



RESEARCH ARTICLE



REIMAGINING THE PAST: GENDER, POWER, AND NARRATIVE IN INDU SUNDARESAN'S *THE TWENTIETH WIFE*

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ABSTRACT



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History as a broad and comprehensive body of knowledge throws light on various social, economic, and political contours that went on to affect human life in constructive as well as adverse ways. It helps in influencing the opinion by the selection and arrangements of the appropriate facts. The appropriateness of any fact is linked with the prevalent social norms in which the history is constructed. This shows that the line which separated literature as imaginative and fictive, from history as a collection of objective facts is blurred. Both history and literature are different kinds of texts which mirror the political and cultural conditions under which a society is formulated, inviting interpretations from multiple standpoints. Hence, for the purpose of research, this paper attempts at analysing Indu Sundaresan's first novel *The Twentieth Wife* as a historical fiction, which under the influence of post-modernism believe in the destabilization of the conventional academic history by fusing the facts with the writer's imagination to familiarize the readers and the humanity in general with an alternate history, rather "herstory" which was otherwise neglected by the patriarchal and subjective historiography.

Keywords: Literature, History, Historical Fiction, Herstory

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INTRODUCTION

Literature overtakes history, for literature gives you more than one life. It expands experience and opens new opportunities to readers – (Carlos Fuentes)

Traditionally, for a common person, the term history has been naturalized as of consisting “a corpus of ascertained facts” (Sebastian), which a historian collects from sources like documents, memoirs, and inscriptions, etc. A historical text is seen as objective listing down of the political and historical events of a particular time and a particular place.

Philip Sidney in his notable work *An Apology for Poetry* argues that

The historian scarcely giveth leisure to the moralist to say so much, laden with old mouse-eaten records, authorizing himself for the most part upon other histories, whose greatest authorities are built upon the notable foundation of hearsay; having much ado to accord differing writers, and to pick truth out of the partiality. (Sidney)

The historian is bound to list down the chronological events and their evidences of the past which are fixed “not to what should be but to what is” (Aristotle). However, history is not constructed in void free from the conscious or unconscious intentions of the historian, and the historical circumstances under which it is created. Hence, the events of past take a shape of historical discourse only when a historian imposes his/her narrative on the past evidences available to him. History as a broad and comprehensive body of knowledge throws

light on various social, economic, and political contours that went on to affect human life in constructive as well as adverse ways. It helps in influencing the opinion by the selection and arrangements of the appropriate facts. The appropriateness of any fact is linked with the prevalent social norms in which the history is constructed.

In his work titled *What is History* (1961), Edward Hellatt Carr argues that,

It is used to be said that facts speak for themselves. This is, of course, untrue. The facts, only when the historian calls on them; it is he who decides to which facts to the door, and in what order or context. (Carr)

History's comprehensiveness mars it from its objectivity and that is why various historians tend to interpret this corpus of knowledge in congruity to their perspectives. In 1980s emerged a new mode of literary study known as New Historicism, which critiqued the formalism advocated by New Criticism emphasizing the dealing of a text in isolation from its historical and cultural context. Hence, the way of looking at history changed. Even historical texts were interpreted as “representations- that is, verbal formations which are the “ideological products” or cultural constructs of the historical conditions specific to an era.” (Abrahams and Harpham 244) This novel claim of historicists to look at such “representations” from a standpoint of a social historian demanded an interpretation of the past so as to strengthen their ideology catering to their own perspectives. These discourses depict that how a system of power does not operate through coercion alone, as it is difficult to force everybody to submission.



Forms of discourse have been used since primitive times to elicit consent from the masses for desired dominance and becoming perpetrators of hierarchies. History written by a historian is one of the ideology-bestowing agencies used by the ruling classes to internalize the subjugation of the subordinate masses as natural, not constructed. This shows that the line which separated literature as imaginative and fictive, from history as a collection of objective facts is blurred. Both history and literature are different forms of narratives which mirror the political and cultural conditions under which a society is formulated.

However, the feminists observed the limitation of New Historicism, which fails to overlook the gendered history. The traditional historical texts written by the males, for the male readership, naturalize the males as active subjects of history, throwing women as passive subjects at the margins of history. With the coming of Feminist New Historicism, there emerged a demand to reconstruct the past from gender perspective. The feminist discourse as started from mid-nineteenth century started unearthing historical events so as to demean metanarratives and thereby construct their own interpretations of the past, where women are seen as partners and not passive subjects in the evolution of society. They discovered the invisible women fraternity right from personal realms to international arena and added a new dimension in all the episodes of unfolding history.

