



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 3. Issue.2.,2016 (April-June)



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

FEMINIST THEMES IN INDU SUNDARESAN'S *THE TWENTIETH WIFE*

N.SUBHADRA CHARI

PhD Scholar in English

University School of Humanities & Social Sciences

Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University

Dwarka, New Delhi



ABSTRACT

Femininity defines feminine identity in socio-cultural matrix of socially constructed feminine attributes in human interactions. In contrast, patriarchy establishes stereotypical perspective of feminine qualities that get mirrored in society, history and literature. But, feminists in this context unanimously oppose the relegated status of women and recover unarticulated voice of women's experience to redefine femininity in language discourses. This paper explores the author's ambition to represent femininity of Mughal royal ladies and their glorious life story in the historical novel, *The Twentieth Wife*.

Keywords: Representation, Femininity, Patriarchal, History

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INTRODUCTION

Indu Sundaresan is an Indian historical fiction writer and winner of Washington State Book Award for *The Twentieth Wife* in 2003. She has noticed that historically powerful women's achievements are ignored in history therefore she rewrites historical events in fiction to bring to light the role of women in the formation of nation's history. Significantly, the author redefines femininity to deconstruct the patriarchal narratives and represents women's experience in feminine language to destabilize Phallogocentric norms in literature. Furthermore, her novel promotes the feminist project for women's representation so as to accentuate women's visibility to empower female readers by rewriting history as Herstory. Stuart Sim, precisely writes about the feminist project of female writing in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*:

Feminism has taken as an object of both analysis and intervention the construction of knowledge, meaning and representations. It has also been concerned with the struggle to find a voice through which such knowledge's might be expressed. For the development of an autonomous female subject, capable of speaking in her own voice within a culture which has persistently reduced her to the status of object, is also part of feminism's project (Sim, 42).

Indu Sundaresan's novel that exemplifies her dexterity to evoke an image of Mughal royal ladies as new women in the backdrop of patriarchal society of that era and such rewriting defines female discourses. Peter Barry in *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* elucidates what the feminist critics

do- "Rethink the canon, aiming at the rediscovery of texts written by women, revalue women's experience, examine representations of women in literature by men and women, and raise the question of whether men and women are 'essentially' different because of biology, or are socially constructed as different" (128). So, the above mentioned causes evince the goals of feminist studies and one of the main aims is to revalue and reshape the literary canon by representing women's experiences to subvert axiomatic patriarchal norms in literature. In the same light, Indu Sundaresan in *The Twentieth Wife* portrays her female characters as empowered women who emancipates from patriarchal patterns and establishes the prominence of the women's individuality in literary discourses. The author negates women's status of victimhood instead extol empowered women in the novel that is similar to Toril Moi's opinion of feminine power in *Sexual/Textual Politics*:

But women's relationship to power is not exclusively one of victimization. Feminism is not simply about rejecting power, but about transforming the existing power structures- and, in the process, transforming the very concept of power itself (147).

A brief introduction of Mughal Empire and their rulers provides a contextual background for the author's novel. Mughal emperors ruled the Indian subcontinent from 1526 to the beginning of the British Raj in 1858. Emperor Babur established Mughal Empire in India and later Humayun, Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan, Aurangzeb and Bahadur Shah Zafer ruled the Mughal kingdom. To say precisely, Indu Sundaresan narrates the riveting love story of the Emperor Jahangir and his twentieth wife (Mehrunnisa) in the novel. The author admires the authority of Mehrunnisa and rewrites her glorious life story in *The Twentieth Wife*. She represents Mehrunnisa as a strong person who dares to dream the impossibility by using her strengths in taking advantage of the trends prevalent in her society. For instance, Mehrunnisa asks her father "why a woman has to stay in the house, when a man can go and come as he pleases" (Sundaresan, 45). It is interesting to read the conversation of Mehrunnisa's parents Asmat Begum and Ghias Beg regarding their daughter's marriage alliance with Ali Quli and this paper will quote such selected dialogues to reveal women's strong sense of self of the royal ladies in Indu Sundaresan's novel *The Twentieth Wife*.

