



Research Paper

InduSundaresan – A Remarkable Author of Historical Fiction

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ABSTRACT: “History” of any nation is “His” story and not “Her” story. Socio-cultural and psychological forces in the patriarchal world made women to internalize the subjugation resulting in the willful subordination of women in the society. Women, from times immemorial are fettered in the shackles of patriarchal, social and religious structure. Doing gender has always been a women’s question. The problem of the opposites has always been existent. InduSundaresan is a historical fiction writer who deconstructed the royal women of Mughal India through “Taj Trilogy”. She has dexterously presented the agonies of women of different strata, from the women of the royal families to eunuchs in the harem and women from the noble families to poverty-stricken slave girls. The general conditions of women are delineated in such a way that they appear similar to the conditions of women in the contemporary times with a little difference. Manifestations of gender inequalities in attaining political power are reiterated through the protagonists. It highlights the fact that gender has been a foe not just to women in Mughal India in the seventeenth century, but in the contemporary times also. Political power in the patriarchal society is the domain of man with a few exceptions, and so, a woman desiring to rise to the highest in all levels is always pulled by her leg by the patriarchy.

KEY WORDS:Trilogy, Patriarchy, Doing Gender

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INTRODUCTION

InduSundaresan, the author of the Taj Trilogy, (The Twentieth Wife (2002), The Feast of Roses (2003), and Shadow Princess (2010)), and the author of present research, is an Indo-American who was born and brought up in India, and settled in Seattle in the United States of America. Her father was a fighter pilot with the Indian Air Force and quite naturally, her childhood was spent on Air Force Bases around the country. Her father, and grandfather were great story tellers, and she grew up listening to stories from Hindu mythology, and Panchatantra tales. Her interest in stories, made her take writing as a profession, after she acquired an M.S. Degree in Operations Research, and an M.A. in Economics. Actually, she began writing soon after graduate school at the University of Delaware. In the beginning writing was only a hobby, when she was writing short stories for magazines during her graduation. Suddenly she decided to write a novel and she says in an interview that she wrote her... first published novel and its sequel, The Twentieth Wife (2002) and The Feast of Roses (2003). But, I suppose like most writers who trudge through masses of rejections, I only knew I was a writer when I published The Twentieth Wife. Now, of course, I know better. I was a writer all along!” (Wood M.E.)After a few years, she penned one more novel with the same backdrop of her earlier novels on the Mughal era, Shadow Princess (2010), and formed the Taj Trilogy.

A ‘Trilogy’ is a set of three works of art which necessarily bear a connection. Three works can be seen either as a single work or as three individual works. Generally, they are found in literature or films.

The history of trilogy dates back to ancient times. In ancient Greece trilogies of plays were performed in the Dionysia festivals. These plays were often followed by a fourth Satyr play. The only surviving trilogy of the ancient Greek plays is ‘The Oresteia.’ Originally it was performed at the festival in Athens in 458 BC.

Several writers have penned trilogies on different themes like historical thrillers, science fiction, historical women and many more. Trilogies are not new in the Indian English literature. Mulk Raj Anand wrote a trilogy with Across the Black Waters (1939), The Village (1939), and The Sword and the Sickle (1942) chronicling the life of Lalu and his struggle to rise from the bottom of Indian society.

Samit Basu, a Bengali novelist authored *The Game World Trilogy* with *The Simoqin Prophecies* (2004), *The Manticore's Secret* (2005), and *The Unwaba Revelations* (2007). Amish Tripathy grabbed the attention of the readers with his *Shiva Trilogy* consisting of *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010), *The Secret of the Nagas* (2011), and *The Oath of the Vayuputras* (2013), depicting fictionalized account of the life and adventures of Indian deity Lord Shiva.

