

**THE RISE OF WOMEN FROM BEHIND THE VEIL: A STUDY OF THE  
HISTORICAL NOVEL *THE FEAST OF ROSES* BY INDU SUNDARESAN**

**Linet Sebastian**

Research Scholar,  
Centre for Advanced Studies and Research in English  
Farook College,  
Calicut, Kerala.

**Dr.Sajitha M.A**

Assistant Professor,  
Centre for Advanced Studies and Research in English,  
Farook College.  
Calicut, Kerala.

History has become the ground on which feminism can challenge the exclusive universality of male subject. A silent and hidden operation of gender is there in history, politics, religion and social life in all societies. Giving voice to or to recognise what has previously hidden and ignored will make history more convincing, whole and complete. Gradually historians turned their attention to the problem of historically representing women. What would it mean to write the history of women? What would her story look like? Indu Sundaresan raises the same issue in her novel *The Feast of the Roses* through the representation of the historical icon Nurjahan. Women have been seen as people without history or subjects without much historical values. Indu Sundaresan have seen Nurjahan as the representative of creative women, who know the possibilities of women rather than 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 in that. She even attended jarokha, which was never attended by any female before. This shows the capability and responsibility that women can exhibit in ruling the country. History has been a serious ground for interrogating the feminist issues.

Female subjects have been continuously neglected in history. It is not possible for us to believe that females have not contributed anything for the betterment of the country or for the larger responsibility of the rule of the country. Indu Sundaresan proves it by taking the example of Nurjahan. Still then; it is doubtful whether she had given enough space in the retelling of Mughal history. Sundaresan uses her pen as a sword to fight for giving her a place. She is exposed before the readers. Gender injustices and the representation of women in history was a matter of discussion after the 1980s. The patriarchal hegemony marginalised and silenced the blooming sound of women. Women's achievements have been erased from traditional history by men. 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.

Mehrunnisa (later Nurjahan) 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. In the novel, *The Feast of Roses*, she 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 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 creates a new social structure that will 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” (Sundaresan, *The Feast of Roses* . 6)

Indu Sundaresan makes an effort to redefine Nurjahan in the light of post modernist approach towards history. Nurjahan untied the fetters on her and proclaimed herself as the champion of women’s cause. For Sundaresan Nurjahan is a symbol. There would have been hundreds of women lived in the bygone years like Nurjahan, but their achievements had been erased from history .Therefore, gender representation in history needs to be examined. Earlier notions of authentic, objective, “Grant Narrative” of history is deconstructed and it finally resulted in writing history from different perspective. 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 Times of the Great Mughals*. 86).

In the post modernist era, the objectivity of history has been highly questioned. The main ingredients of history writing such as facts, sources, documents and records came under a severe scrutiny. The certainty and fixity of history is debunked. Lawrence Lerner goes to the extent of saying that history is a narrative” blend of observation, memory and imagination “and that historical reality is a special case of fiction writing ...and nature a special case of culture” (12). History as a subject has been subverted. History from the perspective of women, tribes, dalits, and other marginalised groups began to appear. History emerges from myths, from folk songs and from the oralities of traditional people. The authenticity of such histories is doubtful. It is no longer possible to think of history in rigid terms. But writing of history based on only of historical facts is not possible always. To fill the gaps among the narratives; historians tend to accept imaginations, and assumptions. Thus in some cases, history share the qualities of literature; history and literature meets together .This is the backdrop of historical fiction. Many novelists wrote historical novels to show their dissatisfaction towards the efforts of historians.

Defying all the established norms of womanhood in the 17<sup>th</sup> century India, Mehrunnisa combats her rivals by forming a junta of sorts with the three men she can rely on; her father, her brother and Jahangir’s son prince Khurram (later Shajahan).She demonstrates great strength of

character and cunning 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, NurJahan 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. She took special interest in the affairs of women, giving them land and dowries for orphan girls. She had coins struck in her name, collected duties on goods from merchants who passed through the empire's lands, and traded with Europeans who brought luxury goods from the continent. Given her ability to obstruct or facilitate the opening up of both foreign and domestic trade, her patronage was eagerly sought, and paid for. She herself owned ships which took pilgrims as well as cargo to Mecca. Her business and wealth grew. Her officers were everywhere. The cosmopolitan city of Agra, the Mughal capital, grew as a crossroad of commerce.

NurJahan also ruled the emperor's vast zenana which housed 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 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 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 queen, such as the Persian poet Mehri.

