

The Voice of Marginalized Women in Indu Sundaresan's *The Twentieth Wife*

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Abstract

New Historicism includes literature, ethnography, anthropology, art, history, and other disciplines. New Historical novelists discern the historical texts through cultural, economic, artistic, religious, political, and social forces. The article concern about Indu Sundaresan's novels through a feminist optic. In the light of feminist historiography, an in-depth study has been made to explore how Sundaresan has tried to bridge the gap of women's roles in her novels of historical fiction. The novels chosen for analysis are, namely, *The Twentieth Wife* (2012), *The Feast of Roses* (2012), *Shadow Princess* (2010), *The Splendor of Silence* (2007), and *The Mountain of Light* (2013). By following the strategy of an interdisciplinary approach that expands the scope of feminist inquiry in historical contexts. This study tries to establish a link between the feminist politics of representation and the genre of historical fiction by highlighting Sundaresan's remake version of the tradition that challenges the conventional modes of Indian historiography. Indu Sundaresan's historical discourses provide the history of the Mughal Empire as a lived experience to the readers. The article explores the author's ambition to give illumination of the feminist battle with the help of New historical perspectives in the novel *The Twentieth Wife*.

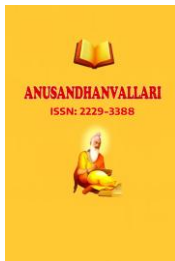
Key Words: New-historicism, feminism, history, patriarchy, politics, and identification

1. Introduction

Feminist historiography mentioned that it had retrieved the ignored women's role in the history and represented women's competence in defeating the patriarchal mindset. Moreover, feminists oppose men's control over women's individuality, sexuality, and subjectivity shuffle the systematic subordination of women in female discourses. Representation of historical female characters in women's writing which provides alternative views of countering patriarchal ideology. Indu Sundaresan de-centred the very roots of gender inequality by giving agency to Nur Jahan's concealed desire for power.

2. Objectives of the study

- A) To examine the gender hierarchies that chart the lives of women who are delineated in the fiction of Indu Sundaresan.
- B) To understand the feminist, history, values, thoughts, needs, desire and relationship of the women portrayed.



3. Scope and Methodology

The Research can take up Indhu Sundaresan's novel for further research in areas such as Intertextuality, Political history, Victimization of people in the name of the caste, Creating new ideas and structures, Marxism, Feminism, Post feminism and Post structuralism. Indu Sundaresan's historical knowledge and ability to characterize the events all his ability to rewrite the history in the form of novels is much appreciated. Indu Sundaresan's historical perspectives and his graph of the sense of time is to be highly commended.

4. Literature review

Literature reflects the social and psychological background of the era and history is considered to be stable and reconstructable. History cannot be universal. Universal historical events written by a person may change the historical images. History is changed by the political scenario and it causes changes in a country. A politician has a major role in the creation of history. His knowledge and power are responsible to change the historical facts.

Illumination of the Feminist battle with the help of New Historical Idea

Indu Sundaresan describes how daringly royal ladies used to involve in power politics by unmasking their potential as king makers. Consequently, she brings many untold and unknown female characters from the life of Mughal royal ladies into the limelight and reveal them from hidden history in her fiction. The politics and diplomatic relation of women that give consolidate power in the imperial harem relatively depend on their equations with the emperor.

Historical writings reveal the implicit presence of the royal ladies in advising the emperors to finalize critical matters of the imperial court. They played a prominent role in court politics and possessed the power and position to challenge any authority that would go against their political interest. Indu Sundaresan vividly depicts the royal ladies tussle to get power in the imperial harems as equivalent to the emperor's struggle for supremacy in the imperial court.

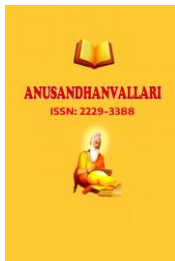
However, reading history through the view of Sundaresan's perspective which makes the readers to imagine the Mughal emperor's court and the relationship between the emperor and women.