InduSundaresan, though is the contemporary of several diasporic writers like Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Benerjee Devakarini, and many others, she evinced interest in historical fiction unlike them. InduSundaresan is not troubled by notions of displacement or alienation. The pangs of diaspora do not come any way near her. As a daughter of an Air Force officer, she was exposed to cosmopolitanism, and globalization of modern times. She does not take interest in writing fiction on contemporary society in which she lives in as it does not interest her. She wanted to portray Indianness in her novels. Her interest is in historical fiction especially the history of India, as Indian history helps her think and understand the lives of the Indians, to recreate them in the contemporary times and thus becomes a historical fiction writer. Instead of questioning identity and bemoaning conflicts between East and West, she selected historical novels to render the vividness and picturesqueness of the Mughal era, without missing out the romance, and the portrayal of women's subtleties.

In an interview to the *Indian Express*, dated 18 Jan 2012, in India, she confesses "I do not find it interesting to write about the Indian diaspora," as her aim is to write for a global audience. Yet in her own words in the same interview, she said "I was a poor student of history in school," as history in school was only full of dates and she was not made to see any sense of people behind it. In the same interview she clearly states that her "tryst started with ... stumbling upon a book on 'Women in Harems,'" as in that book and in many other books of this kind she could not see the women's perspective. It was the man's opinion pronounced on women everywhere. This search for a women's perspective, became the precursor for her creation of the *Twentieth Wife* (2002) and thus the *Taj Trilogy* emerged.

Sundaresan's historical fiction comprises *The Twentieth Wife* (2002), *The Feast of Roses* (2003), *The Splendour of Silence* (2006), *Shadow Princess* (2010), *The Mountain of Light* (2015), while *The Convent of Little Flowers* (2008) is a collection of nine stories exploring the subtle nuances of human relationships. Sundaresan won The Washington State Book award for *The Twentieth Wife*. She felt an honour to be recognized for a debut novel which was translated into Portuguese, Polish, German, Hebrew, Spanish and Greek, Chinese and French. The French wrote to Sundaresan that they knew little about Mughal era, which celebrated the *Taj Mahal*, until they read her novels. It became an eye opener to several to learn that Mughal era in India was so interesting politically, and culturally, and socially. "The true literary artist reveals life more accurately and with more insight than other historical facts and statistical details because he/she deals with the truth of the human heart with the realities of man in society" (FPS 23).

The *Taj Trilogy* is a dazzling piece of fine fiction written with historical accuracy, comprising *The Twentieth Wife* (2002), *The Feast of Roses* (2003), and *Shadow Princess* (2010). Great study of history and geography was made before actually writing the novels. In the words of InduSundaresan, in an interview to Nirmala Garimella,

Most of the research was done well before I started writing the novels. I spent a lot of time reading books, manuscripts, memoirs, travelers' tales to India, following bibliographies, searching for maps to give me a sense of the time and place ... My research focused on the Politics of the time the gossips and myths that arose from incidents that have a historical basis, the intimate details of everyday life in the imperial harem and at court (Garimella.pag).

The author's closeness of fiction to history is a significant matter to delve upon the imagination. She wove beautifully the love-relationship between Jahangir and Nur Jahan, but its fascination was more defined in the backdrop of true history of Mughal India. While writing this 'Trilogy,' she had papered the walls of her office with maps of Mughal India, so that she could sense the movements of the court and nobility.

In the midst of the interesting story we are not made to forget some facts of the rulers that a ruler had an empire to rule. Millions of people were dependent upon them for their existence, and that there were border disputes, revolts from independent kingdoms which had to be fought out. Several historical facts like the Chain of Justice during the reign of Jahangir, the arrival of Portuguese to India, and the visit of Thomas Roe, and the construction of *Taj Mahal* by Shah Jahan are picturesquely portrayed by the author. Jahanara executed authority in her father's harem, as Padsha Begum and was prominently called Begam Sahiba as she is a daughter and not a wife of the Emperor. For her attitude and her abilities like statesmanship, foresight and wisdom, she would have become an indubitable Empress. Even Aurangzeb who rebelled against his father to become the king would have accepted and acknowledged Jahanara, as he believed her to be a good administrator. But gender was her opponent in gaining political power in a man's world.