Asmat Begum says "Listen to yourself Ghias. Is this what we wanted for Mehrunnisa? Are you so blind to your daughter's needs that you cannot see this will not be a good alliance? It is your responsibility to make sure she is happy."

"Enough!" Ghais roared. Asmat Begum stood looking down at her husband. Her voice was quiet. "Do not raise your voice at me, Ghais." (75).

The author describes the individuality of Ruqaya Begum (Emperor Akbar's wife) and how she maintains her accounts and speaks her mind: "Ruqaya said, 'Listen and learn Mehrunnisa'- A woman must not be completely reliant on a man either for money or for love" (Sundaresan 63) and to find such female voice is a necessity for female discourses. Mehrunnisa's determination to be an emperor's wife sets her as an example of strong woman with stronger conviction in the pages of history. Her strong individuality reflects in these lines, "But no matter, Mehrunnisa thought. No matter what people expected, it would happen the way she wanted" (Sundaresan 359). The author describes Mehrunnisa as an epitome of feminine power and beauty that is craved by Emperor Jahangir. And, their passionate love for each other revives occasionally displays exemplary self-control to respect the royal standards of the society. Remarkably, Indu Sundaresan demonstrates Mehrunnisa's will power, "If she was to be his wife, she would be everything to him, not just an empress, but a lover, a friend, a wife" (358). The author further expresses Mehrunnisa's desire in *The Twentieth Wife*:

She would not marry Jahangir for Ruqayya, or for her Bapa, or for anyone else who might profit from it. If, after all this time, she were to marry again—when she was no longer dependent on a man for money, no longer faced the pressure to marry or to have a child-it would be because in the end, she loved him as she had not loved no other man (339).

The author opens up a new field of study to integrate women, writing, subjectivity and history to reformulate the representation of femininity in literature. Besides this, Sundaresan portrays her female characters as new women courageous enough to liberate themselves from the indispensable norms of patriarchy. Also, the issues

of representation, empowerment and visibility are best addressed and understood by analyzing women's political power and their patronage of the arts in conjunction with and during the Mughal period in the novel. For the author, women's experience and their representation in history are significant to counteract their absence in mainstream historical discourses. In fact the retelling of feminine saga redefines the scope of female discourses in author's novel. Dr. W.S. Kottiswari writes her views on revision of history in *Postmodern Feminist Writers*:

Re-vision does not simply mean. "looking back" nor is it a mere "act of survival" Rather it refers to a revisionist remaking of the past and re-innovation of new tradition so much so that it becomes an act of creation, trans-creation (7).

The author deconstructs the stereotypical role of women of the Mughal court and reconstructs as powerful female characters to render strong feminine voice that echoes in the novel. To represent femininity, the language that is used in the novel describes feminine quality of their sexuality, their bodies, their ambitions and their desires to assert their individualism. The men admire the new women's self-love and their individuality that marks the disruption of the Phallogocentric discourses. For example, Emperor Jahangir's love reflects Mehrunnisa's feminine power of self-love in *The Twentieth Wife*:

In his brief saner moments, what his fascination was for Mehrunnisa...He had wanted her longer than the throne...He admired her fierce independence, her deep sense of self, her convictions about her actions. She scorned the rules, trod on them (Sundaresan 353).

The author portrays Mehrunnisa persona and her individuality in captivating lines:

"Jahangir wanted her not for the title she bore-she was no princess-and not for family connections-her father was, after all and would always be, just a Persian refugee-but for herself"(Sundaresan, 273).

Likewise, the influence of patriarchy is trimmed down in the novel. Indu Sundaresan excludes the history of bloodshed to narrate the feminine saga in masculine 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. Apart from that Indu Sundaresan sketches her female characters as strong-minded and courageous enough to question the existing norms to live an autonomous life. Through *The Twentieth Wife*, the author encourages envisaging history with optimism and provides the scope for future possibilities for writers; to place honorably both men and women's contribution in the formation of history.

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