

## Herstories : Decoding and Encoding the Real Self in Indu Sundaresan's The Taj Mahal Trilogy

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### Abstract

An enchanting seventeenth century epic of great passion and adventure, *The Taj Mahal Trilogy* by the Indian English novelist, Indu Sundaresan tells the charismatic tale of Mughal Empire. Indu Sundaresan's Trilogy unveils the enigmatic life of two women in Indian history namely Mehrunnisa better known as NurJahan, and Jahanara the blue blood princess, in *The Taj Mahal Trilogy* which comprises of *The Twentieth Wife* published in 2002, *The Feast of Roses* in 2003 and *Shadow Princess* in 2010. *The Feast of Roses* tells the story behind one of the great tributes to romantic love and *Shadow Princess* is about how heartbroken husband builds tomb called the Taj Mahal and is one of the seven wonders of the world. Both women lived enough lives for ten women in their span of lives and thus rose to power beyond the feminine mystique of beauty which in Mughal India was employed as a strategy to lure man even though their identities in these novels are constituted within the framework of cultural or power discourse/regime that was essentially patriarchal and despotic. Present paper attempts to scrutinize how both woman emerge as substantive identities through rule bound discourse that is inserted in the pervasive and mundane signifying acts of cultural/ social/ political life in the Mughal Era and how Indu Sundaresan adopted the history in her fiction.

**Key Words:** power struggle, imperial seraglio, mythology, Mughal era, cultural/ social/ political life.



### 1. Introduction

Indu Sundaresan's Taj Mahal Trilogies (*The Twentieth Wife*, *The Feast of Roses* and *Shadow Princess*) emphasis on the retelling of a specific time in Mughal era where the women behind the veil stayed invisible both to the world and to themselves in an

exclusively phallogocentric cultural milieu. Her historical novels are attempts to remedy preceding exclusions by delineating the responsibilities of women also in deciding the history of a dynasty. The author refuses to send them to the margins as in the conventional narratives, adhering to the feminist perspectives in New Historicism. Sundaresan has not narrativized a history permeated with blood and gore but chose to fathom into the consciousness of two unfathomable and enigmatic women in history thereby unveils the psychological trauma, and their latent innermost fears and even sexual desires. Behind the opulence and splendour of Mughal court as it is outlined by Sundaresan the novels are not merely historical as they are woven as fascinating and engrossing narrative.

## **2. Gazing through Antique lense**

She who writes history makes history. (Jane Marcus)

Foucault challenges the historians with his notion of power which is less monolithic, monologic and claims on the necessity of observing history as divergent and more comprehensive. His negligence of gender is always an argument of disagreement among many feminists, who are concerned in developing Foucauldian New Historicism to incorporate the voice of the othered. Newton has defendant Foucauldian New Historicism for ignoring gender and repudiating to interpret Feminism genuinely. The dynamic interaction between literature and history takes the reader back to roots and widens our perceptions of fiction narrating history and how such chronicles of past and present re-interprets the idea of history thus making it contested histories or site of contestations and confrontations. Rendering Sara Lennox, “Newton attempts to distinguish a “feminist new historicism” regrounding gender issues and women’s agency from a ‘Foucauldian new historicism’ that treats power as faceless, anonymous and irresistible” (“Feminism and New Historicism” 159). Lennox further condemns new historicists for their notions which are “astonishingly unconcerned with gender and women” (159). Judith Newton’s “History as Usual” has revised genealogies of New Historicism from a feminist perspective, and “thus challenged masculinist assumptions about who makes (and what counts as) history, theory and politics” (“History as Usual” 84).

The illusory discourses by male authors generally observe to the traditional canonical parameters of historiography by rejecting gender and female prejudices. The hegemonic attitude of such storylines demands the inevitability for women to break into the phallogocentric bastions and construct alternate histories or “herstories” which will be “inclusive and pluralist rather than exclusive and monolithically male” (Preface to *Feminist Criticism and Social Change* xii). By refusing the typical resonance of history, women writers inaugurate new horizons of “herstory” where a phallogocentric historical image based on “dominance” and “authority” has stopped short, thereby inspiring the diversity and multiplicity of history. They try to unmask and attack the foundations of male-oriented history which are based on hegemonic ideologies that always rejected the “marginalized”, by offering new pointers to the past including the women’s voices too in the monolithic structure of history. It is interesting to note that “herstory is history with a difference” (*Historicism* 194). From time immemorial, patriarchal power structure admittedly has reduced history into “his” story by correspondingly minimizing or totally ignoring women’s roles.

