



Elucidation of Egalitarianism in *The Twentieth Wife* by Indu Sundaresan

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Abstract

The journey of women had been quite a chaotic ride; from the desire to claim a minimal presence amidst the overpowering men to taking a stronghold of equal status in the male dominant society. The definition of equality and feminism in India is comparatively different to the theories of the West. The oppression faced by women in India is restricted to the social and cultural structure of the country. There have been stark differences in the conditions of Mughal women and indigenous Indian women. Belonging to imperial society did give women some influential positions and powers in the patriarchal conditions. More than the claim for basic rights, the women in the Mughal Empire aspired for egalitarianism. Indu Sundaresan in her work *The Twentieth Wife* captures the life of Mughal Women. The status of women in the Mughal period differed from the Indian women in various aspects such as education, legal rights, social conditions and opportunities. This paper posits the egalitarianism elucidated in the novel *The Twentieth Wife*.

Keywords: *Feminism, Equality, Egalitarianism, and Multiculturalism*

Introduction

Aristocratic Muslim women in India have transcended the limitations imposed by the cultural ramifications on Hindu Indian women. Mughal women were entitled to several legal and moral rights, which were beyond reach for the natives. Indu Sundaresan has beautifully captured the life of Mehrunnisa; who reigned as Nur Jahan in her latter phase, the woman with insurmountable supremacy in every arena of her life. Her presence in the novel reveals the utmost superiority that could have been offered to a woman, against the chauvinism of men which entangled Indian women for ages.

Indu Sundaresan is an Indian- American writer known for her historical writing. Born in India to an Indian Air Force Pilot, Group Captain R. Sundaresan and Madhuram Sundaresan. After the tragic death of her father she moved to Bengaluru, later for her higher education she flew abroad. She migrated to the U.S and married and settled there. Initially her migration was for her graduation. She has an M. A. in economics and an M. S. in Operations Research from the University of Delaware. After her graduation the decision to write settled in her mind. Her experience as a writer began as an experiment to write and the memories of Nur Jahan became the storyline of her first novel. She has faced rejections in the initial stage of publishing her first novel, but there after there has been no looking back. She is a successful and famous Indian author of historical fictions, counted amongst a very few with interest in bringing out the history in words. She is the author of six books so far, *The Twentieth Wife* (2002); *The Feast of Roses* (2003); *The Splendor of Silence* (2006); *In the Convent of Little Flowers* (2008), *Shadow Princess* (2010) and *The Mountain of Light* (2013). She has been awarded with Washington State Book Award for *The Twentieth Wife* in 2003 and Light of India award for Excellence in Literature.

The Status of Women

The novelist does not portray the character as such in their true self, rather transports the readers into the Mughal realm to witness the modernity as inherent quality of women and equality as an attribution in the society. Claiming a position of significance has always been taxing task. Mehrunnisa did not have bed of roses to step forward with ease, rather her birth itself was on thorns. The fact that women have always faced disapprovals and disappointments can not be denied with ease. Even before her birth, when her mother had been under her labour, the midwife, despite being a woman herself opines, before delivery when a woman is touched by a girl she will give birth to a girl baby. The birth of a girl child always had vileness attached to it, Mehrunnisa could not escape the subjectivity as well;

In her corner, the midwife clucked disapproval, rising as she spoke. ‘No, no, don’t touch your mother just before the baby is born. Now it will be a girl child, because you are one. Run along now. Take your evil eye with you.’ (Sundaresan, 2018, p. 2)

A journey of Mehrunnisa’s parents, into a land unknown and unpredictable future becomes an unfathomable route to transcended destiny. The birth of Mehrunnisa, is according to her father the sign of a good omen, “She was not normally a superstitious man, but somehow, he had the feeling that Mehrunnisa’s birth had been a good omen for him. everything good in his life had come from that time after the storm at Qandahar.” (The Twentieth Wife, p. 22) Traversing the path from being a sign of evil to the best of charms did carry advantages in her favour. India, the land of the settlers paved ways for the enhancement of the family in particular and society in general. The social status enjoyed by women did give a sense of egalitarianism which is evident from the liberal attitude pronounced by the protagonist in the novel. Mehrunnisa enjoys the freedom like her brothers, she is allowed to study, “After so many years of complaints and tantrums and ‘Why do I have to study?’ and I am bored, Maji,’ Mehrunnisa seemed to have finally settled down to her lessons.” (Sundaresan, 2018, p. 19)

Cultural pluralism allows multiple cultures to exist with political and social freedom. The acceptance of different cultures leads to the path of development. Co-existence of different attributes is also a sign of emotional and mental freedom; unless an acknowledgement of acceptance is provided the existence of differences is impossible. The credibility of Mughal Empire is evident through the presence of multiculturalism and egalitarianism. The open-mindedness with which different features of diverse lands had been adopted in the past is a lot more appreciative than in the present. The Mughal period could be considered as a pioneering stage for multiple changes. Presence of different religions, cultures and philosophies with greater significance are depicted by the novelist in her works. She definitely brings the extravagance of the Mughal period soulfully and gives the readers a transcending impression of equality during the timeline. This paper also deals with the aspects that prove that the Mughal period had been contemporary and progressive. Women during Mughal period, within the empire had some restrictions too. The confinement within the Zenana walls, and living a private life, appeasing the emperor or significant courtiers and gaining significance had been the most important chores of women; despite these confining practices women like Jagat Gosini, Nur Jahan, and Ruqayya have broken the shackles to flare high. Zaidi Asim Mohammed in his article “Role of Women in the Mughal Empire”, focusses on the status of women,

