

# **Histories that Matter: On the Limits of Gender and the Consequent Subjugation in Indu Sundaresan's *The Twentieth Wife***

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One essential point about Indian English fiction is that it is consequence of multi culturality and multi linguism. Again, it can also be deemed the cultural consequence of multi traditionality. Hence, one can rightly point out that Indian English fiction encompasses a new literary endeavour created out of the mythical fiction with a colonial super structure. English as a language has now become inevitable. Yet the Indian writers can negotiate with and even rebel against the colonial hegemony in a calibanic way. As Amit chotalia and Heena Variya observes:

Literature is essentially a social and cultural seismograph, which records the throbbing pulse of time and transmutes it into the heart beats of eternity. The independent India witnessed a creative up-surge of ideas and resurgence of arts and literature, even though it was rocked by political disasters and social calamities of vast magnitude. (225)

Especially when it comes to women writers, Indian English fiction is evocative of women protagonists and the feminine interventions. Literature, in their hands has begun to witness a new kind of renaissance. Over the years, these women writers have begun to maintain a unique feminine decorum. At the same time, they have never failed to articulate the womanist sense of frustration, desperation and deprivation. Looking at the contemporary Indian fictional scenario there is an obvious marking of a stigma called nostalgia. The nostalgia in their hands is a stigmatic representation of the ancient myths and tradition and ironically the oriented deprivation accorded to women. No wonder their fictions have started to move towards a new direction having the *humane* as its central focus.

Indu Sundaresan is a writer who has accordingly sought to present a reality in such a way she demonstrates the relationship and importance of the backdrop. To Sundaresan, fiction is a kind of aesthetic base that promptly responds to the need for identity and self-definition. The researcher presents a survey of a few specific Indian writers before fixing Sundaresan in the appropriate context. Her fiction demonstrates unique configurations of this encounter. Again it is a stage where old realities are sometimes reconciled with the new. The fiction is also an

expression of contradiction of Indian experience at odds with the colonial intrusion. The writers chosen for survey have wonderfully created a literature that holds within fascinating tension during the direct experience with the outsider. They have produced a unique reality as per their respective notions. Their perception of the Indian space is not only internal and subjective but also an ultimate inference of reality in India. No wonder these writers have imbibed the external world internally, through an examination of the psyche and representation of the unconscious world in literature.

Essentially and obviously the women writers have begun to contest history, knowledge and even wisdom. By fixing themselves in Indian culturality, they have started to doubt the definition of the terms since they are of the strong opinion that they are all off springs of male hegemony. Hence naturally, they have become critics too in the growing desperation against the existing super structure. Thus, these writers have indulged themselves in a unique enterprise of psyche deprivation paving way for a new thinking and perception. To these women writers, as Jean Paul Sartre says, "But since for us, writing is an enterprise; since we think we must try to be as right as we can in our books; and since, even if the centuries show us to be in the wrong, this is no reason to show in advance that we are wrong" (22).

The women in Indu's novels experience an autonomy that caricatures the function of men. To dethrone men she enthrone women. The struggle her women have is universal. Indu can be characterised as a mesmerising storyteller following one way of writing for her short stories and another for her novels. She exercises skill to establish her paramount. She is a proof to the fact that history is always interesting if narrated well. Her first two novels are an insightful look at the royal court of the seventeenth century. The history behind the Taj Mahal, the Taj Mahal trilogy, is skilfully woven in three of her novels.

Her novels respectively conceived history as metaphor and then conceptual metaphor. Her novels project history as signifying not only one idea but also conceptual in encompassing one idea in terms of another idea. Her novels help one to link historical fact conceptually to post-modern facts that dominate today's ideology. Hence her novels as perforations of history as metaphor strategically negotiate a manipulative role of the modern times. The novelist reactivates history in conceptual terms in order to fix it in the performativity principle of post modernity.