The author has reiterated that women like Mehrunnisa and Jahanara could not reach great heights of power because they were the female sex. Gender bias came in their way. Political power is always vested in the hands of men with a few exceptions. In attaining the authority, gender has been a foe not just to Mehrunnisa or Jahanara in the seventeenth century, but in the contemporary times also. A woman desiring to rise to the highest in all spheres is always pulled down by the patriarchy.

Women have always felt the need to be treated like human beings with equal rights and equal opportunities. Though the problems that women have been facing for centuries were not conceptualized or theorized as feminism, women have been overtly and covertly expressing their inhuman state of living and wherever it was possible women belonging to the upper strata of the society, tried to establish their identity to some extent.

Writing historical fiction, while being true to history, is not an easy task. The difficulty raises more, when it concerns women in the Mughal era. The author confesses the fact that no documentation was available until she was thirty-four years old. She had to make some educated guesses about her. She researched her father's, and her husband's lives, and found out their positions and their status, their relationship to the court, the politics of the court at that times; their mutual relationships, and their relationships with the court. In the words of InduSundaresan, in an interview to Nirmala Garimella,

Most of what you will read in the two novels had been documented in one source or another. It was very important to me to be historically accurate, so the reader goes away from the novels not just with a sense of story, but also an understanding of the Mughal period in all of its detail (Garimellan.pag).

An interesting factor in Taj Trilogy cannot go unnoticed. Mehrunnisa-Empress Nur Jahan is the aunt of Mumtaj Mahal. Jahanara of Shadow Princess is a daughter of Mumtaj Mahal. The famous Mumtaj Mahal is closely related to both. Yet, Sundaresan did not select her for her writing. Because, she felt that history tells a different story about Mehrunnisa and Jahanara. Mehrunnisa and Jahanara were two powerful women, who in the words of Sundaresan "influenced the course of Indian history, assumed powers of a sovereign, while being mere women, who lived behind a veil within the walls of a harem" (Simon & Schuster n.pag).

Mumtaj is rendered immemorable through Taj Mahal, and InduSundaresan has made Mehrunnisa and Jahanara more popular through her Taj Trilogy, almost out-facing Mumtaj Mahal. The whole world knows about the famous love story of Shah Jahan and Mumtaj and the Taj Mahal is a veritable evidence for it. Every visitor to Taj Mahal is told the story of the couple. But when one reads the Taj Trilogy of InduSundaresan, one learns that, the romance between Jahangir and Nur Jahan is more interesting than the romance behind the Taj Mahal. Shah Jahan built a Taj Mahal for Mumtaj Mahal. But, Sundaresan brought to light that Mehrunnisa was greatly loved by the Emperor Jahangir, who gave all his powers of sovereignty, and made her an Emperor without the crown.

A careful study of the books on history written in the past or in the present, features men who made a mark of their own by their deeds or actions in a number of spheres of the specific time frame, or in the transitional phases, or in political movements or in inventions to mention a few. History books rarely features even prominent women of the times, and the featuring of women is mostly confined to secondary roles, or of minor importance, and are often defamed for their deeds and actions. InduSundaresan's historical fiction writing explores the prominent women's lives in the history of the Mughal era. In this aspect, she strikes a different chord. She admits in many of her interviews to have deliberately selected women protagonists from history, as they are always been neglected. And she wants to present them from women's perspective. Neeru Tandon in her *Feminism: A Paradigm Shift* states that:

Most of the male writers view the woman as a fallen eve or a Mary. A few are successful in portraying the real female psyche in otherfictional work. Credit really goes to female work and in fact to female authors for delineating the female psyche in the truer sense of the word (FPS 23).

