

Finding the Parasite between the Quote and the Text: A Critical Analysis of Indu Sunderasan's *The Twentieth Wife*

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Abstract

Indu Sundaresan's novel *The Twentieth Wife* (2002) narrates the history of the Mughal Era. Before each chapter of the novel, the writer has quoted some lines from the various famous works written on Mughal History. These works include the famous translations of *Tuzuk-i- Jahangiri*, *The History of Jahangir*, and *Ain-i-Akbar* etc. The novel represents the captivating love story of Nur Jahan (1577-1645) and Jahangir (1569-1627) but with a changed feminist perspective. Among these historical texts, *Ain-i- Akabri* is the third volume of Akbar-Nama, which was originally written in Persian by Abul Fazl. In the same, Emperor Abu'l-Fath Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Akbar (1542-1605) is the central figure, whereas *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* is the autobiography of Nur-ud-din Muhammad Jahangir. Both the texts were written during the Mughal period, but Indu Sundaresan, in her historical fiction *The Twentieth Wife*, has adapted both. The author has not only reworked these texts but has also established a feminist perspective out of them. The paper will explore how the above-mentioned landmark texts related to Mughal Era have been adapted and reworked on by Indu Sundaresan in her debut novel, *The Twentieth Wife*.

Keywords: Landmark texts, Mughal History, Historical Fiction, Ain-i- Akbari, Tuzuk-i- Jahangiri.

The culture of writing the history of Mughal kings and empire in India was commenced by Zāhīr-ud-Dīn Muhammad Bābur (1483–1530) who was the founder of the Mughal Empire in India. His memoirs in the form of *Baburnama* were recorded in Persian and Chagatai languages. Later, *Akbarnama*, also known as the *Book of Akbar*, was recorded in Persian by Shaikh Abu al-Fazal ibn Mubarak, courtier and biographer of Abu'l-Fath Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Akbar. Later, King Jahangir alias Prince Salim wrote his autobiography known as *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*.

Although many writers at different points of time have interpreted Mughal history according to their perspective and on the information based upon the above-mentioned texts yet this paper will explore only the perspective of Indu Sundaresan. While writing her debut novel, *The Twentieth Wife*, Indu Sundaresan has quoted some specific lines extracted from famous works already written

on Mughal History. As the novel consists of twenty chapters, the writer has cited twenty quotes from the below-mentioned works. Some of these works are repetitions, but quotes are not alike. The works cited are *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* translated and edited by A. Rogers and H. Beveridge, *A Dutch Chronicle of Mughal India* translated and edited by B. Narain and S. Sharma, *Munktakhabut-Tawarikh* translated by W.H. Lowe, *The History of Hindostan* authored by Alexander Dow, *History of Jahangir* authored by Beni Prasad, *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India* edited by William Foster, *Ain-i-Akbari* translated by H. Blochmann and H.S. Jarrett, *Storia do Mogor* by Niccolo Manucci translated by William Irvine and *The Travels of Pietro Delia Valle in India* edited by Edward Grey.

Due to the citation of extractions of the texts mentioned above, referring to the concept of Hillis Miller's 'Critic As Host,' a relevant question is posed that – when a text contains a citation from another text, is it like a parasite in the main text or is it the main text that surrounds and strangles the citation? (8-10). Therefore, this paper would attempt to find out that who acts as a parasite in the novel? The quotes Indu Sundaresan has cited or her own text that defies the set boundaries of cited quotes. For the said purpose, the researcher would assay to analyse each chapter briefly.

Chapter one of *The Twentieth Wife* commences with the quote from *The Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* where Jahangir recalls that when he was born, he was given the name of Sultan Salim, but his father Akbar never used the said name. He always used to address Jahangir as 'Shaikhu Baba.' Indu Sundaresan, while narrating the said chapter, didn't mention any incident how Jahangir obtained this name: rather, she gave specific reference to the wedding date of Prince Salim that took place on February 13, 1585. It is also worth referring here that Indu Sundaresan didn't emphasize much on the wedding ceremony of Prince Salim but the incident when young Mehrunnissa got an opportunity to get a glimpse of Prince Salim first time. Furthermore, she also emphasized over introducing another strong character Ruqayya Sultan who owned the most important title in the Mughal Zenana or Harem i.e. Padshah Begum, whom she describes as having a calm demeanour and arrogance, and self-assurance (30). Moreover, Indu Sundaresan also highlights the conversation between child Mehrunnisa and Padshah Begum and also ascertains that child Mehrunnisa feels attracted to the handsome prince. When Padshah Begum asks child Mehrunnisa whether she likes Prince Salim, the latter replies, 'Yes, Your Majesty.' He is...he is more beautiful than my brothers (30).

The first chapter introduces a strong position of Ruqayya in the Zenana and the life of Emperor Akbar, the wedding ceremony of Prince Salim with his first wife, the attraction of child

Mehrunnisa towards Prince Salim a meeting of Ruqayya with Mehrunnisa, and summoning the latter at the royal Zenana. In this chapter, the emphasis is given more on the fabrication of the fiction than narrating any historical event other than the wedding ceremony of Prince Salim. Through this chapter, Indu Sundaresan sows the seeds of feminism in the Mughal era. Moreover, the first chapter is not woven around the quote but has laid the foundation of the commencement of the love story of Jahangir and Mehrunnisa.