*The Twentieth Wife* concerns with the glorious Mughal emperors Akbar and Jahangir. Mehrunissa is Ghias Beg's daughter, who comes to India as fugitive from Persia during the time of Akbar, the third Mughal emperor. She dreams of marrying a prince which appears possible,

when she comes to contact with Empress Ruqayya, the present Padash Begam, who is at the height of her power now. Though she succeeds in having love with prince Salim, her dream slips away when she is forced to marry Aliquli, a brave soldier from Persia by the emperor and they give birth to Ladli a female baby. Emperor Akbar has serious problems thinking over the death of prince Murad, witnessing prince Salim's visible open rebellions for overthrowing him and looking at Danyal, a dissolute youth given to drinking and opium. However, powerful women like Empress Ruqayya and Salima Sultan Begam, step in to set right things. With Danyal's death, Khusrau, son of prince Salim becomes a viable threat to prince Salim's claim on the throne. Finally, Akbar who has Salim in the centre, dies entrusting in Salim's hands the whole empire. Salim who is called Jahangir now, gets rid of Khusrau's menace by blinding one of his eyes. However, all the Begams interfere in the matter of Mizra Koka and changes his destiny. Door opens for Mehrunissa to come from Bengal, where she is now with Aliquli, to renew her love with Jahangir, at the betrothal of Arjumand and Khurram. Aliquli, the tiger slayer, dies bravely when the emperor takes serious steps to marry Mehrunissa. In spite of Emperor Jagat Gosini's stiff opposition and other hurdles, the emperor's twentieth marriage with Mehrunissa takes place and he gives her a brilliant title 'Light of the World' on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1611.

*The Twentieth Wife* is a work of fiction based on a real historical character Mehrunnisa. How she rises from ordinary background to become an Empress is beautifully presented in the novel. Her love affair with Prince Salim and the hurdles she goes through before she comes to the throne is in the novel. One would read with amazement the marvellous account of the man who adores her to the point of obsession. As Michael Foucault says:

It is only if we grasp these techniques of power and demonstrate the economic advantage or political utility that derives from them in a given context for specific reasons, that we can understand how these mechanisms come to be effectively incorporated into the social whole. (84)

Mehrunnisa, Ghias Beg's daughter, is eulogised for her exquisite beauty and lovely form. She is a votary of fashion and revolutionary in thinking. As the novelist writes:

Mehrunnisa - ah, she was now sixteen and seemed to live up to her name. Ghias thought. Sun of Women – she was a beautiful child, physically as well as in spirit. In all their years of marriage, Asmat and he had never shown undue partiality to any one child, but with Mehrunnisa it was difficult not to do so. Her smile, her laughter, the mischievous glint in her blue eyes filled Ghias with a paternal contentment. (*The Twentieth Wife* 61)

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Though there is radiance in her garment and fire lights all parts of her life, she is a comrade of sorrows and her life is darkened with failures. When the heaven showers towards her, the hell also breaks loose. Though impossible is nothing is the lesson she teaches, she is a reminder of how injustice is rendered to women. With appreciative eyes Ghias Beg “Noted her graceful movements, her calming presence, and her melodious voice as she corrected Ladli’s mistakes” (TW, 363). With Mehrunnisa is fashion and style and the following lines ratify this fact. In the novel:

Her white *choli* and *ghagara* were embroidered with gold thread, and around her neck and wrists she wore thick gold chains. Her armlets were of milky white pearls, and two huge pearls dangled from her ears. The outfit contrasted with her hennaed hands and feet and with her blue eyes blazing from a delicately tinted face. (*The Twentieth Wife* 333)

Though Indu Sundaresan’s novels are derived from history, they are not history dictated. She does not read history as a record of the past. She never tries to meet the demands of the historians but measures up to the dream of the post-modern man. Her history keeps swift pace with the present world. In the novel, Indu makes valuable use of history shedding new light on historically great Mehrunnisa, giving new role and vigour to her.

Mehrunnisa’s unbridled imagination looks ahead away from the present realities and wishes to marry a Prince. The words of Ali Quli tell us much about her background. As the novelist writes:

Who are you, Mehrunnisa? You behave as though you were royalty. But what silks and velvets covered your mother’s bed when you were born? What trumpets played and cannons boomed the news of your birth? What bawarchis sweated over chulas to make delicacies that sweetened the mouths of people who came to ask after your birth? What beggars did your father clothe and feed as an indication of his joy at your coming? What can you claim of these festivities? A bare tent, a winter storm. A mother who almost died giving birth to you. A father who decided you would be better brought up by someone else. (*The Twentieth Wife* 121)

Her father Ghias Beg flees Persia towards India as a fugitive justice. On the way, he witnesses his wife Asmat, giving birth to a beautiful female baby named Mehrunnisa. On the other hand, his belongings are robbed off and journey to India seems impossible. He gets stranded at Qandahar and is not able to get a job to manage the family. However, a chance encounter with Malik Masud, a generous merchant who is on his way to India to pay his respects to Emperor

