

Power Behind the Veil: The Empress Nur Jahan
Indu Sundaresan's *The Feast of Roses*

S. Revathi & Dr. A. Selvalakshmi

Abstract

Novelist Indu Sundaresan has written a captivating novel which brings the Mughal times in front of our eyes. *The Feast of Roses* tells the story of Mehrunissa who came into the Emperor Jahangir's harem as his twentieth and last wife. This novel *The Feast of Roses* hints the progress of Nur Jahan from just a spouse of Jahangir to the dignified position of the Empress of Delhi. Nur Jahan seems to be the icon in Indu Sundaresan's work. She unbounded the manacles and acknowledged herself as the defender of womenfolk's cause. Nur Jahan established great power and strength during the reign of Jahangir. Indu Sundaresan uses her pen as a sword to fight for Nur Jahan giving her place in the history. Indu Sundaresan increases feminity throughout the novel by the character of Mehrunissa.



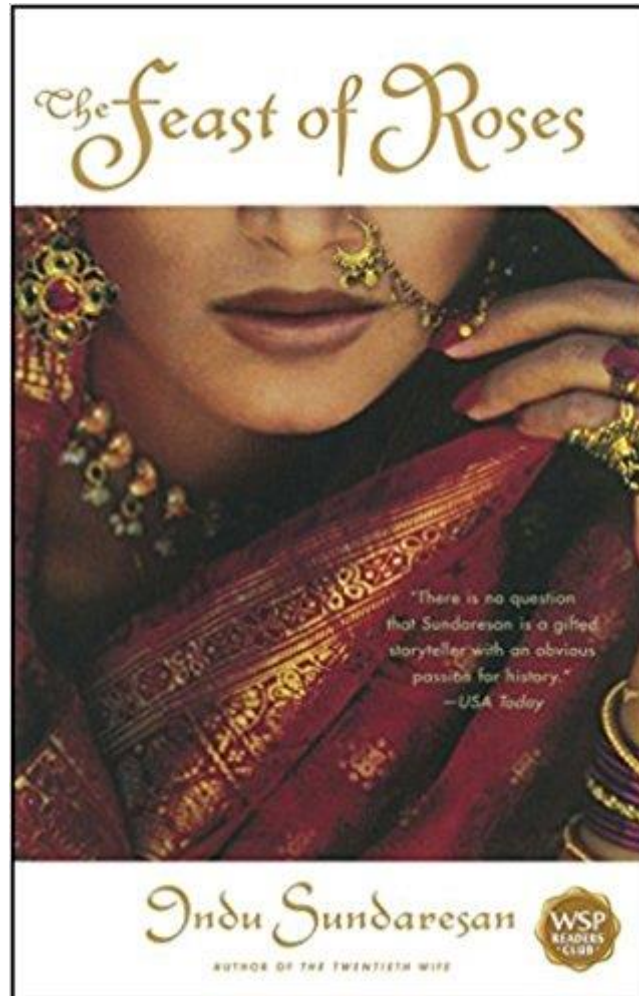
Indu Sundaresan

Courtesy: <http://www.indusundaresan.com/contact.aspx>

Indu Sundaresan - A Short Profile

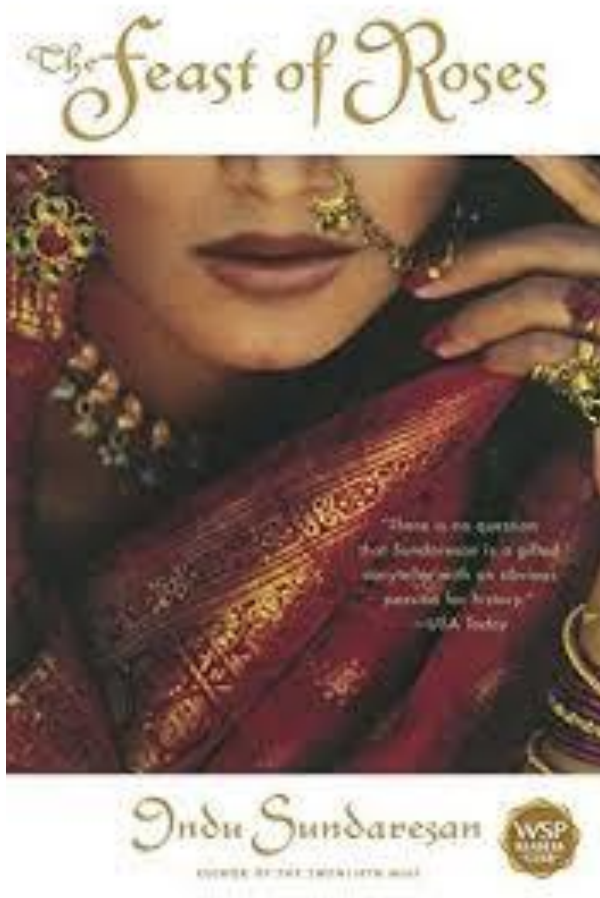
Novelist Indu Sundaresan was born in India and moved all over the country as a child. Her father was a fighter pilot in the Indian Air Force, and the family went from one military base to

the next. Sundaresan developed her love for storytelling as a child. She was wedded and finally moved with her husband to Seattle. Her historical novels depict the Mughal times. She also won the Washington State Book Award in the year 2003. She is the author of six books so far. Indu Sundaresan's *The Feast of Roses* is an extensive work of historical fiction. Some critics say that Indu Sundaresan has written a captivating novel about an attractive time and has brought it alive with the characters who are at once mortal and legendary, moving with loveliness and elegance across the bright period she has recreated for them.