Indu Sundaresan's novel *The Twentieth Wife* is in the words of Linda Hutcheon one such feminist "historical metafiction" which celebrates pluralistic voices of the alternative past by subverting

traditional male-dominated historiography. It is a "herstory", a "gender history" which uses the *Harem Politics* (an inside world or a limited space provided to women to act and live) in order to bring into light, the possibilities of power that *Harem* could provide these women to exercise their agency and participation in the systems of power. The novel shows that the decisions taken in the court were first discussed in Harem where they were manipulated by the marginal community which had otherwise no active place in the Mughal court, to bring about desired decisions further taken officially by the Emperor and the administrators of the court. Not just the female protagonist Meherunnisa (the sun among the women), but other female characters too, like, Ruqqaya, the dowager Empress during the reign of Emperor Akbar, and Jagat Josini, the second wife, titled as Padshah Begum during the reign of Jahangir has a significant role in the administration of the Mughal Empire and the society in general. Even though, patriarchy forced and kept them behind the veils, their experiences and influences during seventeenth century Mughal India is worth knowing.

Hence, for the purpose of research, this paper attempts at analysing Indu Sundaresan's first novel *The Twentieth Wife* as a historical fiction, which under the influence of post-modernism believe in the destabilization of the conventional academic history by fusing the facts with the writer's imagination to familiarize the readers and the humanity in general with an alternate history, rather "herstory" which was otherwise neglected by the patriarchal and subjective historiography.

***The Twentieth Wife: A Herstory***

During the 1970s and 1980s, the second wave of feminism criticised the male-dominated discourse of history, and instead came up with a new idea of “Herstory” first used in 1970 by Robin Morgan in her anthology *Sisterhood is Powerful*. Women writers explored and celebrated the roles of women as partners in evolution of society through these herstories.

“To write as men is the aim and besetting sin of women, to write as women is the real task they have to perform” (Lewes)

The women writers took it up as their responsibility to present history from women’s perspective. Hence, Sundareshan’s *The Twentieth Wife*, a feminist historical fiction could be seen as a part of “*Ecriture Eeminine*”, the term coined by Helene Cixous in her famous work “*The Laugh of Medusa*”, published in 1975.

In the Afterword to the novel, Sundareshan mentions that

When one thinks of the six main Mughal emperors, it is usually in these terms: Babur founded the empire; Humayun lost it, was driven out of India and returned to reclaim it; Akbar, inheriting the throne at the age of thirteen, consolidated the empire; Jahangir added few kingdoms to the legacy his father left him, but his romantic exploits are legendary; Shah Jahan built the Taj Mahal, fixing him firmly in history: Aurangzeb, steeped in religious intolerance, was instrumental in the break-up of the empire.

There are few mentions of the women these kings married or of the power they exercised. *The Twentieth Wife* seeks to fill that gap. (Sundareshan 374)

The writer asserts her feminist perspective which helped her explore the role of Mughal women and the power they exercised in the administration of Mughal court. Sundareshan, through this Afterword reminds the reader about the gendered asymmetries of power prevalent in the discipline of history. She reconstructs the Mughal history by imagining a more plausible Mughal past through a gendered perspective. The author brings the Mughal women from the margins of patriarchal historiography, to (re)present their experiences in a different way which provides an alternative history to fill in the “gap” left by the conventional historiographers, whose texts only talk about the explorations and adventures of male historical figures.

For instance, in the well-known historical texts on Mughal Empire like, L.P. Sharma’s *The Mughal Empire* (1988) and John F. Richards’ *The Mughal Empire* (2001), we find little mention of the Mughal women like Nur Jahan who had a significant role in the administration of Mughal court. *Harem*, as an inner world of women is not shown to be a political space, rather a place of domesticity given to women by the male members of the Mughal court to carry out their duties as the nurturer of their husband’s children, and to provide the space for leisure for the males who would visit there to take some time off from their political roles as the administrators of the empire.

However, Sundareshan presents the *harem* as a socio-political space and as a “complex centre of



power, with women as the players" (Pradgma). It is through this place, the reader comes across the powerful historical women who were empowering and engaging themselves in the society. There have always been and will always be women who with their sharp wisdom and struggle negotiated a significant place for themselves. Meherunnisa, the protagonist of the novel, is one such woman who enjoyed power and privilege in the Mughal court like an Empress, but it was her strong sense of selfhood and resilience since the beginning of her life, which helped her achieve her ambitions in life. She is portrayed as a rebel with an unassuming courage right from her childhood. As an eight years old child, she recognised the hierarchy of patriarchal society and found it "unfair that her brothers were allowed to be present at the courtyard below while she had to be confined behind the purdah with the royal harem." (Sundareshan 27) She realizes the subordination of women in the society as unfair to her gender. While trying to have a glimpse of prince Salim at his wedding ceremony, she asserts her ambitions by saying that "I am going to push them aside and have a look". (Sundareshan 28) When she says so she gives a hint to the readers about her intentions of empowering herself in future by pushing everyone aside and make way for her powerful place not only in *Harem*, the domain of women, but also in the Mughal court. And the reader finds by the end of the novel that she succeeded in putting aside everyone and negotiated power for herself in patriarchy.

