



Feminist Study of Indu Sundaresan's "The Twentieth Wife"

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Abstract— India has a large history with many shades of it. The colonizers and the colonized both have a special place in its history that can't be erased. One such colonizers were the Mughals. The era of Mughal India started in 1526 and ended in 1707 with Aurangzeb's death (the last Mughal ruler). This paper traces down one such period of Mughal India but it doesn't focus on the politics of the time but focuses on of the characters of Mughal India and that too a female character. It studies the feminine approach of the novel with critical evaluation of various women characters and their journey.

Keywords— *Feminism, Mughal Indian, Liberty, Emperor, Empress, Refugee, Resilience, Love, Concubine, Wife, Respect.*

Simone de Beauvoir correctly puts it in her book "The Second Sex", "One is not born but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, physical or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and eunuch that is called feminine." 1.

It is widely known that women are the most gullible ones to be targeted in any society and such was the situation in the times this paper is going to discuss ahead. A time when women were considered no more than an entity, a thing to win over, a mere object to satisfy men's physical needs was one woman, the twentieth wife of the Mughal emperor Jahangir (Salim) who remained determined for her position in life. Though it was not an easy journey but how she managed to keep her head up and be an influence on Jahangir's life is interesting to know. Jahangir formerly known as Salim, was Akbar's eldest son. He was the most suitable heir to the throne after Akbar's death. But the most interesting fact of his life was his love life, as it his passion for Anarkali (a concubine of Akbar) is widely known but less is known of his courtship with his twentieth and last wife Noor Jahan (formerly Mehrunissa). Her charm and presence in Salim's life was unmatched, she was the peace

in his otherwise chaotic life. Mehrunissa's strong character, her unconventional approach attracted Salim the most.

"He had never known a woman so lovely, so charming, so quiet, so secure in her beauty. So much a woman." 2.

A new-born Mehrunissa was thrown away by her father Ghias Beg (a Persian refugee) because he couldn't afford to keep her. But fate had something else to decide. Mehrunissa was back to Ghias Beg who then flew to India in order to take refuge in Akbar's court. Time went by and slowly the eighteen years old Mehrunissa started to have a desire in her heart, a desire which was not common, a desire which required much courage, she was fascinated by Salim, his stature as the Prince of Mughal India, the respect and luxury it will bring to her if she would become his wife. Mehrunissa was sure that she was unique, she deserved something as big as bring the Empress of Mughal India. As her name suggests, 'Sun among Women', she was surely one of her kind, the child that Ghias Beg adored the most. Her wit her and curiosity was unique to her.

"Mehrunissa-ah, she was now sixteen and seemed to live up to her name, Ghias thought. Sun among Women – she was a beautiful child, physically as well as in spirit. ... Her smile, her laughter, the mischievous glint in her blue eyes filled Ghias with a paternal contentment. If it were socially

acceptable to have a daughter live at home all her life, Ghias would choose Mehrunissa to be by him without hesitation." 3.

At Salim's first wedding with Man Bai, Mehrunissa entered the Royal palace for the first time in her life, the royalty, the freedom and the sense of being different fascinated her. Soon she became favorite of Sultan Ruqayya Begum (Akbar's chief wife) and the Padshah Begum. She started spending more time at the zenana or the harem. But as we know fate doesn't answer the prayers so easily, so was the case with Mehrunissa. Though she met Salim once in the courtyard of the palace and both were mesmerized with each other and lost in the sea of love but it was too late, Mehrunissa was already engaged to Ali Quli (a Persian soldier). In those times there was no scope of asking the girl about her choice especially when the order came from the emperor himself. Akbar himself wanted them to marry and so it happened leaving Mehrunissa shattered like anything.

"Her hopes died slowly, crushed and withering as time went by. The wedding preparations went on as usual." 4.

Soon she accepted her fate but she was different. She was not the one who will remain quiet at her husband's abuse. The marriage was a failed one. There was no companionship leave aside love and she just like other women was not allowed to even speak her heart out. Women are the subaltern voices in the patriarchal world, as Gayatri Spivak has put it down in her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" women like any other subaltern group need someone to speak on their behalf.

"Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. ...If, in the contest of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow." 5.

Mehrunissa too suffered from this dilemma, she wanted to cry in her father's arms, she wanted to tell him how she is living in her disputed marriage but she couldn't. As a daughter she didn't have the courage to bother her parents neither she had any choice but to suffer. The second most important thing that a society labels for a woman is 'motherhood', it is a term related to a woman's completeness, she is considered incomplete if she doesn't have a child. Mehrunissa didn't have a child for four years of her marriage with two miscarriages totally unknown to her husband. Ali Quli was not even bothered about her mental and physical pain, on top of that she had to see her husband's child in one of their maids' womb. What more painful and disheartening for a woman who is considered imperfect by her husband for not being able to give him a child and that too a male one.