Introduction

In *The Feast of the Roses*, Indu Sundaresan sees Nurjahan as the creative representative of women rather than focusing on their limitations. Nurjahan was a mighty Empress who could even control the day-to-day affairs of the vast Mughal Empire. Nurjahan minted coins with her own picture. She even attended *jarokha*, which was never attended by any female before. Sundaresan uses her pen as a sword to fight for giving Nurjahan a place in history. The novel *The Feast of Roses* traces the development of Nurjahan from just the wife of Jahangir to the exalted position of the ruler of Delhi.



Courtesy: <http://www.indusundaresan.com/contact.aspx>

Power behind the Veil

The Feast of Roses tells the story of Mehrunnisa, who came into Emperor Jahangir's harem as his twentieth and last wife. Emperor Jahangir married Mehrunnisa for love, and the associates of his courtyard were bothered that Mehrunnisa could employ control over their futures. Mehrunnisa quickly turned out to be the greatest authoritative woman in the Mughal Kingdom in spite of a difficult competition in the majestic harem members of which conspired and planned against her from the start. She rules from behind the veil, safeguarding her rank by creating a junta sorts with her father, brother and stepson and risking it all, even her daughter to get what she wants.

Mehrunnisa is known more contemporarily as Empress Nur Jahan. Jahangir first gave Mehrunnisa a title as Nur Mahal, Light of the Palace, and later it was altered to Nur Jahan which means Light of the World. In Mughal India titles were marks of imperial favour and blessing. The word *nur*, signifying light, had its antecedents in Emperor Akbar's time. Akbar was known as a devotee of the sun, even conceiving a new religion that had at its basis the worship of the sun.

The water was warm as honey and heavy around her, but cooler than air. Mehrunnisa dipped her head in letting her hair swirl wet about her face. She said her new name out loud, "Nurjahan". Her voice fractured in the denseness of the water, little air bubbles blossomed and escaped to the top tickling around her cheeks. (4)

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Through these lines one can see that Mehrunissa was happy with the title bestowed upon her by Jahangir. One can also find that she became ambitious when she entered the Imperial Zenana of Jahangir. She gains control over imperial policy because of her husband's deep and somewhat blind love for her.

Sundaresan increases the femininity subject in the novel, through the representation of the historical image Nur Jahan. The novel shows the progress of Nurjahan from just the spouse of Jahangir to the dignified position of the monarch of Delhi. Mehrunnisa defied all norms by refusing to be confined to the duties of an empress and dares to re-define her role as a decision-maker. She was well-aware of the limitation that a woman suffers in her time. But she was courageous enough to challenge those restrictions on her.

Woman in history is defined by male historians. It is an imperfect representation. Nurjahan deconstructs the stereotypical role of women in the Mughal Court. Mehrunissa bowed to the Dowager Empress. At the door she turned, "I now have a new title, your Majesty, I am no longer Mehrunissa." "Be careful, Mehrunissa. Be careful of how you talk to me. Remember what I have done for you." (17)

Through the above lines one can find that Mehrunissa was challenging her predecessor the Dowager Empress Ruqayya Sultan Begam and other members of the court who interfered with her plans to attain power and strength. She also changed herself as the most powerful and ambitious woman.

In the novel, Mehrunissa thinks why the other wives of Jahangir, especially Jagat Gosini, never demanded any share in the administration of the Empire. Nurjahan dares to question the limits and borders imposed on women. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Indian women were usually banished from public and political activities due to the patriarchal structure of Indian society. In such a time she thought of confronting the patriarchal society and creating a new social structure that would give adequate space to women.

Mehrunnisa sat behind him in the zenana balcony, watching as the Emperor dealt with the day's business. Sometimes she almost spoke out loudly, when a thought occurred to her, when an idea came, then she stopped, knowing that the screen put her in a different place. That it made her a woman. One without a voice, void of opinion. (6)

Nur Jahan unbound the manacles on her and acknowledged herself as the defender of womenfolk's cause. Various historians are of the opinion that king Jahangir had been completely subsumed before Nur in the matter of administration of the Mughal Empire. But she had been avoided only because she was a woman. As the historian Eraly wrote, "But there was one fatal flaw in her. She was a woman... And in the prejudice of the age women had no public role, and ambition was the prerogative of men" (*The Lives and Time of the Great Mughals*. 86).

