

ISSN: 0976-8165

Bi-Monthly, Refereed, and Indexed Open Access eJournal

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English



Vol. 8, Issue- IV (August 2017)

UGC Approved Journal No 768

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

The Twentieth Wife: An Odyssey of Trials and Tribulations

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Article History: Submitted-30/07/2017, Revised-06/09/2017, Accepted-07/09/2017, Published-10/09/2017.

Abstract:

The present paper is an attempt to study the protagonist (Mehrunnisa) in the light of feminism. A closer study of the work reveals her struggle for female autonomy played out against the backdrop of the overarching patriarchal cultural pattern. The paper can be viewed as a self-conscious reaction to the overwhelming masculinity of the privileged and the dominant gender with an objective to identify in her character a defiant voice of asserting the personal and the subjective, the paper attempts at a spatial and temporal understanding of the condition of women in general in the Mughal period.

Keywords: Feminism, Stereotypes, Identity and Mughal females.

Indu Sundaresan, has emerged as a promising historical fiction writer in contemporary times. Her famous trilogy on the Mughal period consists of *The Twentieth Wife* (2002), *The Feast of Roses* (2003) and *The Shadow Princess* (2010) provides an insight into the lives, position, customs, problems, traditions and status of women in the Mughal period and thus helps us to design a generalised sketch of the Mughal society. Sundaresan in her first novel *The Twentieth Wife* with utmost simplicity presents Mehrunnisa's journey as one that highlights the romantic desires, longs for acceptance, challenging the male world, catapults her emotional roller coasters, ill-fated marriage and constraints of other women, the widowhood and self belief as into a new avatar emblazoned with strong will power. The different facets of her life are put forward in an overwhelming feminist manner. Sundaresan in the novel not only addresses the stereotyping of a female as weak, seductress, sexual object and as a procreating being in a patriarchal society but also depicts a female's need for freedom, love, respect and power. Male historians give a negative portrayal of Mehrunnisa (later Nurjahan) for breaking away from natural roles assigned to females but Sundaresan voices her as a contemporary woman who does not submit to the constraints of traditional and stereotypical roles imposed on her.

The birth of a female child is seen as a curse on a family. They are sold, murdered, tortured, beaten up and mostly abandoned by the parents at the time of their birth. In the novel *The Twentieth Wife*, a few days after Mehrunnisa's birth, she is abandoned by her parents in the midst of the Qandahar desert. Ghias (Mehrunnisa's father) abandons a female child without asking Asmat Beg (Mehrunnisa's mother) depicts contempt for a female child and husband as the final decision maker in the family which reflects the patriarchal system prevalent in the seventeenth century India.

As a girl Mehrunnisa breaks free of the traditional stereotypes of narrow, negative and limiting concepts and ideas that a girl should not play games which include physical strength

and athletic prowess or aggression. She enjoyed the outdoor games as these games are dynamic in nature, involved speed and control, unlike the indoor activities which are more static or passive in nature. Her sisters stayed inside the house under her mother's watchful eyes. They played indoor games which would make them good housekeepers as these games did not involve much of a physical activity. Kamla Bhasin, in *Exploring Masculinity* writes: "In pursuit of the "masculine", men generally become active, aggressive and domineering, and women become receptive, subservient and nurturing" (14). Mehrunnisa is bold enough to accompany her brother to hunting and *Nashakhana* (visiting the public houses), a place strictly prohibited for girls. She has inquisitiveness towards a life where she does not restrict herself by any rules. Mehrunnisa shows the same exuberance and playfulness as Abul.

Mehrunnisa imbibes both feminine and masculine attributes as a part of her personality during her childhood. She learns: "scriptures, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and the classics" (*TTW* 46) and when she learned these subjects, she also: "learned to paint, sew, embroider" (*TTW* 46). She is as proficient as her brothers in learning the lessons taught by the mullah. As Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* points out that both the male and the female show same learning capabilities during their respective childhood: "Up to twelve, the girl is just as sturdy as her brothers; she shows the same intellectual aptitudes; she is not barred from competing with them in any area" (293). Mehrunnisa desires to learn more, explore new places and play new games. She sits with Ghias Beg to enquire about his day's work and sometimes even read books, acquiring and learning new things:

Sometimes she would sit by him quietly with a book. Sometimes he would turn to her with a column of numbers to add, or talk to her about the trouble the clerks gave him, or complain that the accountant of the army had come up short again on revenues. (*TTW* 44)

It is through these intrigues that she accustoms herself with male sphere. She sits with her foster father, Mirza Malik Masud and spends hours listening to his tales: "Of highway robberies, of camels that refused to budge when ghosts possessed them, of tents that flew away in the wind, leaving the caravan naked and shivering under a cold night sky" (*TTW* 47). These stories feed her imagination whereby she imagines about the places where she cannot go or experience. She is being constantly exposed to the experiences of the male counterparts through these stories.

Mehrunnisa's mother Asmat no sooner tries to oppose Ghias's treatment of Mehrunnisa. She opposes him as he, through his experiences, shows her another world, which Asmat believes does not belong to Mehrunnisa. Asmat represents a stereotypical woman in the novel. She is apprehensive about teaching girls too much as she believes they will not be able to find a suitable husband if they are too learned. Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* asserts that women, whose actions are defined under patriarchal norms, try to model their daughters on the same plane: "She will gain value in the eyes of males not by increasing her human worth but by modelling herself on their dreams" (358). Asmat here tries to build Mehrunnisa on the same model so that she finds a good husband. She is concerned more about Mehrunnisa as she asks too many questions as to why: "a woman has

to stay in the house when a man can go and come as he pleases” (TTW 45). Asmat never liked Ghias encouraging Mehrunnisa for asking too many questions: “Do not encourage her, Ghias. We must be careful, so people do not think our daughters are too arrogant to make good wives” (TTW 45). Here, Asmat focuses on: “how to make one’s daughter a good wife” (TTW 47). It is evident that the task of domesticating a daughter into a good wife is assigned to females.

Mehrunnisa in one of her first visit to the royal zenana wins Ruqayya Begum’s (Akbar’s wife, the Padshah Begum) favour when she asks to visit her after Prince Salim’s wedding. She watches Ruqayya Begum in admiration, as she enjoys the most exalted position in the zenana. Mehrunnisa is: “fascinated by Ruqayya’s chameleonic moods, her calm and quiet, her fiery rages” (TTW 36). Mehrunnisa learns that Ruqayya is tactful in keeping her position safe and making people pay who defy her authority. Jagat Gosini, wife of Jahangir, is an example who bears the wrath of Ruqayya Begum, from whom: “her child had been whisked away” (TTW 63). Ruqayya serves as a mentor and teaches Mehrunnisa to be financially and emotionally independent. She says: “Listen and learn, Mehrunnisa she said. A woman must not be completely reliant on a man, either for money or for love” (TTW 63). Her experience in the royal zenana is the most influential period in her life. Her interests change when she visits zenana. She fascinates of becoming a queen and marrying Prince Salim (later Jahangir) as it would bring a sense of independence for her. She is confident that even if she does not belong to the royal blood, she will marry him someday. She is more interested in her looks rather than learning, and playing with Abul as she now realises that she can be a queen if only the royal prince approves her. She dresses herself in the finest of “shimmering silk” (TTW 41) applies “kohl power” (TTW 40) does her hair nicely into “a plait” (TTW 41) so that she does not go unnoticed if she ever meets Salim. Above all, it is a bit of freedom that one can enjoy if one is part of the imperial harem. Though, the imperial females are behind the veil, they still have a voice to reckon with. It is her urge to move out of shackles that she wanted to be an empress and she never wanted to be a wife to a nobleman. She knows: “The sheath of royalty gave the women of the imperial harem an emancipation a commoner could never hope to achieve” (TTW 48).