When she was young, she had been aware that only the ladies of the imperial zenana could break the rules this society imposed on women. Now she was a member of that zenana and realized that just being here, only a handful of the women had power-those married to the Emperor, those related to him, or those who were his favourites (TTW-317).

Indu Sundaresan's female characters exhibit exuberant confidence in defeating those forces that work against them. Imperial harem is replete with the stories of political conniving and unmasking those scheming by Sundaresan, who shows the dynamic role played by women in the historical context. Indu Sundaresan talks about how Mehrunnisa's relentless struggle in upholding her feminist consciousness in the men-dominated world has inspired the plot of her novel.

The reader's awareness of the historical past and their understanding of the deliberate construction of the history in Sundaresan's novel impacts their perspective on them. The female characters neither seek self-discovery nor do they go through the angst of an identity crisis that marks Sundaresan's uniqueness among contemporary writers.

Women's fiction reveals the temporal context of the historical interpretation by crafting new narratives on historical female figures. In fact, feminist narrative has the transforming as well as evoking power to transcend the conventional boundaries that develop multiple viewpoints on the historical past. Similarly, Indu Sundaresan



portrayal of Mughal royal ladies as upholders of the feminist ideologies unpacks the specific emphasis on their feminine identity.

A Close reading of history through a feminist lens allows the readers to analyse the text, and to draw conclusions on the portrayal of female and male characters in the historical writings. In addition to that, the historical women's appraisals are judged in relation to their gender roles, which leads to their distinctive identity in historical discourses.

However, women's historical fiction assigns them a new identity to these characters by Illumination their resistance to those forces that are affecting their lives. Accordingly, women's historical fiction confronts and transforms the traditional gender identities by emancipating gender roles from the strictures of public domain. Women writers resurrect the historical female figures as ideal subject of history in their writings, however feminist historians believe in rewriting history by adopting inclusive strategies to inscribe women's presence in historical writings on the other hand, women writers' revisits history to rewrite feminist stories in the historical fiction. In fact, distortion of history is not the definite aim of women writers, but to highlight certain aspects of women's historic role as inspirational stories reflect a suffering of gender and genre in women's historical fiction.

5. Result and discussion

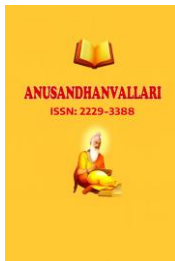
Readers fall in love with the writer's imagination and exaggeration of the historical events when in particular female characters exhibit their heroic deeds and become game changers in fictional history. In such women-centric novels, the gender roles undergo a radical change, narrative reconfigurations construct new identities, and feminist politics of representation works as counter discourses of history that acts like a counter memory in historical fiction.

6. Findings

It mainly brings out how Indu Sunderan's is reconstructing the past with historical senses. It attempts to study the reflections of victors and victims in his historical narratives. It discusses the realization of cultural hegemony. This research tries to produce a critical analysis of the resuscitation humanitarianism in the historical text. This research mainly attempts to explore restructuring the social structures and historical structures.

Indu Sundarasan's feminist thought that mirrored in his novels and representation of the gender roles in his historical fiction through characters. Representation of the historical character's past reveals the effects of history on their identity and subjectivity as a man of transmitting history. Sundareasan's narratology highlights the positive representation of the female character's subsequently empower the female readers. In particular, Mehrunnisa's self-love conveys women's specificity in embracing their femininity as natural phenomena.

And now, after all this time with me, if you do not come to the imperial harem, your reputation will suffer. People will talk, Mehrunnisa. The emperor's discarded concubine can have no standing in society. ... She pulled away, anger flooding out at his words. 'So that is why you offer me this exalted position of concubine, your Majesty? To protect me? You forget that I have looked after myself for four years now, with no help from either you or my Bapa (TTW349). Indu Sundaresan wrote many novels, giving importance to women characters and their role in it. *The Twentieth Wife* is the finest example for her feminism-based works. This paper deals with the role of women in the society and their own voices to stress their own rights and identity. She tries to reflect more on historical events that detail the lives of people not just simply dates and facts. This paper aims to bring out the rise of Mughal rule, politics in court, women in the Mughal era, and their roles in court unveils richness, luxury, architecture and futuristic rule of Mughal rulers.