Akbar at Fatehpur Sikri, enables him to escape his misfortune. After being introduced to Akbar, Ghias Beg gets the job as a Courtier. Ghias Beg has the privilege of accompanying King Akbar on hunting parties and entertaining him with stories of the Persian courts. Once Mehrunnisa witnesses Prince Salim marrying Princess Man Bai and from then on she fondles the idea of marrying a Prince. Knowing about whom a Prince marries and whether he always marries Princesses, occupied her upper most mind. In the novel, “Who is Prince Salim marrying, Maji?” she asked again. “Princess Man Bai, daughter of Raja Bhagwan Das of Amber.” “Do princes always marry princesses?” “Not necessarily, but most royal marriages are political” (*The Twentieth Wife* 22).

Superior power exercises control over her life and subjugates her interest. In the guise of arranging a marriage for Mehrunnisa, the Emperor Akbar and Ruqayya satisfy themselves. It is a proposal orchestrated by vested interest for political purpose. Ali Quli, a brave soldier from Persia, whom the King wants to be in the empire permanently is the man proposed for her. The empress is mindful of Mehrunnisa’s valuable service which is possible only if she marries a soldier who often stays away from home. Mehrunnisa’s heart which is tender with rich imagination terrifies with his announcement. This stays her onward progress of marrying a Prince and slains her inward joy. She becomes despondent and dispirited.

Indu’s eyes are open to a wealth of unrealised information about women lying in the ancient records of Mughal Empire. To her, history is a parable for the present and is metaphor- ridden. In the present context, she describes how women are pigmies in front of the potentates of earth. Mehrunnisa, who is seen as having scores of knowledge and dazzling intellect, is deprived of the right to choose a marriage partner of her own. She experiences the oppressive weight of imposed interest of the man in power. Depth and intensity of feeling of subjugated women and their utter inability to resist the pressure of the mad rush of selfishness and tread of unfeeling love, is poignantly presented. As R.G. Collingwood writes:

An inquiry into the nature of historical thinking is among the tasks which philosophy may legitimately undertake at particular periods of history, particular philosophical problems are, as it were, in season, and claim the special attention of a philosopher anxious to be of service to his age. In part, the problems of philosophy are unchanging; in part, they vary from age to age. (231)

Indu Sundaresan conveys us through these incidents that no one is void of blame and people are merciless to be merciful to them. Events taking place in her life are in an illogical

order, be it her success in love or Ruqayya's attitude to her love or the Monarchs reaction to Prince Salim's approach to dissolve the engagement. Mehrunnisa's love affair with the Prince blooms after being engaged to Aliquli. Ruqayya shys away from accepting the truth citing it as flirtation, when Asmat, Mehrunnisa's mother presents the problem to her. Emperor Akbar wants to teach a lesson to the Prince who has hurt him with his rebellious action. Prince Salim is not ready to sacrifice his love even after her marriage with Aliquli. Mehrunnisa will not be able to leave the one to go on with the other.

Indu appreciatively converts history into mockery and convincingly distorts the truth. She uses history as her own property. History is plastic to her touch as clay in the hands of a potter. A Prince in the Mughal Empire is blessed with inviolable rights and privileges – feet behest his word, beasts toil for him, birds swarm around him, flowers line up his paths and enticements stretch ahead of him. Here in the novel, historically great Prince Salim struggles a lot to convert his love into marriage. The love story of Prince Salim show the fact, that Indu Sundaresan has contradictory trust in history. As J.R. Ackerley rightly puts it:

This isn't a history of India. About all that I knew of that country when I sailed for it was what I was able to recollect from my schooldays – that there had been a mutiny there, for instance, and that it looked rather like an inverted Matterhorn on the map, pink because we governed it. (38)

Though Indu Sundaresan's novels are fragrant with love, marriage, feast, hunting parties and elephant fights, there interposes murder, death, deceitfulness, trickery and other evils. Indu confines her interest to the wants of her aristocratic readers rather than being a law giver, sensitizer of evil and promoter of peace. Evil disguises as love and the worst of it is seen in her novel. Vice visibly accompanies and follows love in her novels. Bent on keeping her readers occupied with the delightful side of history, she deviates from moralistic attitude, scientific thinking and straight forward grand narratives. Mehrunnisa reserves to herself a love affair outside marriage and Emperor Jahangir exercises his authority to possess her. This speaks volumes of the evil side of love. Love presented in Mehrunnisa is not an example to be followed, but a model of what post-modern love is.

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