Women writing features women in their narratives through women's perspective. This has been a proven fact with the internationally acclaimed women novelists of all the times. "Feminist literary criticism has given us an opportunity to look at 'women' in literature from women's point of view" (34). The consciousness of women makes her represent, or re-present the fictionalized or mythical or real-life characters from her own perspective. Genderization/gendering of writing perhaps is one of the major factors for the success of the writers, as they are voicing out the unheard voices, by championing the cause of women. There are several women in the history, who are portrayed only from the perspective of man. One such individual is Nur Jahan-the Empress of Mughal India. Mughal era in India has always been captivating to writers and commoners alike for varied reasons. The author, InduSundaresan also is mesmerized by the Mughal times not simply for the socio-cultural or political upheavals but for one woman 'Nur Jahan' who exerted her 'self' in the medieval times like a woman of post-modern or post-structural times. There are only a few novelists like Jogender Singh and Jyothi Jafa who have written about Nur Jahan in the genre historical novel, while Sugam Anand has written *History of Nur Jahan* (1992). Jogender Singh's *Nur Jahan: The Romance of an Indian Queen* (1909), is a historical romance depicting the life of Jahangir and Nur Jahan, and Jyoti Jafa in her novel *Nur Jahan* (1994),

has etched the life of Nur Jahan from birth to death. Though Nur Jahan was the lead character, she is not treated as a strong woman. Sugam Anand's portrayal of Nur Jahan in her book *History of Begum Nur Jahan* (1992) has been a clean image reflecting the virtues of a South Asian Muslim Woman.

InduSundaresan's historical Taj Trilogy, is centred in the Mughal era of Indian history. In the first half of the novel *The Twentieth Wife*, Emperor Akbar is the ruler reigning supreme over most parts of India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. From the second half of the novel Jahangir is the ruler. He is lucky to be handed over a vast empire by his father Emperor Akbar. He was busy fighting down skirmishes in the boarder but there was no need to make any big conquests. In the sequel *The Feast of Roses*, Jahangir continues to be the Emperor of Hindustan, until Shah Jahan ascends the throne in the end of the second novel. Shah Jahan reigns through the third novel, until he is succeeded by Aurangzeb in the middle of the novel. Thus, the 'trilogy' covers the important Emperors of the Mughal era. The political, the social, the cultural heritage of the time prevailed at their best. The empire was rich with good commerce and trade and industry. The Mughal emperors were great patrons of learning and encouraged the spread to education in their dominions. There existed both Hindu and Muslim education.

Women in the Mughal period ran in two categories that are diagonally opposite to one other. The women in the royal household had an exclusive rearing. They could learn whatever they wanted through private education. It ranged from tailoring to Astronomy. Many of these women were very powerful, who took important decisions living behind the veil. Women of the poorer lot were not so fortunate. They ran the same humdrum, poverty-stricken lives as their counterparts today. InduSundaresan's protagonists came from the first category. Mughal era is incomplete, and InduSundaresan's novels are also incomplete without understanding what a harem is. Her protagonists are women who lived in the harem. Daughters lived in their father's or brother's harem, while wives lived in their husband's harem. Many have a wrong understanding of what a harem is. They are not sleepy, complacent, sequestered quarters for women, where women talk about womanly matters, and domestic issues. It is not a place where lunch and dinner is planned alone. The harem is a politically active and complex centre of power, with women as the players. It is here that one comes across powerful women. A study of some of them makes one feel how powerful they are, and are amazed to know that the most important decisions taken by the Emperors' at the court are actually pronounced before they reach the court. The royal ladies living in the harem wear a veil, and are not seen by strangers. No stranger can enter the harem. The institution of purdah has always been a mark of Islamic societies across the world, and through the ages. All Muslim women are supposed to wear purdah, which is a veil that covers their faces. In the case of powerful women, purdah is not a hurdle to their political or spiritual activities. These women in purdah commissioned large sacred and secular monuments like Sarais (rest houses), and tombs, shrines and gave away large sums of alms to the needy women. Women play the roles of mother's wives, queens, elders or juniors and they change historical climates. Sundaresan in an Interview during her Boston Book Tour herself said:

In researching Mehrunnisa's life, I realized that many women in the zenana owned ships that plied the Arabian sea routes (and so engaged in overseas trade); had vast incomes that they have to learn to manage on their own by appointing stewards and over-seers, built tombs, monuments, gardens and sarais (rest houses) for traveller's. They also had access if they wanted to tutors in history, Astronomy, logic and math. They were fluent in many languages, wrote poems and prose (some of which still exist today) and also excelled at playing musical instruments and singing (Garimellan.pag). Ruby Lal's observations on harem are also similar. She says that a harem is not a mere domestic space. It is full of zest, vigour and dynamism which is so different from their portrayal in history.