Nur Jahan as Decision Maker

Nur Jahan is portrayed as an active and intellectual 'decision maker' rather than a silent subject under Jahangir's rule. She even thought of challenging the traditional male chauvinistic assumptions about womankind. Nur Jahan bravely takes a prominent role along with Jahangir in the administration. No woman stood there before. The Jharoka was a special balcony built into the outer bulwark of Agra Fort, where Jahangir gave address to people three times a day. Sundaresan describes

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that, “the women of his zenana, whatever their relationship to him had always stayed behind the brick walls of the harem” (10).

Nur Jahan also governed the monarch's vast zenana which contained hundreds of people including Jahangir's wives, ladies-in-waiting, concubines, servants, slaves, female guards, spies, entertainers, crafts people, visiting relatives, eunuchs, and all the children belonging to the women. Nur Jahan greatly influenced the zenana's tastes in cosmetics, fashions, food, and artistic expression. She spent money lavishly, experimenting with new perfumes, hair ointments, jewellery, silks, brocades, porcelain, and cuisine from other lands. Since Nur Jahan came from a line of poets, she naturally wrote too and encouraged this among the court women. Poetry contests were held, and favourite female poets from beyond the court were sometimes sponsored by the Empress of the Mughal Empire.

When Jahangir falls seriously ill, a battle for succession to the throne begins. This battle comes to an end, when Mehrunnisa fails to marry off her daughter, Ladli, to one of the primary contenders for the throne, Prince Khurram. There is a documentation on Mehrunnisa's attempts to marry Ladli to Khusrau and to Khurram although Khurram is sometimes regarded as false by some historians.

Sundaresan chose to believe both accounts for the arguments put forward against khurram's marrying Ladli were mostly these –that Khurram was so in love with Arjumand that he would not countenance marrying again and that to Arjumand's cousin. Khurram undoubtedly adored Arjumand, he demonstrated that by building the world's greatest monument of love, the Taj Mahal in her memory. The power struggle worsens, but Mehrunnisa is fated by a key incident in which she accidentally kills a palace infringer.

A critic remarked that the novel's scope and ambition are impressive, as are the plentiful era details and portrayals of the various ethnic rituals that distinguish court life in royal India.

But Mehrunnisa did not know then, would never know, by giving her blessings to this marriage she had set into progress a chain of events that would eventually erase her name from history's pages. Or that Arjumand would become the only Mughal woman posterity would easily recognize. Docile, seemingly tractable and troublesome Arjumand would eclipse even Mehrunnisa, cast her in a shadow... because of the monument Khurram would build in Arjumand's memory-the Taj Mahal. (291)

She establishes great supremacy of character and is crafty to get what she wants, sometimes at greater personal cost, even almost losing her daughter's love. Since women were not supposed to appear face to face with men in court, Nur Jahan ruled through trusted males. But it was she who approved all orders and grants of appointment in Jahangir's name, and controlled all promotions and demotions within the royal government.”...during the rest of the reign of Jahangir, she bore the chief sway in all the affairs of the empire” (135).

Mehrunnisa was very powerful during the reign of Jahangir. Though she had great rivals, she successfully waged wars in the battlefields and proves herself as the strongest woman. Sundaresan describes this, “Mehrunnisa threw down the bow and grabbed the waist of her granddaughter's ghagara. She turned to Ladli, whose eyes flickered to her mother just briefly, the Rajput soldiers held steadily in the musket's sight. “Whatever you wish, Mama,” she said quietly. (350)

Visit of Travellers

Then and there are the foreigners whom the Mughals rely on increasingly even while they despise them. Sir Thomas Roe mentions Mehrunnisa abundantly in his autobiography, realizing, quite soon after his arrival in India, that the beloved wife was the real power behind Jahangir's throne. He is naturally an excellent source for Anglo Indian relations during Jahangir's rule, and an interesting witness of court politics and the junta's infighting. William Foster in *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India* describes about Mehrunnisa as,

I never saw so settled a Countenance..but mingled with extreme Pride and Contempt of all. If I can judge anything, he [Khurram] hath left his heart among his father's women, with whom he hath liberty of conversation. Normahall...visited him...She gave him a Cloake all embroidered with Pearle, Diamonds and rubyes; and carried away, if I err not, his attention to all other business "(165).

Conclusion

Novelist has greater degree of freedom than a historian. Indu Sundaresan develops the plot through the representation of Nurjahan. The rulers and the emperors who were known only by the names come alive in front of human eyes. Their movements, the dresses, the food, the war tents, the servants, the attendants all give the reader a glimpse of the times. She was a powerful queen who actually ruled the empire in the name of the king. But in history of the time she is not given adequate place. She is not numbered along with the Mughal rulers, though she actually regulated the Mughal court. History will always celebrate Nur Jahan who withstands all the existing norms of an Empress and dares to redefine her role as a decision maker. Novelist Indu Sundaresan uses her pen as a sword to fight to give her a place in history.

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