Meherunnisa tried to widen her prospects rather than being a submissive woman in the royal *harem*. Through her interaction with Ruqayya, the Dowager

Empress, she unfolds the politics of *zenana* and of the court life. She understands that in Ruqayya as Padshah Begum resides powerful position, hence, she dreams of marrying Prince Salim to rule the empire as an Empress. She questions and challenges the gender roles imposed on her by the society. She accompanies her brother to *Nashakhana* (a bar), disguised as a boy to explore the domains in which men were generally the actors. She tries to subvert the dominant tradition which put women second to the superior males by imitating the prevailing norms which allowed men to explore the outer world. Just like the women writers of the Feminine Phase of imitation in Showalter's "The Female Tradition" (Showalter), who understood the radical importance of role-playing required by women's effort to participate in the mainstream of literary culture, Meherunnisa's visit to *Nashakhana* as a boy could be seen as a strong marker of the historical shift in the development of her selfhood.

While in an argument with her brother Abul about prince Salim's second marriage, and her infatuation for him, Meherunnisa asserts her strong individuality by saying that "if I wanted to marry him, what would stop us?" (Sundareshan 41) By saying so, she takes away the agency from the patriarchs, such as the Emperor Akbar, her father Ghias Beg, Salim, and even her brother Abul, who were otherwise thinking that they had imposed their decisions on her. Where all the royal marriages took place only to make political alliances with other kingdoms, for Meherunnisa the struggle was one level up to marry the prince, as she was aware of her status as a common girl. She realised about the *harems* that "cloistered as they were, the women of the imperial



zenana still managed to step beyond the harem walls" (Sundareshan 48), not as she went to *Nashakhana* dressed up as a boy, but as women. Her parents Asmat and Ghias Beg as agents and products of patriarchy could not let her transgress the societal norms after a certain limit, they tried to control her by imposing the rules of patriarchy and familiarizing her with the consequences of transgressing the norms. Asmat is worried of her daughter's rebellious nature and depicts her fear of she not getting a groom for herself. Ghias Beg, even if he has given much space for his wife and his daughter at his home, could not let her go against the rules outside home. Meherunnisa and Asmat Begum can question him and be his partners in taking decisions for the family, but he could not let them go against the supreme authority of Emperor Akbar, the ultimate patriarch, even if he has to compromise with the happiness of his daughter and wife. He loves them, but does not love them above his role as an agent of patriarchy existing outside his home. Still not having the support from her family, Meherunnisa climbs step by step to become the empress. By being attentive within the system of power, she unravels the fact that "a woman must not be completely reliant on a man, either for money or for love" (Sundareshan 63)

Meherunnisa is seen respecting and admiring Ruqayya, another powerful lady who has learnt to keep her position safe and make people bow down before her power. On the other side, Ruqayya also knows that if Meherunnisa marries Salim, her position is not in any threat unlike in the case of Jagat Josini, second wife of Salim. This relationship between Meherunnisa and Ruqayya gives a positive

sign in the evolutionary process of society where women come together as the advocates of sisterhood to help each other in negotiating places for themselves in the systems of power. It is through the inner world of the imperial *zenana* does Meherunnisa recognize the Emperor as the symbol of power. But by her frequent visits she also learns that others, especially women, have a significant contribution in maintaining that power. It is women who advised the emperor in taking various political decisions. Hence, through her, Indu Sundareshan helps readers to unveil the significance of women in making of the past which was otherwise invisibilized by traditional biased historiographers.

Meherunnisa is constantly reminded of her subordinate position as a woman by the typical patriarch Ali Quli as per whom she "talks too much for a woman...as if you were a queen, as if you expected to be queen." (Sundareshan 116) This shows that being a queen could bring with it some freedom of speech, but a wife of a noblemen is not expected to argue with her husband. But she does not let go off her autonomy to survive in such a marriage which expects her to be submissive and selfless, and demands for a divorce instead. She refuses to be the "other", to be inferior to a person like Ali Quli and knows that she is not a perfect match for someone like Ali Quli who truly is a product and agent of patriarchy. She recognizes that marriages like her are nothing but a weapon for patriarchs to exercise their dominance over women. Hence, difference in the viewpoints of men and women about marriage in the novel foregrounds Simone de Beauvoir's idea of marriage that man has always tried to make woman dependent on him, and marriage is



one such way to bring out this desire not of equality, but that of male supremacy over females.

