



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 7. Issue.3. 2020 (July-Sept)

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

A FEMINIST READING OF DEEPA AGARWAL'S 'THE TEENAGE DIARY OF NUR JAHAN'

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Article information

Received:17/08/2020
Accepted: 30/09/2020
Published online: 07/10/2020
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.7.3.301](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.7.3.301)

ABSTRACT

Historical records mention Nur Jahan as Jahangir's wife who ruled in his name, but there is very little told about her earlier life. The text under study is a rare attempt to rewrite history of Nur Jahan's early life, imaginatively without tampering with established facts. This paper endeavors to assess this work from the Feminist perspective. It is through early childhood, sometimes developed and sometimes intuitively that the lady was blessed with courage to surpass all her trials. She is never an agency-less, distressed woman. Her femininity gave her confidence in herself, her integrity gave her vision to dream big and fortune after various trials gave her optimum opportunity to realize her dreams. Sometimes her kismet favors her, and at time when the stars disfavor her, she is strong enough to confront her battles valiantly and make her karma. This paper shall try to focus on the developmental, formative years of her life and study them through the feminist lens assessing traits which later blossomed to reach their peak.

Keywords: courage, Femininity, karma, kismet

Nur Jahan is one rare female historical personage who is not lost somewhere in the pages of history, but has come down to us. That is because of the power that she wielded in her times. Each historian depending on his ideology has interpreted her success. While some chauvinist patriarchs attribute her success to sorcery, black magic, some others attribute it to her beauty and manipulative abilities, some others believe she regulated Jahangir's opium and wine intakes as per her needs; the feminist critic differs from each of these theories. Indu Sundaresan wrote two novels on the life and times of Nur Jahan, and Deepa Agarwal's text under study too is a fictional account of her teenage years. What historians foreground is her life after marriage to Jahangir, but the traits that she shows then, were developing during her adolescence and through her early experiences. In the words of Mutamad Khan, "Fate had decreed that she should be the Queen of the World and the Princess of the Time."(19).Undoubtedly, fate and her stars were behind her ascent but so was her strong will, administrative abilities, and her overall actions, her karma.

No matter what perspective one chooses, it is a historically accepted fact that she was the most powerful Mughal woman in history. That she was widowed and later married Jahangir, who loved her more than he loved to rule, is known, thereby she was the de facto ruler in her times. What is important is to give her credit for her administrative abilities and her indomitable spirit, the foundations for which can be seen in her childhood. Deepa Agarwal fabricates the story of her life from known facts and weaves a tale of courage and optimism. It is a feminist reading of this tale that is that I shall attempt in this article.

The trajectory of her ascent is a story of strong karma and strong kismet. There are times when Fortune completely disfavors her, but she copes with the power of her strong will, and there are times when her karma are rewarded heavily by fortune. Her birth in Kandahar under poverty-struck conditions forces her parents to abandon her, in hope that someone might find her and fend for her, and her Godfather does and brings her back to her parents. She brings fortune to her father, who manages to appease Emperor Akbar, and get a decent living in the Empire. Empress Ruqaiyya soon gets enticed by Mehrunissa's wit and frequently calls her to her palace. This diary begins from the time when Ghias and his family are in Kabul, since Ghias had been made the treasurer of Kabul. It is in flashbacks that Mehrunissa notes down in her diary about her birth, and childhood years at Agra. It is since early childhood that she despises the differentiation of viewing things from behind the lattice framework of a wall, and later behind a veil. She understands much early that she wanted to be a part of the administrative setup and had abilities of governing and management better than many men around her. "That I could also take part in the affairs of state, command troops and govern provinces. If I got a chance, I'm sure I'd be as good as anyone else." (53)

Like all females, she is also socialized into adhering to gender roles, but at the same time her parents realized her potential and gave her a quite liberal ambience at home. Mehrunissa excelled at embroidering, and gifted an exquisitely embroidered shawl to her godfather and a beautiful veil for her friend Kauser's wedding. This is the skill which reaches its zenith during her widowed years, when every zenana woman wanted to wear her designs and even history notes her contribution to the development of certain unique designs and embroidery patterns. She was an embodiment of Helen complex that Patriarchy attributed as one essential of femininity. Her azure eyes, olive complexion, and slender Persian features were in accordance with the Mughal definition of beauty, anyone who ever cast eyes on her as a girl could not but appreciate her beauty. Mehrunissa even excelled in academics, she paid full attention to her tutor and was well-versed in languages, Persian, Turkish, Arabic etc.

Mehrunissa once offered to help her father with the accounts, and successfully located the discrepancy in numbers. Ghias Beg valued her intelligence and motivated her in hope that her future would bring her bright prospects. She was in no way inferior to her brothers. Be it in manners and courtesies she was always ahead of all, which even enraged her elder brother Muhammad, but she paid little attention to that. She was aware of the people around her, and deeply understood their behaviors and dealt with them accordingly. Ghias even allowed her to learn shooting, much to the displeasure of her elder brother Muhammad. On their way to Kabul, Ghias allows Mehrunissa to accompany them on a hunting excursion but asked her to dress up as a man. She was a woman ahead of her times. When most women of her age were interested only in embellishing themselves she valued academic and literary pursuits.