Feminist theoreticians have always expressed their anxieties concerning the muting of women’s voices in discourses including that of history. Along with their controversy against male authored texts, they have also exhibited disharmony in the feminist ideologies which have often turned out to be monologic. Along with their trajectory through the various phases of development, Feminist theories, beginning with the first phase to the Post feminism, have inspired writings simultaneously. In this context, linking Feminism with

New Historicism, also, has become problematic. In analyzing the first two works of Indu Sundaresan's, Indian born American writer, *Trilogy*, hence, it would be appropriate to adopt the methodology of using radical feminist theory along with the Feminist New Historicism popularized by Judith Newton, since the novelist depicts the female protagonist as acquiring selfhood and empowerment through stiff resistance against male hegemony. This paper focuses on the initiative of a woman writer in tracing "herstory" about women of the Mughal era from the woman's perception in order to highlight their roles, contributions and achievements which have been rendered almost invisible in androcentric historical and historiographic fictitious narratives embodied in this study by *The Emperors of the Peacock Throne* and *Taj* respectively. The attempt of women writers in providing a more candid probing into woman's identity while tracing the trajectory of a history usually represented by male emperors, is subject to analysis.

History further claims that Jahanara and Mehrunissa were among few women who kept their other leg free when one of their legs was steeped in the mire of tradition and culture as both could transcend from the spatial and cultural limitations of their time. But this is only partially true. The dangerous maze of power struggles and political machinations limiting essence to a body- a politically inscribed body- commence right from the family. This is evidenced in *The Twentieth Wife* in the words of Asmat, Mehrunissa's mother when she says to her husband Ghias Beg:

We must be careful not to teach the girls too much. How will they ever find husbands if they are too learned? The less they know the less they will want of the outer world. Mehrunissa asks why a woman has to stay in the house when a man can come and go as he pleases. We must be careful so people do not think our daughters are too arrogant to make good wives. (*The Twentieth Wife* 45)

Ghias Beg's reply to this worry is symptomatic of the male authored notions of femininity and culture. He vocalizes it thus "They will be confined behind the pardha soon enough for the rest of their lives. What little we can give them, we must."

According to Barbara Harlow "The literature of resistance sees itself further more as immediately and directly involved in a struggle against ascendant or dominant forms of ideological and cultural production" (*Resistance Literature* 29). As a resisting female protagonist, Mehrunissa even dares to resist the prevalent practices of her society by accompanying her brother to nashakhana once disguising as a boy. She is always bold and wishes to widen her horizons rather than exist behind the veil. When her brother Abul rebukes her for her infatuation for prince Salim, she boldly retorts, "if I wanted to marry him, what would stop us?" (*The Twentieth Wife* 41). Her firm replies mark her strength of mind and determination. Sundaresan employs Mehrunissa's dream of becoming an Empress of Hindustan as a leitmotif throughout the novel. She presents Mehrunissa as a symbol of the powerful woman who relentlessly tries to become the mistress of her own destiny despite the hurdles on the way to achieve that goal. There are various instances where she questions and challenges the gender roles prescribed by the race. She often asks her father "why a woman has to stay in the house when a man can go and come as he pleases" (45). Asmat, who wants to confine her daughter to the domestic space is a typical stereotype of the subjugated woman, conditioned to be happy in her marginal existence. Ghias, on the other hand, is afraid of losing his daughter's intelligent assistance in his official responsibilities if she is forced to stay behind the purdah.

### **3. A Power Behind the Veil**

"No wife, no concubine, no mother had that power. But this wife, she was different" (*The Feast of Roses* 8)

The first novel delineates the life of Mehrunissa from her birth to her growing up years, her first meeting with her childhood love Prince Salim in the exotic interiors of Agra fort, her ill-fated marriage with Sher Afgan and her consequent widowhood, her journey through motherhood and the end of her expedition when she discovers her heart and its dreams. *The Feast of Roses* discerns the transformation of Mehrunissa to Nur Jahan the first Mughal empress who as a child was forced to be abandoned by her hapless father Ghiyas Beg because of excruciating poverty. She Challenges men and women as natural and universal. The novel relocates Nurjahan as a feminist figure in the contemporary medieval history of India. The mire of existence led her father from Kabul to Agra where he could find employment in the court of Akbar and gradually rose to power- even to the rank of the Grand Vizier of Mughal India. Jahangir's romance with Mehrunissa- though devoid of volcanic eruptions and thunderstorms in the passionate affair of Salim and Anarkali as it is illustrated in the writings of travellers like William Finch-is a mature love between a man in his forties and a woman in her late thirties, portrayed as above and beyond everything that is ephemeral. In the midst of the avarice of life and the rapaciousness of the courtiers and the innumerable women in his life Jahangir discovers in his twentieth wife stability and a rare munificence which gives him no second thoughts to transfer his power and the most potent symbol of imperial authority, namely, the royal genealogical seal of Mughal dynasty. This bounteousness of the emperor in turn brings to fore how Mughal hierarchy should be perceived as an all-pervasive conflating masculinist hegemonic power that perceived its woman as a body-as 'other' in the schism of self/other, marked by cultural impositions and inscriptions.