Mehrunnisa enters her adolescence. She is tamed into a ‘cultured female stereotype’ under the watch of Ruqayya and Asmat. The royal zenana is seen as a place where Mehrunnisa is tamed to turn into a desirable woman. She is made to learn feminine attributes that attract men. As Simone De Beauvoir in regard to a girl entering her adolescence opines: “adolescence is such a difficult and decisive moment for a woman. Until then she was an autonomous individual: she now has to renounce her sovereignty” (126). Mehrunnisa learns about the mannerism, codes, and conducts to be followed to become the part of the Royal Zenana. Until now, she explores the world in her own way but now her actions are restricted by her parents and Ruqayya. The chains of Patriarchy cling to Mehrunnisa. Ghias and Asmat, who are the agents of the Patriarchy now “imposed restrictions on her” (TTW 48). She is instructed and warned: “Do not go out too much; keep your voice down; pull your veil over your head when a strange man, one not of the family, comes to visit” (TTW 48). Such

instructions become common to her as if these are part of her life, for she is a woman now, so her actions are being regulated.

Mehrunnisa on her visits to the royal harem get accustomed to the real power and politics behind the court life which is localised in the royal zenana. She learns that it is the female who runs the Empire behind the veil, the royal women hold an important position in king's life, important decisions of conquering new territories, are discussed with the women. Here, the royal women (some chosen one) execute their power with efficiency. Kamla Bhasin in *Exploring Masculinity* makes the following observation about this mutual dependence of men and women:

As we cannot live in the world without the full range of masculine and feminine energies, each sex has been helplessly dependent on the other half for its survival...Men have desperately needed women to provide them with the nurturing intuitive wisdom and emotional support, without which they unconsciously know they would die. (14)

Mehrunnisa realizes that even if the emperor is the symbol of the realm and an absolute sovereign, the cooperation of others especially women is a necessary precondition for his power. In other words, relationships and expectations linked women and men as partners or competitors in an ongoing contestation that played a crucial role in the politics of the royal court. The women in the zenana exercised direct power and used men as a means of accessing authority. These women could sometimes restrict men's power over imperial, social and economic resources. One can gather that the royal women combined their astute economic instincts with their politically nurtured pious activities to strengthen the Empire, temporally as well as spiritually. Women of the royal zenana not only played an important role to set things right for the king by being participative socially and politically but also served as the lifeline of the Empire, in carrying out reconciliation among the members of the family. It is in the zenana that she meets Prince Salim and they both fall in love. Prince Salim is awestruck by her beauty and desires her. The beauty of Mehrunnisa is captivating and even in music, dancing, poetry, painting, etc. she has no equal among her sex. Her disposition is volatile, her wit lively and satirical, and her spirit lofty and uncontrolled.

Marriage is considered central to a woman's existence in a society. It is told to her from the beginning that marrying a fine man is her destined goal. In a patriarchal society, virtues as docility, chastity, civility, are assiduously cultivated right from the beginning of the childhood. She is expected to be a good wife who dedicates herself spiritually and physically to her husband. In the novel *The Twentieth Wife*, Akbar suggests Ali Quli's marriage to Mehrunnisa on Ruqayya's suggestion. Her betrothal to a soldier is a result of Ruqayya's strategy to not let Mehrunnisa become a threat to her position in the zenana. She knows that Prince is attracted towards Mehrunnisa's charm which can lead to an uncanny situation for her, as she will lose her influence over Jahangir. Also, she finds herself insecure as she knows that Mehrunnisa has all the qualities of becoming an empress. Mehrunnisa is unhappy to know about her marriage to a soldier Ali Quli Khan Istajlu: "Ali Quli was every inch a soldier from his sunburned skin, unkempt beard and harsh laugh to his calloused hands more

used to holding a mace or sword than a book of poems” (TW 79). The decision regarding the choice of a husband is made by the males in the family or by the males under whose patronage she is living. One cannot deny that the ultimate authority to choose a husband rests in the hands of a male. No one cares about her liking and her happiness and decision of her marriage is imposed upon her by men and women in power.

