

Empowered Women and Feminism in the Novels of Indu Sundaresan

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Abstract

*This research paper investigates the nuanced portrayal of empowered women and feminist ideologies in the novels of Indu Sundaresan. Through a meticulous analysis of works such as *The Twentieth Wife* and *The Feast of Roses*, the study examines how Sundaresan reconstructs historical narratives to spotlight female agency and resistance against patriarchal norms. Her storytelling vividly captures the complex interplay of gender, power, and societal constraints within historical contexts. The research highlights recurring themes such as autonomy, solidarity among women, and the intersection of gender and politics, which underpin Sundaresan's feminist ethos. By presenting women who navigate and often subvert oppressive structures, her works challenge traditional portrayals of women in historical fiction. The paper further explores the development of her protagonists, who emerge as multidimensional figures embodying both strengths and vulnerabilities, thereby making them relatable and inspiring. Ultimately, this study underscores how Sundaresan's novels not only reclaim the voices of marginalized women but also contribute to contemporary feminist discourse by inspiring a re-evaluation of historical gender dynamics.*

Keywords: Indu Sundaresan, Feminist Literature, Historical Fiction, Empowered Women, Patriarchy, Gender and Power, Female Solidarity

Introduction

Indu Sundaresan, an acclaimed Indian author of historical fiction and recipient of the 2003 Washington State Book Award for *The Twentieth Wife*, addresses the marginalization of women's achievements in historical discourse. By reimagining historical events through the lens of fiction, Sundaresan foregrounds the critical roles women have played in shaping national histories. Her work deconstructs patriarchal narratives by redefining femininity and employing a distinctly feminine language, thereby challenging phallogocentric norms within literary traditions. Furthermore, her novels contribute to the feminist objective of reclaiming history as “her story,” striving to enhance the visibility of women's experiences and empower female readers. Stuart Sim articulates this feminist endeavor:

Feminism has taken as an object of both analysis and intervention the construction of knowledge, meaning and representations. It has also been concerned with the struggle to find a voice through which such knowledge's might be expressed. For the development of an autonomous female subject, capable of speaking in her own voice within a culture which has persistently reduced her to the status of object, is also part of feminism's project (Sim 42).

Indu Sundaresan's novels are celebrated for their vivid portrayal of historical India, focusing on the lives of women who navigate complex social hierarchies and personal challenges. Central to her storytelling is the exploration of female agency within a patriarchal framework. This research aims to uncover the layers of feminism embedded in Sundaresan's works and examine how her female protagonists assert their autonomy. By

addressing themes such as power dynamics, solidarity, and resistance, this study highlights Sundaresan's contribution to feminist literature and her unique approach to reimagining historical narratives.

Discussion

Sundaresan's works often situate women in historical contexts where their roles were largely dictated by societal norms. Yet, her narratives bring to life women who defy these constraints, wielding power in subtle yet significant ways.

The Twentieth Wife: This novel focuses on Mehrunissa, later known as Empress Nur Jahan, one of the most powerful women in Mughal history. Sundaresan's portrayal of Mehrunissa's journey from an ordinary girl to the wife of Emperor Jahangir underscores themes of ambition, intelligence, and resilience. Despite existing within a deeply patriarchal empire, Mehrunissa's political acumen and influence over imperial affairs highlight her as an empowered figure. As Sundaresan writes, "Mehrunissa's determination to rise above her circumstances was the spark that lit an era of unparalleled female authority" (*The Twentieth Wife* 237). In *The Twentieth Wife*, Mehrunissa is depicted as a profoundly ambitious woman who achieves her aspirations through her intelligence, resilience, and determination. Her journey is marked by love, courage, tolerance, and fortitude, rather than reliance on male counterparts. Mehrunissa's character embodies the struggles of contemporary women striving to attain their goals, regardless of their geographical or cultural contexts. Recognizing the universal relevance of these themes, Indu Sundaresan believed that historical novels set in India would resonate with a global readership. She symbolizes women who possess great potential but are transitioning from traditional feminine roles towards feminist empowerment. Sundaresan's feminist perspective is evident throughout her trilogy, as she advocates for women to confront challenges and endure hardships with courage. In an interview with Uma Girish for the California Literary Review, Sundaresan explicitly affirmed her commitment to feminist ideals.