#### **4. Consequent Subjugation**

Mehrunissa re-defines her role in the sequestered territory of Mughal harem and emerges out as a role model for any typical Indian woman aspiring to touch the skies whereas on the other hand Jahanara, Shah Jahan's favourite daughter, is the shadow princess in the third novel in the trilogy *Shadow Princess* destined to live like a shadow behind her doting but helpless father, and thus forced to live a secluded life in the insulated walls of the Mughal court, caught up in the intrigues and power politics of her contending siblings, and finally sacrificing "herself" subserviently for the sake of her father. Describing the significance of the name, Mehrunissa, Harbans observes:

The daughter of Ghiaz Beg who had been so providentially preserved in the desert as she grew up excelled in personal attractions, all the loveliest women of the East and was therefore honoured with the designation of Mihr-ul-Nissa: the Sun of women. The extraordinary event which had distinguished her birth seemed but as the prognostic of future distinction. The child of the desert grew to be the perfection of women (*The Mughals of India* 11).

A major part of the trilogy takes place within the precincts of the imperial Mughal harem and in its mysterious cores where power operates to invest, train and produce docile female bodies placing it as a target of disciplinary act. Harem is a closely guarded wing known in Arabic as a sacred or prohibited place which evokes images of an immensely fortified playground for carrying out one man's sexual fantasies with hundreds of women of all shapes and sizes, colours and ethnic group at his beck and call. In fact, contrary to this image, harem is a sanctum sanctorum where committing of any sin is forbidden. It was thus at least in concept a state of restraints rather than excesses. The number of women in one's harem was perceived as one of the major symbols of state power. It was a sequestered space where women, wives, concubines, maids, eunuchs lived collectively and where royal baths, Meena bazar and royal marriages were held. Though harem was a gilded cage it was a terrain where female bodies were perceived as valued property and a place where women had to conceal themselves from male gaze. It was a part of pomp and display expected of an

emperor who was the only male lived in the harem. Admission into the harem was strictly regulated by other Uzbeks, Tartar and Ethiopian women. It was strange that women within harem whose bodies were marked and subjected to a claustrophobic reality of a masculinist hegemonic patriarchy and despotic power were protected by other women who were witnesses to the cultural and carnal interplay inside the seraglio.

The vastness of the imperial harem and the little authentic information we have of it except from the wandering eyes of European travellers like Manucci and Tavernier describing it as a pagan heaven of extravagant and endless orgies, provides Sundaresan a vast canvas with a narrative that is at once grand in its sweep and yet rich in the sensory detail of every specific moment and hence brings forth what life must have been like behind the cloistered inner walls of the imperial seraglio. Such indeterminacies in history are absences which demand a filling up of gaps with imagination as the medium demands as to reveal the modalities of how to tell the story of what happened rather than what happened thereby making it a subjective metanarrative. The shift from owned history to shared history has opened up new pastures of re-invention and re-interpretation making Sundaresan's trilogy what Linda Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction. Sundaresan's translocation of his-story to her-story impregnating the so-called objectivity with sophisticated artistry in delineating two enigmatic women in Indian history unveiling their problematic lives within the harem.

Harem which had its roots in Ottoman Turkish Empire played a pertinent role as a social/political institution, had homologous hierarchical structure in the Mughal tradition where women were compelled to follow the rules of *pardha* as they were considered as the torch bearers of Mughal culture thereby giving us a gruelling picture of how female bodies were subjected to scrutinizing male gaze. The cloistered and secluded space of the seraglio in the trilogy has its chief the dowager Empress Ruqaya, who used to be the Padshah begum of Akbar whose secured position in the *zenana*, made no further attempts to beguile the emperor. Sundaresan writes:

It was a waste of time when everyday a fresh new face appeared at the harem. So Ruqaya left the satisfaction of Akbar's physical needs to the younger girls while she made sure that he came to see her for all else. (*The Mughal World: Life in India's last golden age* 18)