Mehrunnisa enters into an ill-fated marriage to Ali Quli. She exerts her female ego through defiance and resistance against the male ego of Ali Quli, who exerts the control of a patriarch and self-projection through his sexuality. However, in the novel, Mehrunnisa defies Ali Quli’s order time and again. She does not follow things as he says. Mehrunnisa once finds Ali Quli sharing a bed with a slave girl. This erupts into a big fight as he accuses her of being barren and calls her bed ‘not fruitful’. After an argument, he turns violent:

You talk too much for a woman, Mehrunnisa – as if you were a queen, as if you expected to be a queen. Yet where is the gold in your veins? Who are your ancestors? What lands did they conquer? Where are the monuments to their lives, the tombs of their deaths? And who is your father? a Persian refugee. (TTW 116)

Violence is perpetrated on Mehrunnisa both emotionally and physically in her ill fated marriage to Ali Quli. It is when she shows resentment and Ali Quli is not able to control her, he tries to mutilate her body and soul. Mehrunnisa challenges the concept of marriage by questioning and dares to move out of the ill-fated marriage by asking Ali Quli for a divorce. Ali Quli answers her gently this time that to divorce her is not easy and she should rather ask for his promotion from Jahangir so that he can enjoy. She is completely devastated as divorce can be had only on the willingness of the husband.

Ali Quli hates the defiant behaviour of his wife as he says: “Why couldn’t his wife be like other men’s wives? They were ready to follow their husband’s initiative without question; Why not Mehrunnisa?” (TTW 174). Mehrunnisa’s intelligence and wisdom bewilder him. She puts forth her views on Ali Quli’s support for Khusrau who wants to be an heir to the throne. She is rational, mature and straight forward. Ali Quli is a full of androcentric thoughts and believes that a woman is man’s commodity, for his pleasure and to bear him sons. He never wants Mehrunnisa to advise him on political and royal matters. Instead, he wants her to be passive and just listen to what he says, without questioning him:

He held up his hand as she opened her mouth. ‘Keep quiet and listen. Confine your interests to the house and the children you are supposed to have. This is man’s work. Just because you cannot fulfil your responsibilities as a woman does not mean you can interfere in this issue. (TTW 174)

He clearly defines the mindset of a man in a patriarchal set up and wants Mehrunnisa to follow him blindly.

Mehrunnisa is confined to a space, segregated and secluded from the rest of the world. It is clearly seen that a female has to live according to the world that is created by men.

Mehrunnisa, on the other hand, does not want to remain inside the boundaries; she wants to live a life less ordinary. She is smart, agile and has her own rules and does what she likes. She is carefree and society does not bother her. She is ambitious and wanted to be at helm of affairs. She is seen as a mouthpiece of the narrator, where for a woman no bars hold. It is only when Ali Quli is out with the imperial army that Mehrunnisa visits the bazaars of the city. Mehrunnisa knew that Ali Quli, Bapa, and Maji would not like this act of hers and Ali Quli would consider her: “Like a woman of the night, as if you had no protector, no husband. Other wives don’t do this; they stay at home where their men keep them. Why not you? From Bapa, it would be: You must take care, beta. It is an ugly world out there?” (TTW 140). Mehrunnisa defies all the norms of a good woman as she is carefree and wants to live on her own terms.

In a patriarchal society a woman is made to accept motherhood as her natural role and it becomes central to her existence. The sexuality of a woman is often reduced into a mere function of reproduction. In the novel, Mehrunnisa’s yearning for not having a child was not only mental but also physical “her arms ached to hold her child” (TTW 142). R.J. Kalpana mentions in her book *Feminism and the individual*: “Women’s place in society is circumscribed by her reproductive functions” (9), so it becomes necessary to bear children. The yearning of a child became all the more intense when she finds Yasmin, a slave girl, pregnant with her husband’s child. Once again a woman is victimised. Ali Quli’s atrocities are not only restricted to Mehrunnisa but extend to a slave girl Yasmin whom he leaves pregnant in a desolated state. Other women are insensitive to her because she is carrying an illegitimate child. It is depicted that the hapless women are left to bear the consequences of sexual advances of men. Mehrunnisa has a sense of incompleteness without a child and this has also been instilled by the patriarchal mindset which considers women incomplete if they are unable to bear a child.

After going through many abortions Mehrunnisa expects a child again. A girl is born to Mehrunnisa, and there is no happiness, gloominess surrounds the atmosphere, as she is not welcomed and there is nothing to celebrate. Ali Quli is indifferent at the news of his newly born girl child. He shows no concern for her. All that matters is that he wants to have a child, that too, a male, so as to have an heir. The child in Mehrunnisa’s hands give her immense pleasure as it is a moment of joy for her: “Mehrunnisa immediately held out her arms and hugged the baby tight. Ali Quli would be disappointed. The great soldier had only a daughter; there was no son to grow into manhood and emulate his father’s deeds – or misdeeds” (TTW 211). Mehrunnisa is happy with the thought: “If not Jahangir, at least there was to be a child” (TTW 209).

