



# Third Gender in Power Dynamics in Indu Sundaresan's *The Twentieth Wife*

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## Abstract

The fields of literature and social sciences provide fertile grounds for studies of subjects which offer valuable insights into human experience. Most of the interactions among individuals and institutions contain some form of power-play, and the exploration of power dynamics is essentially about the sociological, economical, psychological, and biological factors involved in the equation. Historical fiction in postmodern times is known for challenging the recorded history since it has rarely been sympathetic in considering the role or contribution of those who were marginalized by the patriarchal authority. Indu Sundaresan's *The Twentieth Wife* provides a fictional account of one of the most powerful women of Mughal era in India, Nur Jahan, whose exceptional influence and power in the male-dominated structure has been marginalized in records of history. A close study of this text reveals another class of individuals who were not only important players in the politics of the time, but they were also considerably instrumental in the success of political ambitions of the power-wielding women. These were the eunuchs employed in the royal harem to serve, guard, watch, and assist the ladies of the zenana. This paper aims to examine and analyse the role of these important participants of Mughal politics as portrayed in Sundaresan's novel.

*Key-words:* gender, power, eunuch, Mughal, harem, historical fiction.

People with non-binary gender identities have existed in many cultures all over the world. Their presence is venerated by some, while others look down on them. In India, the community called hijras, or eunuchs, belong to the category of third gender. As the Hinduism case study on gender by the Harvard Divinity School, titled 'The Third Gender and Hijras,' points out, "While recognition of genders outside male and female has only recently been discussed in Western societies, in Hindu society, people of non-binary gender expression have played important roles for over 2000 years." In Mahabharata, characters like Vrihannala and Shikhandin represent the third gender, and they play an important part in the narrative of the epic. However, in the colonial and post-colonial classification of gender assignment, this community did not fare well in terms of inclusion in professional

and economic spheres of society. The traditional roles played by eunuchs in religious and ceremonial practices in Indian society still prevail and “evolving interpretations of human rights law suggest that third gender recognition is gaining momentum (Ghoshal).” The Harvard study enumerates on the gender identity of eunuchs as follows: “Often called transgender by outsiders, Indian society and most hijras consider themselves to be third gender—neither male nor female, not transitioning. They are a different gender altogether.”

Gender is a term which is used to define the social constructs attributed to men and women on the basis of their sex. Judith Butler asserts that gender precedes sex. Referring to Michel Foucault's theory of power, Butler contends that “to be sexed is to be subject to the law, that is, to discourses that categorize sex (Caughie, 197).” According to R.W.Connell, gender is “the structure of social relations that centres on the reproductive arena, and the set of practices (governed by this structure) that bring reproductive distinctions between bodies into social processes.” Foucault opines that power exists everywhere, and that institutions exercise power and control over bodies within their territories. Eunuchs belong to the non-binary division of gender; they are differentiated from transgenders and other members of LGBTQ category because of their sense of Gender Dysphoria. The word eunuch is rooted in the Greek eune (“bed”) and ekhein (“to keep”), meaning “bed keeper” which hints at their employment in ancient times for the maintenance of the king’s chamber. Their inability to reproduce and the absence of a family in their lives made them less likely to harbour any ambitions of dynastic nature, which made them ideal and reliable servants for those in power. In the Mughal harems, the ambivalent sexuality of eunuchs gave them an edge over the powerful men of court who were forbidden to enter the private space of imperial zenana.

The Mughal era was particularly remarkable in putting the eunuchs at a significant position in the power-play surrounding the imperial court. In the harems of the royal men including the emperor, eunuchs were placed as guards and companions of women who were wives, concubines or slaves to the master male figure. The eunuchs were relied upon for the general maintenance and functioning of the harem due to the unique nature of their gender. Since the male presence was forbidden in the harem, eunuchs were allowed due to their undefined sexuality that posed no threat to either the fidelity expected from the women or the male hegemony that wanted no competition inside their own homes. This special privilege accorded to the eunuchs put them in an enviably strong position to participate in the political intrigues and power games which governed the politics of the time.

Indu Sundaresan’s *The Twentieth Wife* is a work of historical fiction which depicts the tale of Mehrunnisa, the daughter of a Persian refugee, who becomes the twentieth, and the most influential, wife of Jahangir, the Mughal emperor. Nur Jahan was a considerably powerful woman of their times. Being born or married into the royal family was both a blessing and a curse for women in Mughal times. Their gender prevented them from having a wholesome political career of their own and their royal status did not allow them to stay aloof from the political intrigues. They were helped immensely in this precarious position by their eunuch escorts and assistants. This alliance forged between the royal mistress and the eunuch servant ensured that the “sheath of royalty gave the women of the imperial harem an emancipation a commoner could never hope to achieve (TTW, 48).”