History to address the partiality and imperfections in the historical discourse. This Article is an attempt to articulate the limitation of history as it marginalises females as a non-historical subject. Gender hierarchy, domination, and subordination are societal as well as cultural constructs. During the reign of the Mughals, the imperial women of the court played a pivotal role in the administration. Mughal historiographers have not adequately represented the political interference of Nur Jahan, Jahanara and the influence of other royal women in the Mughal harem in controlling the administration of Mughal Empire.

The historical fictions of Indu Sundaresan present Mughal history from the standpoint of a woman. These novels are written against the hegemonic patriarchal rendering of Mughal India. The novels select for the study subvert academic history and it tries to give voice to the suppressed. Historical fiction is a liberating genre, for it allows the reconstruction of history from the viewpoints of women and other marginally represented groups. The postmodern historical novels problematise the distinction of fact and fiction. The transgression of boundaries of history and fiction is a pertinent issue in contemporary historical fiction.

The new historical narratives attempt to recast the historical females in the past and the inherent gender politics of the conventional historiographers who misrepresented women in history as passive subjects. In recent years, the unheard voices of women in history have become more visible and indisputably appeared in the historical discourse. Formerly rejected and subordinated female figures have thrived in the new reconstructed history and its penetrating repercussion can be felt in contemporary fiction.

“A woman must not be completely reliant on a man, either for money or for love”(T TW63)

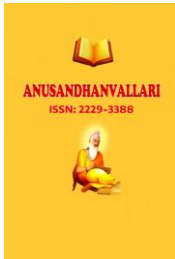
The repeated rewritings of history focusing on the unheard, marginalized and underprivileged sects have upheld historical discourse as more inclusive and open-ended. These female figures of the past are also accepted and interpreted within the ambit of historical fiction. In modern times, authors have worked to project the influential female historical figures as the centre of their writings both in the literary and historical narratives.

Women writers who affirm feminist perspectives as their prime preoccupation have experimented with different narrative techniques to represent women's contribution in different genres of literature. Indu Sundaresan has preferred the genre of historical fiction to vindicate the patriarchal foundation of history and the historical neglect of women through her novels. Indu Sundaresan through the Taj Trilogy discusses the diminishing space of women in the history of a nation constructed by the male historiographers.

The selected novels for the study demand a revisionist history to address the partiality and imperfections in the historical discourse. The significant historical textbooks about the Mughal dynasty ignore the contributions and the political interference of the Mughal princesses and queens. This is obviously because of the patriarchal domination in historiography. The histories of various countries and cultures are written by men about what men have achieved over the years. Women's participation in the historical process is sidelined and marginalized, masculinity is foregrounded, and women as partners in the evolution of society and the emergence of dynasties and empires are completely ignored. “Mehrunnisa sat down and looked into his face. Ghias was smiling, but his smile seemed too forced; it did not reach his eyes” (T TW76)

These monarchs occupied the throne from time to time, and their accomplishments as the emperors of Mughal India have been lauded and documented in the archives of history. But it is difficult to name any queens who have been celebrated in the historical records of their own accord. Sundaresan points out this subjugation of Mughal queens in the afterword attached to the novel *The Twentieth Wife*. As a woman writer, Sundaresan explores the role and prominence of Mughal royal women to bring forth the character of Nur Jahan in such a way that she has the agency to dictate the fortunes of one of the most powerful empires in the history of India.