Ali Quli derives pleasure in telling Mehrunnisa only about the downfall of Jahangir as he knows that hurts her the most. He has been conspiring against the king along with Khurram and Khusrau. Ali Quli comes to tell Mehrunnisa about the recent happenings in the court and about Khusrau moving and conquering Lahore and then the whole world. While telling all these developments, he turns rude towards her to which she objects as she is not the one who takes things lying down. During the argument, Mehrunnisa is more rational than Ali

Quli, she understands the gravity of the situation and concludes that if emperor captured khusrau, Ali Quli's life would be worth nothing.

Mehrunnisa in her marriage with Ali Quli shows interest in Salim (Jahangir). She prays for his well being and she writes letters to him informing about Ali Quli's plan to deceive the king. Salim also, on the other hand, has not been able to forget Mehrunnisa. Salim curses Akbar for not granting him permission to marry Mehrunnisa. It was because of Mehrunnisa that he gave Ali Quli the title "Sher Afghan or Tiger Slayer" (TTW 133). When Ali Quli informs her about the title, she contemplates about Prince Salim who is disturbed with every thought of Mehrunnisa every now and then. Mehrunnisa cherishes the memories of Prince Salim instead of thinking about her husband. Everything she thought was – Prince Salim (now Jahangir).

Mehrunnisa becomes a widow when Ali Quli dies in a military coup carried out by Jahangir. Widowhood devoid a woman of a better future but it did not restrict Mehrunnisa's desire to attain female autonomy. Instead, she feels free to execute her will to be at helm of affairs, after the death of Ali Quli as she saw her marriage to him a mere contract. She is called by Jahangir to stay in the zenana. On one occasion of *nauroz* festival, Mehrunnisa went to the bazaar in hope of finding Jahangir. It was indeed a strenuous task for her to make a place in zenana as she is in her thirties, a widow and a mother of a girl. The emperor had around three hundred women, in the zenana. The women were lucky if their lord visited them at night at least once or twice a year and if one of those visits resulted in a child, preferably a male one. Mehrunnisa shows her youthful side the way she dresses up at the age of thirty – four when society see this age as an end in itself to desire anything: "No woman over thirty would dare to wear white; it symbolized purity and virginity" (TTW 326). Ladies of the harem gave themselves up for the king. Even the wives of noblemen dressed in their best to catch the Emperor's eye, and if they are inducted into the royal harem they will have rewards for her and her family.

Mehrunnisa once again captivates Jahangir by her Wit and charm. He couldn't resist her as he always wanted her. Mehrunnisa and Jahangir enjoy each other's company. A number of meetings start taking place between the two. Mehrunnisa is astonished to see how in weeks, everybody is talking about her. Mehrunnisa is to marry again, this time to a man of her choice. Jahangir also notice a change in Mehrunnisa's behaviour, she is a mature lady now endowed with beauty and intellect. She is to be a king's wife. Mehrunnisa asserts her identity as a self-sufficient woman as she isn't in a mood to compromise; she never wanted to be the one who is a mere concubine to a king. She wants to be a wife of Jahangir. Mehrunnisa, for Jahangir is someone who thwarted all logic: "He admired her fierce independence, her deep sense of self, and her convictions about her actions" (TTW 352-53). She marries Jahangir and becomes the queen, his twentieth wife.

Mehrunnisa emerges as an androgynous, independent, self-reliant force guiding or governing events, changing situations struggling against power and making her way out. Indu Sundaresan reconstructs the historical past, especially in a male dominated history where female voice is subjugated in the literary discourse as well. Mehrunnisa throughout her

journey defies various stereotypical roles that are imposed on her. In addition, it echoes the trials and tribulations she undergoes in the course of her journey to become an Empress, the twentieth wife of Jahangir. It also gives voice to the women of contemporary age to get inspired by such characters located in history to redefine and assert female autonomy.

Abbreviation used:

The Twentieth Wife- *TTW*

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