In *The Twentieth Wife*, Hoshiyar Khan, “the head eunuch of Salim’s zenana, the most important man in it other than the prince (54),” is seen as the trusted confidante of Jagat Gosini, the wife of emperor Jahangir. Towards the

end of the novel, the same Hoshiyar Khan is found to be in the service of Nur Jahan, the latest and favourite wife of the emperor. It is revealed that Nur Jahan has procured the services of Hoshiyar Khan as a wedding gift from her husband which speaks volumes about the importance of the head eunuch in the scheme of things in the harem. While Jagat Gosini is obviously upset at this turn of events, Nur Jahan has made a strategic move to secure her place as Padshah Begum in the imperial zenana. Hoshiyar Khan is regarded by the royal women as the most powerful and formidable ally in the quest for supremacy in their veiled world inside the harem. Considering the skills and acumen of Hoshiyar Khan as a trustworthy confidante and resourceful servitor, he is much sought-after by the ladies of the harem, especially the Padshah Begum. He is projected as the one “who ran the harem with metronomic efficiency, settling squabbles between the various women: wives, concubines, slaves, maids, cooks (TTW, 54).” Hoshiyar is also performing the task of doling out their allowances and advising them on their investments. In the hierarchical arrangement of services, junior eunuchs look up to Hoshiyar Khan as a role model that they want to emulate.

Some eunuchs are born with the non-binary physical sexual attributes, while others go through voluntary or forced castration that places them in this particular section of society. In *The Twentieth Wife*, no specific individual stories of the eunuch characters have been told, nor are their personal journeys discussed, which only serves to amplify the indifference shown by both society and history to the ‘personal’ and ‘human’ part of their existence. Besides Hoshiyar Khan, the chief eunuch of the harem, whose position affords him relatively more visibility and individuality in the story, other eunuchs appear to be merely playing a stereotypical part in the narrative. Even Hoshiyar Khan gets to be mentioned mostly with reference to his utility for those whom he serves. On her wedding day, Mehrunnisa reflects on her shrewd procurement of Hoshiyar Khan at the advice of Ruqayya Begum:

Although he had been at Jagat Gosini’s side for twenty years, Hoshiyar was a shrewd man and saw immediately that Mehrunnisa had a hold over Jahangir that no other lady had been able to duplicate. She could trust him—but not completely. As long as she remained in authority, Hoshiyar would be her ally, but once she lost it, he would fly to her opponent. However, while she was supreme in the zenana, Hoshiyar would do everything in his power—even lay down his life—to serve her (TTW, 368).

Critics of patriarchal hegemony believe that all non-masculine gender identities, including women and the third gender, have been victims of male domination. Opportunities for self-growth and self-promotion for an individual have been decided and formulated by the patriarchy on the basis of gender. Resistance or conflict, which indicate differences of interest and assertion of democratic impulses, are celebrated or condemned in society according to the context which is almost always gender-centric in such matters. Lukes’ theory of third dimensional approach in power dynamics suggests that individuals may be manipulated by certain agencies to develop a lack of knowledge or understanding about their own interest or welfare. The eunuchs in Mughal harem are compelled to act within the defined territory of the zenana and their interests are bound with those of their patrons. They may be assigned the responsibility of serving one woman or the other, but their ultimate loyalty lies with the emperor. Hoshiyar Khan is seen as arranging secret meetings with Mahabat Khan, a minister of the court, for Jagat Gosini, the Padshah Begum of Jahangir’s harem before his marriage with Mehrunnisa, on a number of occasions, but it is pertinent to understand that the secrecy surrounding these meetings emanated from feminine jealousy and

rivalry rather than any conspiracy against or threat for the emperor. The ultimate power obviously belongs to the head of monarchy which is a patriarchal structure.

Despite the evidential powerlessness or limited scope of influence, the eunuchs are found to be omnipresent in the strictly private and exclusively cocooned world of the harem. The same sexual decapitation that robs them of the opportunity to participate in the patriarchal domination, allows them the privilege of being privy to inner secrets and gossip of the imperial harem which has greater implications on their role in the royal politics. They are ruled by the men in power and are denied any assertion of their humanity or of their individual aspirations in the same manner as the women whom they are serving. In a camouflaged manner of resistance, the eunuchs and the women form a formidable alliance of their own to serve their respective interests in the best ways possible, and reveal an autonomy within the walls of the harem that may be limited in sphere, but is limitless in possibilities.

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