



RESEARCH ARTICLE

**VOICING THE SILENCED: REWRITING MUGHAL HISTORY IN *THE TWENTIETH WIFE***Shilpa Vashisht^{1*}, Dr. Sunil Kumar Mishra², Prof. Surya Kant Mishra³^{1*}PhD Scholar (English), Amity School of Liberal Arts, Amity University, HaryanaE-mail: shilpavashisht95@gmail.com²Associate Professor, Amity School of Liberal Arts, Amity University, HaryanaE-mail: skmishra@ggn.amity.edu³Professor, Satyawati College, University of Delhi, DelhiE-mail: skmishra@satyawati.du.ac.inDoi: <https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2024.113011>**ABSTRACT****Article history:**

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History, as traditionally recorded, has long been shaped by patriarchal structures that marginalize the voices of women and obscure their roles in shaping sociopolitical landscapes. In the context of South Asian historiography, especially during the Mughal era, women are often pushed to the margins—silenced, erased, or reduced to passive figures within grand imperial narratives. Indu Sundaresan's *The Twentieth Wife* (2002), a work of historical fiction centered on the life of Mehrunnisa (later known as Empress Nur Jahan), challenges this marginalization by reimagining and reclaiming the agency of one of the most powerful women in Mughal India.

This paper explores how *The Twentieth Wife* functions not merely as a historical novel but as a feminist intervention that destabilizes dominant historical discourses. Drawing on postmodern historiography and feminist literary theory, the study examines how Sundaresan uses fiction to reconstruct the past, blending documented facts with imaginative elaboration to give voice to a figure largely muted in mainstream historical accounts.

Keywords: History, Literature, Historical Fiction, Feminist Historiography



INTRODUCTION

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This paper explores how *The Twentieth Wife* functions not merely as a historical novel but as a feminist intervention that destabilizes dominant historical discourses. Drawing on postmodern historiography and feminist literary theory, the study examines how Sundaresan uses fiction to reconstruct the past, blending documented facts with imaginative elaboration to give voice to a figure largely muted in mainstream historical accounts. Through this act of narrative re-inscription, the novel contributes to a broader project of rewriting gendered history—one that acknowledges the complexity, influence, and autonomy of women within imperial power structures.

By focusing on Sundaresan's narrative strategies and her portrayal of Nur Jahan's political and personal life, this paper argues that *The Twentieth Wife* offers an alternative mode of historical storytelling—one that foregrounds female subjectivity, reclaims silenced experiences, and questions the objectivity of traditional

historiography. In doing so, it not only reinterprets the Mughal past but also invites readers to reconsider whose stories history chooses to remember and why.

Hence, the paper examines Indu Sundaresan's debut novel *The Twentieth Wife* as a work of historical fiction that, influenced by postmodernist thought, challenges traditional academic history. By blending factual elements with imaginative storytelling, the novel presents an alternative historical narrative—one often overlooked by patriarchal and biased historiography—to make it more accessible and relatable to readers.

Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, published in 1820 is considered as one of the first historical novels. It constructed the writer's imagination by historicizing it within the historical context of England in Middle Ages. Novel writers started using historical facts and started incorporating the social, political, and cultural happenings into the fictional framework of history. This new experiment of blending facts with fiction attracted wide readership. It expanded the experiences of the readers and provided them with alternate histories otherwise restricted by historical texts written by traditional historiographers.

Literature also helps in shaping history as illustrated by events such as French Revolution or Indian Independence Movement by appealing to emotions and arousing nationalist sentiments. The leaders of modern India having been inspired from such literatures and judiciously adapting it to Indian conditions, spread the ideas of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. Not only this, various magazines and books such as "Young India" by Mahatma Gandhi, "Poverty and Un-British Rule in India" by Dada Bhai



Naoroji, etc. inspired, motivated and guided our fight for Independence. Apart from this, these national leaders produced as well as took help of local literature to reach to the masses by printing pamphlets, newspapers and magazines in different local languages to broaden the base of movement and turning it from elite to mass movement. For example, Bal Gangadhar Tilak's "Kesari" in Marathi, Raja Ram Mohan Roy's "Bang Duta" in English, Bengali, Persian, Hindi, etc.

Colonisers have always understood the profound power of literature as the perpetrator of dominance as well as the subversion of that dominance by providing alternate truths and possibilities of a society. Edward Said through his notable work *Orientalism* advocates the patronizing of Western's viewpoint about the Eastern world as undeveloped, barbaric and inferior to the superior Occident. Through this conceptualization of the Orient as the subaltern, the Occident naturalized and appropriated their colonization project as essential for the development of the Orient in the footsteps of the ideal West. Similarly, during the Indian Freedom Movement tried to suppress the movement they resorted to unethical Vernacular Press Act, 1878 which restricted the publications in various 'local' languages. However, Indians did not succumb to this and one profound example is "Amrit Bazar" newspaper which innovatively converted from Bengali to English overnight to avoid the British intention of eroding the base of the movement.

Several poems and songs such as our national anthem, national song, and patriotic songs like Saare Jahan se Achha, etc. deeply penetrated into the hearts and minds of Indian common masses and

united them like never before. All these depict the relevance of literature as how it shaped the History-in-Making.

Likewise, the emergence of Indian novels gave way to narrate the nation's history before independence. Earlier, the Western vision of India dominated the world, but the nineteenth century renaissance leaders like Gandhi, Tagore, Nehru, etc. brought a change in the vision of India which was earlier presented to us through Western eyes and pens. These factors gave way to extensive publication of historical fiction after 1930. The novel form in India developed at different times in different regions of India, but almost all of them were pre-occupied with historical romance as its centre. The first generation of Indian English novelists incorporated the plot in the setting of the past, about historical figures' romance. But with the change in attitude during the nationalist stirrings shifted the novelists' concern from romances and culture to political aspects, social realities, and history of the nation. They tried to make sense of the political and social conditions of present times by exploring the texts and events of the past.