Mughal women remained invisible and mute because of the patriarchal structure of society during that time. But the women of royalty wielded great power within the harem, and some highly influential women like Nur Jahan



and Jahanara contributed significantly to literature, architecture, politics, fashion, and culture of the time. In the novel *The Twentieth Wife*, Mehrunnisa is the frontispiece of the plot, and it opens with the birth of Mehrunnisa in the desert of Kandahar to poor parents. The novel begins with a close description of the birth of Mehrunnisa, detailing the hardships of the refugees. Sundaresan narrates one of the popular versions about the life of Mehrunnisa that her parents left her in the desert because of their poverty, and her father's friend Malik Mazud, with whom they travelled in the caravan, has taken her back from the roadside.

Indu Sundaresan, in her Taj Trilogy Novels, attempts to imagine and construct the possibilities of women's lives, experiences, and involvement in the public domain of the Mughal Empire. The authentic history of Mughal India gives privilege to the dominant masculine voices and neglects the marginalized voices of women; hence, the historical figures such as Nur Jahan, Jahanara, and other imperial women are repeatedly avoided from the fulcrum of the conventional history.

'Even a girl child should be worth *something*' (*The Twentieth Wife* 6)

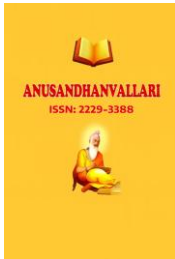
Sundaresan's presentation of female figures of the past in the Taj Trilogy reminds the readers about the power and authority exerted by the patriarchal society to erase and silence women. Sundaresan redefines the significance of female discourses in the male-dominated classical historiography. Nur Jahan enjoyed power and privilege in the Mughal court like an empress. Drawing attention to various historical sources, Sundaresan has skilfully woven an engaging story about the most ambitious Mughal queen. She thoughtfully excavated the mute history of this forgotten Mughal empress. *The Twentieth Wife* portrays the life of Nur Jahan from her birth to her marriage with the Mughal king Jahangir. It is Jahangir who bestows upon her the title Nur Jahan, the light of the world.

She depicts the power and glory of Mughal royal ladies as very influential in dealing with court matters, as peace makers, well-read scholars, writers, diplomats, having authority to grant royal orders, owned properties, and as great admirers of art and architecture in the novel. She portrayed historically famous personalities like Mehrunnisa, Ruqayya Begum, Asmat Begum, and Jagat Gosini, as strong and daring women who were ahead of their times. In this way, the narratology of the novel exposes the strong portrayal of women perhaps to transform victim feminism to power feminism and such representations mark indelible impact on the readers.

7. Conclusion

This study highlights how Indu Sundaresan effectively reclaims and reinterprets Mughal history through a feminist lens, challenging the long-standing patriarchal biases embedded in traditional historiography. By foregrounding the lives and agency of women such as Nur Jahan, Jahanara, and other royal figures, Sundaresan reconstructs history as a more inclusive and dynamic narrative that acknowledges women not as passive subjects but as active participants in political, cultural, and social spheres. The analysis demonstrates that Sundaresan's historical fiction functions as a counter-discourse to male-dominated historical records by illuminating the hidden contributions and influence of imperial women within the Mughal court. Her portrayal of characters like Mehrunnisa reflects a shift from victimhood to empowerment, thereby redefining gender roles and dismantling rigid hierarchies that have traditionally marginalized women's voices. Through narrative reconfiguration, Sundaresan bridges the gap between history and fiction, offering readers a reimagined past that validates female subjectivity, desire, and authority.

The study affirms that feminist historiography and historical fiction together serve as powerful tools for revisiting and revising the past. Sundaresan's works not only question the authenticity and completeness of conventional historical narratives but also emphasize the necessity of incorporating marginalized perspectives to achieve a holistic understanding of history. Her novels inspire readers to critically engage with historical texts and recognize the socio-political forces that shape historical representation. This research underscores that the rewriting of



history through feminist perspectives is not an act of distortion but of restoration. By bringing silenced voices to the forefront, Sundaresan contributes to the ongoing project of reconstructing history as an open, pluralistic, and equitable discourse. Her work stands as a significant intervention in both literary and historical studies, reinforcing the idea that women's experiences and contributions are indispensable to the understanding of the past and the redefinition of cultural identity.

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