In the historical background of the Mughal era InduSundaresan pens her Taj Trilogy in all vivaciousness, with a pointed attention towards women as protagonists and their resilience through hard times. Historically, Mehrunnisa and Jahanara remained as round personalities, rather than caricatures of a tradition. The writer notices that, along with the protagonists, there were several women in the harem who were very strong. The author's study of Mughal women in the harem brought unimaginable truths like, for example, women confining to the harem walls in veils are considered to be inconsequential and weaklings, without any purpose to their lives, and that they are taken for granted.

Mehrunnisa as portrayed in the *Twentieth Wife* is an intensely ambitious woman. She had set a goal for herself and reached it through her struggle, intelligence and wisdom, her love and affection, her courage and tolerance, and fortitude rather than with any input from the male counterpart. Her strength and struggle symbolizes the struggles of women of the present times to achieve their goals no matter in which country they are living in. The author, therefore strongly felt that historical novel about India, will definitely interest the global audience. Mehrunnisa represents women who are able and capable but are caught in a feminine phase and who are moving forward to a feminist phase. InduSundaresan is for feminism and it is present in *The Trilogy*. The author wants women to face challenges and bear difficulties with courage. In an interview with Uma Girish for *California Literary Review* on April 3, 2007, InduSundaresan endorsed:

All my work is constructed around female protagonists (except for a couple of short stories) and I

always want 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 n. pag).

InduSundaresan's words are remindful of the opinion of author Jaidev in his chapter on "Feminism and the Contemporary Hindu Novel" in an edited book on Indian Literature (1990), where he says that:

A feminist novel for India is not a novel which a woman will write just because she is a woman and knows how to write. it will be written by one who has understood a woman both as a woman and as a person pressurized by all kinds of visible and invisible contexts, by one who is not carried away by fetishes but is mature enough" (63).

The author InduSundaresan selects protagonists from Mughal era. The first thought that comes to anybody, when one hears about the protagonists is that Mughal period was backward. The author selects Mehrunnisa (Nur Jahan) whose story is endlessly intriguing. It is the story of a powerful woman who belonged to a time, when women had no power, yet who becomes a role model to the younger generations.

InduSundaresan is an omniscient narrator in presenting the story and the action to permeate the readers to empathize with the characters. The reader is exposed to the world in which the story is set, like the place, the setting, the weather, the political climate and the experiences and thought process of the characters of the then times. Sundaresan's novels are the intricate canvas of the luxurious descriptions of the places and things which brings back the life of the Mughal era. With the use of past tense in her novels, the writer has successfully pulled the readers with a sense of distance, to familiarize the unfamiliar World. By using the tone, language and vocabulary according to the context, the author authentically made the characters realistic in the true sense.

The Twentieth Wife (2002) is the first novel of the Taj Trilogy by InduSundaresan. The novel is a fascinating story of a controversial and legendary Empress Nur Jahan (Mehrunnisa). The novel is a complete analysis of Mehrunnisa, an incandescent beauty with brains, from her humble birth to her marriage with a Persian soldier and after his death with the Emperor Jahangir. There are only a few powerful women in the history of the world, who exerted their 'self.' Mehrunnisa-The Sun among Women, entranced many people, not only by her charms but also through her personal traits.

Mehrunnisa, from her childhoods innocence to a matured woman, resisted gender bias in her own way, either by questioning her father about restrictions on physical movement for girls or playing the so called boys games like 'gillidanda' or visiting nashakhana in disguise or daring the patriarchal norms in questioning her husband Ali Quli on his wrong doings, could be called a prescient feminist, because she could voice herself when women's voice was unheard. Even without knowing any ideologies like feminism, she stood for herself.