1980s saw the emergence of the second generation of Indian English novelists born after independence. They experimented with metanarratives to find a new way of looking at history. These historical metafiction were not merely historical romances, rather focused on a reconstructed history from the "standpoint of a social historian" (Sebastian 28) to provide a larger picture of the past to the world.

Indu Sundaresan's *The Twentieth Wife* is one such historical fiction which entangles within a romance,



the Mughal Empire politics of who will succeed Emperor Akbar, and most importantly of the politics within women quarters (Harem) during the seventeenth century Mughal India. It is Sundaresan's first ever novel which established her as a writer in the literary canon. Indu Sundaresan is an Indian-American historical fiction writer. She was born and brought up in India, and is currently settled in U.S.A. Her Taj Trilogy attracted much attention among the readers as well as the critics. *The Twentieth Wife* is the first novel in the Taj Trilogy which along with the second novel *The Feast of Roses* revolves around seventeenth century story of India's one of the most controversial and commended Empress Nur Jahan. It won the Washington State Book Award and has also been serialized as a popular television show titled "Siyaasat". The third one in the Trilogy titled *The Shadow Princess* is about Shah Jahan's daughter Jahanara, who was equally an important historical figure who had an active role in the administration of the Mughal court. She is also an author to other historical novels like *The Splendour of Silence* (2006), *In the Convent of Little Flowers* (2008), *The Mountain of Light* (2013). For the purpose of research, this paper shall analyse the first novel *The Twentieth Wife* through various standpoints.

As a historical fiction, the novel provides ample space to include the experiences of the marginalized or invisible masses of history who had great significance in the construction of past and in the evolution of society. The limitations of Mughal history are identified and rectified by the writer to bring in the plurality and multidimensionality in the interpretation of history for the readers who were otherwise veiled by the ignorance (conscious or

unconscious) of conventional historiographers in constructing historical discourse. It is an example of what Linda Hutcheon refers to as "historiographic metafiction" (Hutcheon), providing a new awareness of the past.

THE TWENTIETH WIFE: A FEMINIST CRITIQUE

The existing literature on Indu Sundaresan depicts her as a feminist writer who presents and re-presents the royal Mughal women in a positive light. However, the critics are unable to look at these historical figures from a viewpoint which is not influenced by gender and its already existing framework. If one tries to look at these figures irrespective of their gender, she would realize that women like Meherunnisa are no one but the members of a royal family, who try and will always try to succeed the reign of the current ruler. It is not just women who are pulled by their leg for trying to gain power, everyone, irrespective of their caste, class, and gender has to fight in the battlefield of politics to sit on the throne. The mightiest has the supreme authority and everyone else has to be subservient to it. A ruler is replaced by another, a new politician takes over the previous one, it is just that those who want to be the ruler should be a good diplomat and an excellent politician to make the subjects believe in his/her supremacy as their controller and administrator. The moment one loses this power of manipulation and diplomacy in oneself comes another manipulator who replaces the older one with great intelligence. Hence, it is important to look at Meherunnisa as a great politician who through her experiences evolved herself in such a way that she manipulates even the Emperor that he gave all his



powers of sovereignty to her. She becomes the symbol of power, no less than an Emperor.

When the writers as well as the readers will start looking at such empowered historical figures not as women, but as another politician or a member of a ruling dynasty first is when women will not require “a room of their own” (Woolf) to live and act. This is because they are capable of negotiating for themselves the space within the systems of power just like Meherunnisa who took some time but surely evolved herself along with her name from being Meherunnisa, “the sun among the women” to being Nur Jahan “the light of the world”.

Through the critical analysis of Sundaresan's novel *The Twentieth Wife*, it could be argued that historical fiction as a genre, brought a paradigm shift in looking and presenting history. Literature perhaps plays most important role in capturing the dynamic events of an era and thus preventing it from turning into the only existing truth about reality. It forms a base for future historians to go back to those episodes of history with some empirical evidences. The bare body of history leaves itself open to various interpretations and so it depends upon the individual's intentions and objectives of how he/she wants to construct the edifice of future. Deliberate misinterpretation of any historical event for promulgating sheer self-interested ideology will hamper the humanity. As even the most tragic events of history do not try to depict how it unfolded instead it shows the way in which it could be avoided in future.

CONCLUSION

History itself is not inherently biased—it is the historians who interpret, construct, and redefine historical events through particular perspectives and ideologies. While traditional historiography often reflects subjective viewpoints and institutional biases, historical fiction offers a more inclusive and multidimensional understanding of the past. As a literary genre, it challenges the singularity of official narratives by introducing alternative voices, experiences, and interpretations that have long been marginalized or overlooked.

Unlike conventional historians, writers of historical fiction delve into the personal, emotional, and psychological dimensions of human experience. They focus not only on the major events and figures of the past but also on the nuanced lives of individuals, especially those traditionally excluded from historical records—such as women, the marginalized, and the subaltern. In doing so, historical fiction democratizes history, making it accessible not just to scholars but to a broader audience seeking to engage with the evolution of human society.

Thus, historical fiction expands the boundaries of historical understanding by offering a broader, more humane, and more inclusive canvas—one that integrates factual chronology with the richness of lived experience, imagination, and cultural memory.

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