The 'all else' factor gives her agency though Ruqaya's subjectivity in *The Twentieth Wife* and *The Feast of Roses* is not premised upon as having a unified sovereign rational consciousness but not unlike other women in the harem, is discursively constructed encompassing the conscious and subconscious dimensions of herself steeped in Mughal *tehzeeb* or edifice. The coherence of herself is dispersed to be located in subjectivities though the subject and its agency is uneven and asymmetrical as the balance of power is heavily tilted towards the social codes of masculinity its patriarchal metaphysics, value spheres and epistemology. The collectiveness of the lives of women in the seraglio spiced up by harem gossips and intrigues as mentioned in the trilogy brings to the fore a romanticised and jaded Mughal culture as it is evinced in the harem of Jahangir in the first two novels and in the imperial seraglio of the saturnine and cynical Aurengzeb in *Shadow Princess*. It is here where women are moulded to live a cloistered life under self-surveillance and militaristic self-disciplinary practises of subjugation to create docile bodies. Mehrunnisa gains ascendancy over not only her husband who is relatively weak-minded but also over her formidable rivals in the harem including Empress Jagat Gosini who plotted against her from the moment Mehrunnisa entered Jahangir's life.

## **5. On the Limits of Gender**

Mehrunissa, sketched as a widow and mother to a child had dreamt of marrying the crown prince of Hindustan Prince Salim, right from the age of eight, though situations take

her to diverse places where she had to live a harrowed life with her husband Sher Afghan who abused her without compunctions. From abandon to physical chastisement she has seen it all. She feels irritated with the system for insulting the women. She has to stand and watch Salim's wedding from the zenana balcony, "It was 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" (*Shadow Princess* 27). She is throughout portrayed as a rebel with individuality and courage right from her childhood that resulted in her meeting with Padshah Begam, Ruqayya which marks a turning point in Mehrunissa's life and provided her an opportunity to get closer to the workings of the zenana and the court. By observing Akbar's favourite wife, Ruqayya Begam during the visits to serve her, Mehrunissa learns, The title of Padshah Begam was not lightly bestowed nor lightly taken. Everything that happened within the harem walls and quite a bit that happened outside, came to Ruqayya's ears through various spies. Nothing was too big or too small for the Empress's notice . . . (36). Those were the lessons that augmented her survival instincts against the oddities of life. The iron in her spine transforms her from the daughter of a mere refugee to the empress of Mughal India who as history claims was powerful enough to struck coins in her name and issue royal farmans.

Contrary to what is seen as bodies entrenched in her physicality and perceived as a receptacle for the desires of man "a thing sunk deeply in her own immanence" (*Second sex* 4) as Simone de Beauvoir writes, Mehrunissa learns Scriptures, Arithmetic, Geometry, Astronomy and classics and but along with it Asmat makes sure she learnt painting, embroidery and sewing- all pointing to the fact that the woman in Mehrunissa is produced, restrained and moulded by the conflating structures of power through which emancipation/docility is sought. Asmat's constructedness of her gender suggests a certain determinism of gender meanings inscribed on her daughter's body whose body like innumerable other female bodies in the harem are understood as passive and docile recipients of an inexorable cultural law. Judith Butler writes in *Gender Trouble*:

When the relevant culture that constructs gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology is destiny formulation. (*Gender Trouble* 46)

In that case Mehrunissa's culture not her biology becomes her destiny. There is an essential cultural compulsion on the part of Asmat to make her an essentially masculinist construction pointing at how female sex is restricted to body. The supine yet flamboyant Jahangir or for that Nur Jahan in *Shadow Princess* take us further to ponder over the magical relation of reciprocity whereby Jahanara and Mehrunissa are limited to their bodies and the emperors to an incorporeal and intangible instrument of an ostensibly radical freedom, whose bodies remain unmarked unlike the bodies of women which are marked with inscriptions within the hegemonic discourse. Ever since the reign of Akbar it had been ordained that the names of the royal women in the seraglio should not be mentioned in the public sphere, thus excluding them in historiography. Instead they were designated by epithets such as Mariam-uz-Zamani (Mary of the age), a title bestowed by Akbar as an honour to one of his Rajput wives who bore him his crown prince Salim, and other analogous epithets like Mariam Makhani and Padshah Begum thus reducing them to titles. This postulates the modes of the discursive construction of the 'other' feminine gender and subjectivity by focussing on the ways in which masculine mainstays of phallogocentrism produces subservient female bodies as a target of disciplinary power and an effective form of social control. In *Shadow Princess* Jahannara is the one who comprehends the elements that make an empire function than all his sons, but her conspicuous erasure from the public domain /memory by Aurangzeb/history is similar to Nur Jahan's erasure from the court of Shah Jahan once Jahangir passes away. Jahanara is depicted as a peace mediator between

the father son duo and whom even Aurangzeb is in awe as it is manifested in his several requests to her to be the Padshah Begum of his harem, on the other hand Nur Jahan was seen as a potential threat -a threat which Shah Jahan wants to physically liquidate or exterminate.