The novel brings to light the emancipation of women of the Mughal era, which in fact was restricted to the elite circles and the plight of commoners in the patriarchal society. The protagonist's brilliance and her strength of mind perhaps made her stand ahead of times. The novel portrayed Mehrunnisa as a real woman, who held her head high through every thick and thin. She was a real woman with courage and grace, which could make her wish fulfilled. Jahangir was her person and passion in life. So, Jahangir was her 'personal mission' in modern terms, and she knew she could be successful because, she knew her actions and their outcome. So, in spite of the scorns, criticism, and opposition she had embarked upon her 'personal mission' and proved to be a 'real woman' with self-empowerment.

The Feast of Roses (2003) which was earlier named as Power Behind the Veil, is the second novel by InduSundaresan, and is a sequel to The Twentieth Wife. The novel delineates how Mehrunnisa lived a life of an Empress during Jahangir's life time and ends with her death in exile after his death. The novel focuses on how Nur Jahan differed from the established social stratification rules, which oppressed the gender and has hampered ones freedom and ability to do what one intends to do, and has denigrated her position to mere domesticity. Mehrunnisa's attitude reminds the reader of the structure and agency of sociology, where sociologists consider social structure and individual actions, or human agencies, as the two important factors of the developmental phenomena. While social structure restricts woman from making choices, her inner energy acts as a catalytic agent to recoup her ability to grow as an individual thus permeating her role, not as a woman but as an individual who is able to make her own choices. This novel shows how the protagonist wanted to be a contributor of circumstances in life and did not like to remain a product. Mehrunnisa (Nur Jahan- The Light of the World) was portrayed as a powerful administrator with her decision making, shrewdness and political maneuvers.

Shadow Princess (2010) is the fourth novel of InduSundaresan and also the third of the Taj Trilogy. The novel delineates the life of Jaharara, the most adored and beloved daughter of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal. The novel depicts how a woman is exploited in one or the other form especially in the name of love and affection. A man is always dependent on a woman whether she be his mother or wife or daughter in general. This dependency most of the times leads to exploitation. Jahanara also was exploited by her own father or

brothers in the name of love and affection; barring her to have a life of her own, and to remain with them throughout her life. Jahanara was more attached to her role in the family, with a deeper understanding of her father, and brothers, and also of the empire. Her capabilities need no altercations. Jahanara had been a victim of man's selfishness. She was an icon of selflessness. She sacrificed her personal life and motherhood for the sake of her father. The novel portrays Jahanara, as an influential personality who carved a niche for herself in her personal life during the then existing customs from behind the veil.

2. CONCLUSION

InduSundaresan, through her Taj Trilogy was successful in representing the strong urge among the women protagonists in all the novels that they also wanted to be on par with men. InduSundaresan's novels present the panorama of women's plight.

Every woman whether it is a powerful Mehrunnisa or a learned Jahanara, wanted to unmask, and never wanted to be a victim in the patriarchal order that are choked under the patriarchal ideas and ideologies. Theorization of the problem of the opposites are done in the modern era, but it can be understood that women's realization of gender discrimination began long ago. One can see Mehrunnisa raising her voice, and showing resistance, and no more allows herself to be oppressed. Equally we see another character Jahanara, a brave person who is modern in approach and outlook, but was fettered in chains of patriarchal social and familial responsibilities. She remained a doormat at the threshold of family bonds. Jahanara is an embodiment of thousands of Indian women who suffer in silence and are not in a position to raise their voice either in protest or in pursuit of their own happiness.

Even in the modern times, women's position is unenviable, as she stands on the threshold of social change, intensely aware of her exploitation-socially, economically, culturally and politically by man in the still patriarchal society. Her attempts of protest to voice bitter feelings are always reckoned with the prospect of social ostracism for questioning the sanctity of time-honoured and time-tested customs and traditions.

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