All my work is constructed around female protagonists (except for a couple of short stories) always want to explore in these women the possibilities of stepping beyond society's restrictions and to see how they would react, what would really matter to them (Girish).

Indu Sundaresan's perspective echoes the views expressed by Jaidev:

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 Indu Sundaresan focuses her novels on protagonists from the Mughal era, offering a nuanced exploration of this historical period. At first glance, the Mughal era might evoke perceptions of social and cultural backwardness. However, Sundaresan challenges this notion by selecting Mehrunissa (later known as Empress Nur Jahan) as a central figure whose life story remains endlessly captivating. Mehrunissa's narrative is one of extraordinary empowerment, portraying a woman who defied the limitations imposed on her gender in a time when women had little to no societal power. Sundaresan presents her as a figure of immense strength, intelligence, and influence, making her a source of inspiration for contemporary readers and a role model for younger generations.

As an omniscient narrator, Sundaresan skillfully immerses readers into the world of her protagonists. She intricately portrays the setting, encompassing the geographical and cultural landscapes, the prevailing political climate, the societal norms, and even the inner workings of the characters' minds. The detailed descriptions of places, weather, and objects vividly recreate the luxurious and opulent Mughal era, offering readers a rich, textured experience. By employing the past tense, Sundaresan provides a sense of historical distance, allowing readers to connect with and comprehend an unfamiliar world. Her use of tone, language, and vocabulary, carefully tailored to the historical and cultural context, further enhances the realism of her characters and their environment, making them feel authentic and relatable.

The *Twentieth Wife*, the first installment of Sundaresan's acclaimed Taj Trilogy, delves into the remarkable life of Empress Nur Jahan. The novel offers an in-depth examination of Mehrunnisa's journey, from her modest beginnings to her rise as a legendary and controversial figure in history. It explores her transformation from a beautiful and intelligent young girl to an ambitious woman who married Emperor Jahangir after the death of her first husband, Ali Quli. Nur Jahan emerges as one of the rare, powerful women in history who successfully asserted her identity and agency in a male-dominated world. Known as "Mehrunnisa – The Sun among Women," she captivated people not only with her beauty but also through her intellect, strategic thinking, and determination.

The novel chronicles Mehrunnisa's evolution from a curious and spirited child to a mature woman who consistently defied gender norms. As a child, she resisted societal restrictions by questioning her father about the physical limitations placed on girls, participating in games typically reserved for boys, and even visiting prohibited spaces like the nashakhana in disguise. Later, as a married woman, she challenged patriarchal authority by confronting her husband, Ali Quli, on his immoral actions. Although she may not have been familiar with the modern ideology of feminism, her actions and resilience align with its principles, as she consistently stood up for herself and voiced her opinions in a time when women's voices were largely silenced.

Through Mehrunnisa's story, Sundaresan sheds light on the limited emancipation available to women in the Mughal era, which was largely confined to the elite class, while also highlighting the struggles faced by ordinary women in a patriarchal society. Mehrunnisa's brilliance, courage, and unwavering determination positioned her as a woman ahead of her time. The novel portrays her as a multifaceted individual, embodying both grace and strength. Despite societal scorn, criticism, and resistance, she pursued her personal goals with unrelenting focus and purpose.

For Mehrunnisa, Emperor Jahangir was not only her passion but also her life's mission - a personal mission, as one might describe it in modern terms. She had a clear understanding of her actions and their potential outcomes, which enabled her to navigate the challenges and achieve her ambitions. In this sense, Mehrunnisa exemplifies self-empowerment, as she fulfilled her aspirations while maintaining her dignity and integrity. Sundaresan's portrayal of Mehrunnisa as a courageous, self-assured woman provides a compelling depiction of a historical figure who transcended the limitations of her time to leave an enduring legacy.