Mehrunissa was a woman in a men's world and the only women who could experience a bit of a freedom were the ones who were in royal zenana and were favorites of the emperor. She suffered two miscarriages and when she was third time pregnant her only wish was to be able to birth this child irrespective of its gender whereas her husband's desires were clear he didn't want a daughter. She gave birth to a girl whom she named 'Ladli' but not only her husband but everyone else including the midwife pitied her.

" 'A Girl', the midwife said in a hushed tone, pitying the woman who lay on the bed. After all these years of marriage, this poor woman had given birth to a puny baby girl. What ill luck!"

This clearly points out to the hypocritical world we live in where a woman is there not to uplift but suppress another woman. The birth of Ladli didn't seem to affect Mehrunissa, for her she was the whole world, her only hope in this dark world. Surely, Ladli's mother was not like the ordinary women who was affected by what the world wanted her to be.

Though she accepted her fate but Salim's thoughts never left her, he was there in her consciousness, his softness, his gentle touch, his royalty in his personality always remained embedded in her heart. Though Mehrunissa's character portrayal it can be analyzed that she still had a hope left her heart to be what she deserved. The writer has clearly shown that her heroine was different, she used to talk to her father about poetry, literature, art, politics and many other topics which were considered to be of no importance to a woman, she was there only to be possessed like a possession. Mehrunissa's words when after Ladli's birth she says,

"Forgive me for my greed, Allah, ... Thank you for the child and thank you for making me perfect." 7.

Throws light on how a child bearer woman is considered a perfect woman. Having a child is indeed a blessing but not having one is not a curse either, she is still perfect the way she is and must be respected and loved.

"The Twentieth Wife" highlights many issues related to women during the Mughal rule but out of them some are relevant today. The jealousy and insecurity Ruqayya Begum had towards Salim's second and most influential wife Jagat Gossini highlights the insecurity women have for each other, the fear of seeing other women win over themselves is the main issue. The way Ruqayya asked Akbar to give her Jagat Gossini's son Prince Khurram (later known as Shah Jahan) and not any other of Salim's wife's shows that how badly she wanted to put that woman down. She even later on tried to push Mehrunissa towards Jahangir so that Jagat Gossini's position as the chief empress would be taken away from her. One such disheartening incident took place when Jahangir's first wife Man Bai was struck

between her husband and her son's rebellion for the throne against his father. She tried to sought the issue but ultimately committed suicide by taking an overdose of opium, certainly her life didn't have much value for the men for whom she was fighting as they were busy in their politics and she 'a mere woman' gave up on her life.

"Princess Man Bai, was deeply grieved at the rift between her son and her husband. ...Finally, Man Bai gave up and took an overdose of opium." 8.

This was the place for women back then and it is the place for women in many places even today. The critical view to this work points out various such incidents which are a parameter to view the conditions of women at that time. With time Mehrunissa thought that Jahangir must have forgotten her for he was now the emperor of Mughal India and she was just the wife of an ordinary soldier. But things were not as she thought of, Jahangir still had Mehrunissa in his heart all this time and he ordered her husband to divorce his wife, to which he obviously denied. After Ali Quli's death the path was clear for both of them and he finally confessed his love to her and wanted to take her to his palace as his concubine but it was not acceptable to Mehrunissa who always thought of becoming the empress of Mughal India. She was surely not the woman who wanted to marry Jahangir for he could protect her this was not the idea of marriage for her. She wanted to be his 'wife', to get the dignity and respect she deserved and she stuck to that. Even in front of the emperor she didn't agree to compromise her worth becoming his 'concubine' a position for which almost all the women longed.

When she was there in the royal zenana before marrying Jahangir and after Ali Quli's death she used to make ghagharas and other stuff for the harem ladies and earned a good deal from that so, earning money was not an issue for her all she wanted from her husband was love, care and respect for which craved for thirteen long years during her marriage. While analyzing the text it is clear that Mehrunissa stands out as an example for women to not put their standards down even if the most powerful person is offering something to you which you don't deserve. At Jahangir's offer to her to come to zenana as his concubine she replied,

"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. I will doubtless be a fallen woman, but I will not – absolutely not – come to your zenana as a concubine." 9.

Her resilience made Jahangir fall for her even stronger. She was determined in not sacrificing her self-respect and finally she became Noor Jahan, the twentieth and the last

wife of Jahangir. She was successful in gaining the power as she enjoyed the power and influenced Jahangir's decisions in politics like none of his wives. The critical analysis of *The Twentieth Wife* aims to throw light on the aspects of a woman's life that are altogether responsible in making her character and it also challenges the conventions surrounding women of all times.

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