Owing to her ancestral lineage of poets, she was a fairly good poet too. Ghias valued her flair for poetry. Even Empress Ruqaiyya was impressed by her quick wit and composition of verse. When at Kabul, Mehrunissa befriended Kauser, daughter of one of the nobles there. They developed an intimate relation and Kauser shared with her one of the letters of her fiancé, wherein he had sent her a poem expressing pangs of separation. Kauser expressed her desire to reciprocate his love and Mehrunissa offered to help. She gave words to Kauser's feelings. Much to their distress, the patriarchal society considered it immodest, and the engagement was broken. "It felt like a curse to be a woman. What kind of world was this when the most innocent of acts can be turned against you?" (85) This incident was an eye-opener for Mehrunissa. She realized the gendered identities that one was forced to conform to. Kauser and her family were publically shamed by this accusation, and Kauser was soon betrothed to an elderly man, whose first wife hadn't borne a son. Kauser had had to find satisfaction in such an alliance, finding refuge in her progeny. But Mehrunissa could not reconcile to things so easily. She was troubled by her involvement in causing her friend such shame. She soon shared this with Abul and managed to get Ali Habibi whipped by dacoits in the dead of the night. This is the trait that is evident in Empress Nur Jahan, anyone who dared to bring her or her near ones harm, bore heavy penalty. She is on one hand an embodiment of a damsel, on the other she is not one to be distressed easily. She is a fighter; she is strong-willed and fearless. On the one hand she celebrates her femininity, and on the

other makes it her strength. She celebrates the onset of menstruation, but in no way feels herself weak and imbecile because of it. For her, her womanhood exudes strength. She is not one to be easily cowed.

It is early in her life that she is enticed by Prince Salim. The persona of the Prince, and the glory attached to being his wife fascinate her and she nurtures the dream in her heart. Her years in Kabul are filled with a yearning to get back to court and somehow meet Salim. But fate had another trial for her. No sooner do they return to court than Ruqaiyya suggests Mehrunissa's hand for Ali Quli, a Persian soldier of repute in Mughal army. Strangely, the soldier was neither a match to her in temperament and nor in lineage. He was earlier a menial staff of Persian Shah, and was neither educated, nor had any inclination towards literature to comprehend or match Mehrunissa's refined interest. In a moment her pride, her hopes were smashed. Almost everyone around her knew that it was a match much beneath her, but there was none who could question the decision of the Emperor.

At Meena Bazaar fate brought Salim to Mehrunissa for the first time. Though there are some who might label it as her shrewdness, a rational mind would view it as a dying hope and effort of someone who is doomed. Undoubtedly Salim was bewitched by her looks, and Mehrunissa even got to know that Salim had pleaded (though without success) Akbar to nullify Mehrunissa's engagement, for he wanted to marry her. The little hope that had re-kindled in her heart was trampled again and she was married to Ali Quli. Somehow Mehrunissa had the will to survive, the spirit to find refuge and cling on to a hope of motherhood. Ali Quli reprimanded her for her poetic skills, and even for her intelligence in matters of the State, but she somehow ignored it all. Soon she had her first miscarriage, which shook her hope of finding satisfaction in maternity like her friend Kauser. Though she fulfills patriarchy's demand of a beautiful woman, who could be ornamentation to the house, she could not give sons to her husband. But this did not belittle her confidence in herself. Mehrunissa's spirits were still surging, she somehow had faith in her resurrection, she ends her teenage diary on a very reassuring note, "...there's no point shedding futile tears... I can battle the vagaries of fortune. Someday, my savior will come, my angel with a flaming sword, to rescue me. Till then there is the love of my family, laughter, painting and poetry and so much more to enjoy!" (165). She never berates her femininity as something that weakens her, in fact it is from within the ambit of this gendered identity that she gains her power. Though there are times patriarchy deems her effeminate, even after becoming Empress Nur Jahan, her stride and her pride in her womanhood are exceptional, and her life is a resounding of Maya Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman". In the concluding note to the text, the author mentions historical facts that Nur Jahan continued to pursue her interest in poetry even gave patronage to woman poets and arranged marriages of orphan girls. (177)

Somewhere one is reminded of Hemmingway's, "A man can be destroyed but not defeated"(93), and Mehrunissa is never defeated, for her soul has a way of healing and composing itself, fighting on and hoping that there will be a silver lining somewhere, and history records that fortunes turn and bring her to the pinnacle of power. If she is fortunate, she is also strong willed. Her karma is equally strong as his her kismet. At times one and at times the other favors her and brings her the courage to keep going. Even she confronts opposition in the face of Muhammad, her eldest brother and later her husband Ali Quli, they tried to make her behave like other agency-less women, but she was aware, and sure of her potential. In a feminist's words she did not internalize the discourse of patriarchy and therefore did not succumb to the norm of conformity to gender roles to prove her femininity. In times when feminism wasn't known she dared to question the veil, and demand for equality, as a child and later superseded every man and woman around to become the most powerful woman of her times.

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