Mehrunissa knows of her difficulties in competing with her rival, Jagat Gossini who shared twenty-five years with the emperor. She has already decided not to respect her as the padshah Begam which inspired her to speak first even without performing a konish. People begin to watch the new Empress with admiration and awe: "How brave she was, how proud, what a noble bearing for a woman born to Persian refugee" (*Shadow Princess* 49). With calculated moves, she breaks the hierarchy of power politics controlled by both men and women showing that women have to fight against themselves to assert their self. Michel Foucault observes on power relations:

Power-relations are dependent upon a number of deftly designed strategies. Most important one of these strategies is the tendency on the part of the dominant to ceaselessly refuse to acknowledge the dominated subject's separate identity and the dominant power structures constantly strive to drive a wedge between the oppressed group, gender or class to which she belongs (*The History of Sexuality* 125)

Her prowess as an efficient administrator in her short span of administration and her monstrous ambition to retain that position scares him. When Jahangir passes away she is detained in the Lahore fort, away from Delhi till her death as it is mentioned in *The Feast of Roses*. Her identity is understood as one that is not designated by masculine sex- docile and passive but the identity she is designated to be- to be aggressive, ambitious but as a doting wife and mother she disciplines herself to the extent that she is not the sex she is designated to be, but a masculinist one looking at herself through the masculine lens parading in the mode of otherness. Similarly the mystery that shrouds Jahanara partly is due to the travel writings of explorers like Francois Bernier regarding her incestuous relationship with her father. It is explicated in his own words:

Rumour has it that Shah Jahan's attachment reached a point where it is difficult to believe the justification of which he rested on the decision of the mullahs or doctors of their law. According to them it would have been unjust to deny the king the privilege of gathering fruit from the tree he had planted himself. (*The Feast of Roses* 34)

Though this blasphemous relation appears as an indeterminacy in the text, her clandestine rendezvous with the Mughal noble Mirza Najabat Khan and her other sexual escapades in the sacred/profane interiors of the harem where men are not permitted explicitly brings out a new image of the princess who has no qualms or compunctions in quenching her sexual needs. Such a quest can be read as a subversion of a paternally sanctioned cult bringing forth a new paradigm of gender relation where Sundaresan does not hesitate to discuss about the personal choice of woman and her sexuality. Historians have written much about the perception of this sexual malaise -a moral canker-of later Mughal rulers in their historiography explicitly where women like Lal Kunwar and Koki Jiu had no qualms in capitalising their body as a tool to soar heights. But Jahanara's contravention of the sanctity of her body undermines the phallogocentric mode of signification of female sex as it produces and reproduces phantasms of its own self amplifying desire.

## **6. Conclusion**

Apart from Nur Jahan, Sundaresan delineates other remarkable women characters as well also like Ruqayya Begum, Salima Sultan Begum and Jagat Gossini without reducing the significance of male characters. So instead of adhering to the 'sameness' of homogeneous history and male narratives, the writer brings forth a 'difference' by giving

voice to the women also. Resistance narratives reinterpret 'history' and insist on making female voices heard. It is imperative to note that such writers produce "history in a way which allows us better to account for social change and human agency" ("History as Usual" 118). In these novels, Sundaresan challenges the centers of power through Nur Jahan's resistance, thus demonstrating how, through resistant writings, women empowerment becomes a futuristic possibility.

Judith Newton contends that the articulation of assumptions and practices however "differs in feminist and non-feminist work and is tied to the politics, the needs and desires of the practitioners" ("Historicisms New and Old" 450). Thus, Feminist New Historicists are interested in recovering lost histories thereby exploring mechanisms of repression, oppression and subjugation stressing on the 'difference' contrary to the 'sameness' that we often encounter in the male narratives. It is of paramount consideration that Feminist politics can give ground breaking articulations to New Historicism. Feminist New Historicism is not only an attempt to make women's voices heard to make others see them as in history but also to see themselves in history to give value to themselves. Thus, women writers like Indu Sundaresan give value to themselves by challenging "traditional, masculinist, 'objective' 'history' by making women visible, by writing women into history" ("History as Usual?" 99-100). Apart from recreating the lives and achievements of royal women, Sundaresan has also tried to incorporate the story of a slave girl, Yasmin's sufferings as well, thereby initiating the path to perceive history "as composed of many voices" (103). Thus, Sundaresan illustrates how the prevalent monolithic "histories" can be re-read as "herstories" too.

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**Biosketch**



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