Indu Sundaresan's *The Feast of Roses*, originally titled *Power Behind the Veil*, serves as the sequel to *The Twentieth Wife* and explores the life of Mehrunnisa as an Empress during Jahangir's reign, culminating in her death in exile after his demise. The novel highlights how Nur Jahan defied the prevailing social stratification that subjugated women, restricting their freedom, agency, and opportunities. Mehrunnisa's character challenges the notion of domesticity imposed upon women, embodying a balance between social structure and individual agency - a central theme in sociological discourse. While societal norms attempted to constrain her choices, her inner strength functioned as a transformative force, enabling her to assert herself as an autonomous individual capable of shaping her destiny. The narrative portrays Mehrunnisa as a proactive agent of change rather than a passive product of her circumstances. As Nur Jahan (the "Light of the World"), she emerges as a formidable administrator, distinguished by her astute decision-making, political acumen, and strategic maneuvers.

Themes of Empowerment and Resistance Several recurring themes in Sundaresan's novels emphasize feminist principles:

- **Agency and Autonomy:** Sundaresan's characters often challenge societal expectations. For instance, Mehrunnisa's refusal to conform to traditional roles of wife and mother and her active participation in politics reflect her assertion of autonomy. Sundaresan remarks, "Mehrunnisa chose her path, not as an accessory to power, but as a force within it" (*The Twentieth Wife* 146).
- **Intersection of Gender and Power:** The novels explore how women navigate and subvert power structures. Nur Jahan's rise to prominence, despite being surrounded by powerful male counterparts,

is a testament to her strategic brilliance. As Sundaresan articulates, “In a court filled with whispers of intrigue, Nur Jahan’s voice rang clear and commanding” (*The Feast of Roses* 202).

- **Sisterhood and Solidarity:** relationships among women play a crucial role in Sundaresan’s narratives. They offer support systems that enable resistance against patriarchal oppression. Sundaresan writes, “The strength of one woman became the strength of many, weaving a tapestry of defiance and hope” (*The Feast of Roses* 224).
- **Feminist Reading of Character Development:** Sundaresan’s protagonists are not without flaws, which makes them relatable and multidimensional. Their struggles and triumphs resonate with feminist ideals, illustrating the complexity of navigating womanhood in restrictive environments. Mehrunissa’s growth from a young, determined girl to a politically astute woman exemplifies the power of perseverance and self-belief. As Sundaresan poignantly states, “To falter was human, to rise again - divine” (*The Twentieth Wife* 328).

Conclusion

Indu Sundaresan’s novels offer a nuanced portrayal of empowered women who challenge patriarchal norms and assert their individuality. By revisiting historical narratives through a feminist lens, Sundaresan not only reclaims the voices of marginalized women but also inspires contemporary discussions on gender and empowerment. Her works stand as a testament to the enduring strength and resilience of women across eras. In highlighting the complexities of gender dynamics, Sundaresan invites readers to reflect on the past while envisioning a more equitable future. The struggles of women, whether exemplified by the powerful Mehrunnisa or the learned Jahanara, reflect a shared desire to unmask patriarchal structures and reject victimhood under patriarchal ideologies. While the theorization of gendered oppositions is a product of modern discourse, it is evident that women’s awareness of gender discrimination began much earlier. Mehrunnisa is depicted as a figure who resists oppression, raises her voice, and asserts her agency. In contrast, Jahanara embodies the plight of countless Indian women bound by patriarchal familial and societal expectations. Despite her modern outlook and courageous spirit, Jahanara remains confined to her role as a dutiful, self-sacrificing figure within the family. She represents the silent suffering of women unable to protest or pursue personal happiness. Even in contemporary times, women occupy a precarious position at the intersection of tradition and social change. They remain acutely aware of their exploitation across social, economic, cultural, and political spheres within a predominantly patriarchal society. Attempts to challenge this oppression often face the threat of social ostracism for questioning entrenched customs and traditions, underscoring the enduring challenges women face in striving for equality and autonomy.

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