S. Revathi in her thesis "A Kaleidoscope of India's History and Culture in Indu Sundaresan's Taj Trilogy" argues for the marriage of Meherunnisa and Emperor Jahangir as merely her luck which gave her space and immense power in the Mughal Empire. To call it merely a matter of luck is like ignoring the courage and quick wisdom of this powerful woman with which she earned and deserved all the power and status she got. A woman like her is no less than a role model for women of all times to draw inspiration from. She not only dreamt of the impossibility, but achieved it with her sheer resilience and strong determination. She was a born rebel who had eyes and mind so sharp that she carved herself a way out to power. She is courageous enough to reject the offer of the Emperor himself to be his concubine. She knows that with marriage would come the economic autonomy and agency of being a peer in the relationship with her husband to take decisions together. The Emperor loved her not solely for her beauty, but "he admired her fierce independence, her deep sense of self, her convictions about her actions." (Sundareshan 353) Just like any other reader who had just read the traditional history texts which only talk about the realm of politics with men as actors, it surprised the Emperor to find that Meherunnisa, "merely a woman—would be interested in the affairs of the empire." (Sundareshan 354) Either Jahangir was ignorant enough of the other Mughal royal women who took a deep interest in politics and acted as the guides and counsellors to the Emperors of their time; or he was too innocent to believe that seven generations of the Mughal Empire

ruled for more than ten centuries only by the political and authoritative abilities of Mughal Emperors. Sundareshan's historical women are round characters whose strength and struggle to achieve their goals inspire the readers. The female writer pulls out these historical figures from the margins and brings them in the spot light. They are empowered and in return influence the historical discourse. Meherunnisa is not the first Mughal women to have an active role in the domain of politics, women before her like Ehsan Daulat Begum (Babur's grandmother), Qutluq Nigar Khanun (Babur's mother), Mahim Begum (Babur's wife), Khazada Begum (Humayun's wife), Ruqayya Begum (Akbar's wife), etc. have always contributed in strengthening the holds of Mughal Empire which could not be undone merely by not giving them enough space in the academic history. Rekha Mishra in her work *Women in Mughal India* found a great need to write about the women during the Mughal rule as they were not given sufficient attention by the students and creators of history. Similar are the intentions of the novelist Indu Sundareshan who uses the same thread of Mughal history to weave it into a different way which supplements the Indian Mughal history in order to fill the gaps left by patriarchal historiographers, where only history accounts for the explorations and adventures of male historical figures.

The novel explores the socio-political spaces of women and opens up a new horizon of Herstory paradigms by denying the traditional male voices of history. The protagonist, Meherunnisa rejects the middle-class ideology of the proper sphere of womanhood, which developed in post-industrial



England and America prescribing a woman to be a perfect lady, an angel in the house, contentedly submissive to men, but strong in her inner purity and religiosity, queen in her own realm of the home. She strives to become the queen of the world, to rule not just the women in *Harem*, but to rule the entire Mughal Empire, and she achieves it. By the end of the novel, she becomes the Empress and enjoys and strives to maintain the power and sovereignty which is followed with the title she possesses. Meherunnisa evolves herself along with her name from being Meherunnisa, "the sun among the women" to becoming Nur Jahan "the light of the world".

Instead of lamenting about the sufferings of women in a patriarchal society, Indu Sundareshan empowers her female characters and brings about a positive turn in the feminist literary criticism. Sundareshan's women characters, not just in this particular novel, but in entire Taj Trilogy are presented as able stateswomen negotiating in the political space. They are given "a room of their own" (Woolf) to explore and evolve themselves out of the constraints of patriarchal historiography and have an autonomous identity rather than merely being wives and daughters.

CONCLUSION

It is never the history but the historians who construct, define and re-define the events of history. Historians can be biased but not the history. Hence, historical fiction as genre of literature brings in the plurality and multi-dimensionality of history. It opens up the availability of history not just to historians, but to anyone who humanity wants to understand and trace the evolution of human society. A historical fiction writer unlike a traditional historian, takes a

microscopic view of realities of human, which is a difficult task for a historian to take up as he focuses on the actions of the past and does not put man at the centre of events. Historical fiction provides a larger canvas of the past by encompassing not just the chronological events, but also all the dynamic parameters of historical events.

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