This is an age of enlightened women. Women had been neglected through the dark ages. Now she is identifying the ways of humiliation from man. History is seen as a space to enlist the victories of great man. There was no women. Where was she? We are living in a post modernist era; where the absoluteness of everything has gone. Post modernism speaks about multiplicity. In literature post modernism amounts to a denial of the fixity of any "text" of the authority of the author over the interpreter, of any canon that privileges great books over comic books. In philosophy it is the denial of the fixity of language, of any correspondence between language and reality, indeed of any essential reality and thus of any proximate truth about reality. In law, it is the denial of the fixity of constitution and of the legitimacy of law itself, which is regarded as nothing more than an instrument of power. The political potential of postmodernism has been seized most enthusiastically by feminist historians. The new feminist history, demands that all of history be rewritten from a consciously "feminist stance" a "feminist perspective"-which is more often the perspective of the feminist historian than of the women who are the ostensible subjects of history.

If traditional history is an object of patriarchal power, feminist history, by the same time is an instrument for feminist power. It is evident from many instances that if the ancestry holds power, it will guarantee the continuity of that legacy. If one wants to be hailed, one should have a glorious and courageous past; a place in history.

In recent years feminist's have attempted to change the male dominated history by recovering marginal voices of women in history and by restoring women's places in the historical tradition. Feminist reconstruction of history raised certain serious questions concerning truth and method, the role of interpretation, the definition of history.

Nurjahan 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. Nurjahan bravely takes a prominent role along with Jahangir in the administration. When she appeared in the jharoka the entire courtiers startled and they talked about the “unprecedented occurrence”. No woman stood there before. The jharoka was a balcony built in the outer space of Agra Fort, where Jahangir gave audience to people three times a day. Sundaresan describes that, “the women of his zenana, whatever their relationship to him, had always stayed behind the brick walls of the harem” (The Feast of Roses, p. 10). Nurjahan was a woman of sound common sense. Sundaresan is against the traditional methods of doing and writing history. Traditional history perceived, identified, evaluated and described female and male subjects differently. Usually male historians either didn't mention women's intellectual contribution at all or mentioned them only indirectly. The feminists have to challenge the traditional masculine assumptions about women and women's ways of thinking and writing.

Demystification of a historical enterprise therefore also delegitimizes it. Such demystification can thus, “free up” historians to tell many equally legitimate stories from various viewpoints, with umpteen voices, employments and types of synthesis. It is in that sense we can interpret the past “any way we like”. It is this conclusion, which signals to many historians the end of their kind of history (Jenkins, Keith *The Postmodern History Reader* 12)

The two fold agenda of post modernism is to free history from the shackles of an authoritarian ideology and to release it from the constraints of a delusive methodology. Within the discipline of history as Joan Scott argues in *Gender and Politics of History*, new knowledge about women has surfaced, which questions the central role that male subjects have traditionally played in historical narratives. In a sense this new knowledge may more precisely be understood not as “new” but rather as “old” hidden knowledge which has been discovered as full scale re-evaluation of what. According to Scott, we can find three distinct her story methodologies that developed in tandem with social history. Firstly, those which claim women's essential likeness as historical subjects to men. Secondly, those which challenge received interpretation of progress and regress. Thirdly, those which offer a “new narrative, different periodisation, and different causes”, so as to discover the nature of the feminist or female consciousness that motivated “the behaviour of notable women's lives. It is curious to ponder over the issue of “how gender operates historically”.

Post modern historiography treats “everyman as historian”. There is a hidden androcentricity of gender in history. Literature is an effective tool for bringing about social changes. The patriarchal structure of society reflects in all walks of life. It is a high time to rethink about the representation of women in history. For a long time even women didn't think about that. History is no longer a closed entity. It is open for debates, discussions, additions and deletions. New interrogations may lead to new facts. Historical injustices to women and other marginalised communities need to be answered. Some historians had seen the influence of Nurjahan in a negative sense. Historical novels sometimes shed lights to such aspects of history. Novelist has greater degree of freedom than a historian. Indu Sundaresan, develops the plot through the representation of Nurjahan. She was a powerful queen who actually ruled the empire in the name of the king. But in history of the time she has not given adequate place. She is not numbered along with the Mughal rulers, though she actually regulated the Mughal court. Sundaresan uses her pen as a sword to fight for giving her a place in history.

## **Work Cited**

- Baker, Stephen. *The Fiction of Post-Modernity*. Edinburg: Edinburg University, 2000.
- Dhar, T.N. *History-Fiction Interface in Indian English Novel*. Delhi: Prestige Books, 1999.
- Eraly, Abraham. *The Lives and Times of the Great Mughals*. Delhi: Penguin Book, 2000.
- Fulbrook, Mary. *Historical Theory*. U.S.A: Routledge, 2002.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 1988.
- Jenkins, Keith. (Ed.). *The Post Modern History Reader*. Chennai: T.R Publications, 1997.
- Lerner, Laurence. *The Frontiers of Literature*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988.
- Mishra, Rekha. *Women in Mughal India*. Delhi: Oriental Publishers, 1965.
- Scott, William. *The Gender and Politics in History*. Columbia: Paperback, 2000.
- Sundaresan, Indu. *The Feast of Roses*. Delhi: Harper Collins, 2003.
- White, Hayden. *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in the Nineteenth Century Europe*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. 1973.