Muslim women at some point in the Mughal Empire enjoyed a better reputation than their Hindu opposite numbers. This was partially because Islam provided girls with greater legal and social protections than Hinduism. Muslim girls have been entitled to inherit assets and had greater rights in marriage and divorce than Hindu women. (Zaidi, 2023, p. 7498)

Mughal Empire is dominated by the patriarchal conditions. The important positions and powers mainly were with men and they were the decision makers as well. Ruqayya Begum unlike other women characters, is supposed to be one of the powerful women during the reign of Akbar. Apart from having position and power; wealth and assets of significant capacity made her an important persona of the era, “Ruqayya’s importance to Akbar was far more than the brief physical satisfaction his mindless concubines could provide him. he valued her quick mind, sharp wit and comfortable presence.” (Sundaresan, 2018, p. 30) Similar was the power and position of Mehrunnisa. She did have all the basic rights which were considered to be completely absent for indigenous women in India. She had education like her brothers and freedom of choices as well. She surpassed her other siblings with her superior thoughts and knowledge, “Women from wealthy and influential families had been frequently educated in the Quran and other religious texts, which allows them to better fulfill their roles as mothers and to make sure that their families adhered to spiritual norms and practices.” (Zaidi, 2023, p. 7498) Even from the early stage of admiration towards Salim, the Prince she thought why it is not in the scope of being in marriage with him. She prominently declared the inner desires without being hesitant and also was wisely confronted the expectations and reality. As the love of Jahangir, she understood the prominence she could have gained under his reign. She did not let go of the destined chances that came her way.

Mehrunnisa did not want to share Jahangir’s affections with anyone else- his time, perhaps, but not his thoughts. Those should be hers...he had been her choice when she eight, was still her choice when she was thirty-four and would be equally important to her for the rest of her life. (Sundaresan, 2018, p. 339)

Equality Evident During Mughal Period

Men had superior status over the women. The prime posts and positions were held by men during the Mughal reign, yet they made it a point the women did not undergo tribulations of severe kind. There were midwives and ayahs to take care of young born babies and new mothers at affordable rates and men made it a point to appoint them to ease the burden of the wives. Men discuss important matters with their wives before plunging onto the final decisions and Jahangir, the Emperor himself gave his wife Nur Jahan significant place both in his zenana and reign. Mehrunnisa, due to her imperative status was able to state her thoughts to the emperor with ease. Despite being the supreme power in the empire, he listened to the needs of Mehrunnisa and accepted her conditions of marriage, “Before now she had been anonymous in this harem of women-one of many, a beautiful face in a handsome crowd...this was not a simple marriage. Marrying an emperor never was. She was married not just to Jahangir but to the empire.” (Sundaresan, 2018, p. 371) It had been the equality of a woman with the men which won her the title “Light of the World.”

Ruqayya too was deemed superior to almost every woman in the zenana and even Akbar could not deny her choices, “Ruqayya Sultan Begum had demanded custody of Khurram. Akbar unable to deny his wife anything commanded that the child be weaned from his mother and put in the care of his Padshah Begum Ruqayya.” (Sundaresan, 2018, p. 63) She was very powerful in the empire and made decisions on own, she allowed Mehrunnisa to be aware of the societal conditions. Mehrunnisa visited her everyday after study, and Ruqayya was also one of the reasons to make Mehrunnisa learn the policies of life, “Listen and learn, Mehrunnisa,” she said. ‘A woman must not be completely reliant on a man, either for money or for love.’” (Sundaresan, 2018, p. 63)

Most of the women characters mentioned in the novel cleverly picturises the significance they held during the Mughal period. Mehrunnisa’s mother, Asmat Begum; Jagat Gosini, Man Bai or even Sultana were important and had significant position and power. Despite being powerful they had the certain limitations of their own, they were neither the prey to any kind of chauvinism, nor allowed their power to subdue others. They remained under the limits of the custom and culture, which paved ways for further developmental facets. Mehrunnisa at a phase of her married life had undergone deterring incidents, yet nothing could bound her perimeters, she was able to overcome the pain and sufferings to move on towards better choices. Limitations of the society were unable to limit the women’s influence, it was due to inner strength and mental stability Mehrunnisa was able to surpass all her past bitter experiences to break the shackles, and gain the title of being the greatest woman ruler during Mughal empire. She did not rule as the queen, but held powers equivalent to Jahangir, “Nur Jahan, the spouse of Emperor Jahangir, turned into an effective and influential discern who played a crucial role in the courtroom and within the affairs of the empire. She changed into a client of the humanities and played a crucial role in promoting the careers of poets, artists, and musicians.” (Zaidi, 2023, p. 7503)

Conclusion

Women during Mughal period were positive, powerful and multifaceted. They held significant roles and did have equality even in the male dominant society. Women had education as the basic right, and education played an

important role in moulding them according to the conditions around them. They held complex roles and maintained decorum in the empire. They satisfied the needs of men happily and managed the desires without surrendering to them sobbingly. Women's representation is evident in every field and they promised egalitarian principles to the counterparts and future generations ahead.

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