The quote before chapter two expresses Begum's great affection for Mehr-un-nasa alias Mehrunnisa, and the text also justifies the quote. Here, the writer exhibits how the empress always used to keep Mehrunnisa in her company (32). Through this chapter, Indu Sundaresan also introduces Zenana as a symbol of power. The women at the imperial Zenana used to visit temples, gardens, and sightsee. They owned lands in the empire and talked with their stewards without any commotion (48). Here, Ruqayya has been portrayed as a powerful woman who advises Akbar on all political and personal matters. These matters include grants of gifts or mansabs or his campaigns as well. Though she was behind the purdah, she was still the strongest voice in the harem. A mere nobleman's wife could never hope for such liberty. The sheath of royalty gave the women of the imperial harem and emancipation a commoner could never achieve (48). The few historical events in this chapter are briefly described by Indu Sundaresan, i.e., the marriages that took place between Prince Salim and princess Jagat Gosain and later between Prince Salim and princess Sahib Jamal.

Chapter three demonstrates the restlessness Prince Salim goes through, which forces him to hatch a conspiracy of killing against his own father Akbar with the assistance of Hakim Humam. This chapter again describes the strength of Ruqayya who is as powerful in Harem as King Akbar in his court. The writer has cited a number of episodes to establish the power of this Ruqayya. First, although she was infertile yet she managed to get the custody of Salim and Jagat Gosini's son Khurram upon his birth. The reason for choosing this child was the hostile nature of Princess Jagat Gosini towards Ruqayya. The iron princess, Princess Jagat Gosini, always defied Ruqayya's authority. Therefore, Ruqayya took away her child. Thus, Ruqayya selected this child not out of affection and love but out of revenge. Here, Indu Sundaresan describes Ruqayya as cruel, merciless and dangerous (63). Second, it was Ruqayya only on whose recommendation emperor Akbar chose Ali Quli Khan as the future husband for Mehrunnisa. Third, she was not only ruling inside the harem or Zenana but also owned lands in the empire also. Her perspective towards life and love was neither idealistic nor romantic but pragmatic. 'Listen and learn, Mehrunnisa,' she said. 'A woman must not be completely reliant on a man, either for money or for love' (63). Thus, it is

relevant to mention that Indu Sundaresan created the character of Ruqayya more powerful than the character of Mehrunnisa.

The quotes before chapters four and five are from *The History of Hindostan* and demonstrate Mehrunnisa's adroitness in music, dancing, painting and education. Besides, her beauty and charm have also been spoken of. Still, Indu Sundaresan develops the love-story of Jahangir and Mehrunnisa through their meetings at Royal Palace and later at Meena Bazaar in chapter four. The love feelings between the two lovers grow and shatter soon with the marriage of Mehrunnisa to Ali Quli in chapter five. Thus through these two chapters, Indu Sundaresan has artistically-recreated the melancholic story of meeting and separation of two lovers. Therefore, here the text has drifted away from the cited quotes.

Chapter six begins with the quote of Beni Prasad from *History of Jahangir* and refers to Mehrunnisa that she aspired to the conquest of Prince Salim and succeeded by a dexterous use of her charms and accomplishments at entertainment in casting a spell over him. But she was married to Sher Afghan, a Persian noble of highest courage and valour (106). Like chapters four and five, this chapter also fails to revolve around the above-mentioned cited quote: rather, in this chapter, Indu Sundaresan retells the story of Mehrunnisa's miscarriages and her unhappy marital life. Besides, she has also incorporated an important historical event in this chapter i.e., the death of Akbar's son Murad that took place in May 1599. Here, Indu Sundaresan briefly mentioned his death and avoids narrating this sad episode in detail. Thus, again this chapter fails to revolve around the cited quote.

Chapter seven begins with the auto-biographical quote from *The Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* that at the time he (Akbar) went in prosperity to the provinces of the Deccan, and I (Jahangir) was ordered against the Rana, he came and became a servant to me (126). The said chapter has been woven around the same quote. Indu Sundaresan has successfully recreated the above-mentioned quote as a situation. The quote before chapter eight is from the *Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India* and describes the rebellion of Prince Salim against his own father Akbar. Indu Sundaresan has recreated the rebellion in the said chapter along with the elements of feminine writings where Mehrunnisa helps to deliver the child of her estranged husband Ali Quli from a slave girl Yasmin.

Mehrunnisa touched a rounded curve and dew back, her fingers coated in blood. The baby was already half out, but she had not been able to see it in the semi-darkness of the hen shed.----- the child was coming out bottom first (146).

The quote before chapter nine describes the evil fortune of a father caused by the rebelliousness of a son without any reason or cause. It has been extracted from *The Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, but like other chapters, Indu Sundaresan has not mentioned the same in the text: rather, she has rewritten other important historical events. One of them is related to the birth of Prince Salim alias Jahangir on August 31, 1569, followed by the construction of the mosque and imperial palace at Fatehpur Sikri after the birth of Salim. Other historical events include the building of a city at Fatehpur Sikri post-conquest of Gujarat, plans of Akbar to make Sikri as the capital of the empire, shortage of water at Sikri, digging up a vast lake, failing of rains, and abandoning of Fatehpur Sikri by Akbar finally. Besides, Indu Sundaresan also recreated the murder of Abul Fazl in this chapter on the secret commands of Prince Salim, reconciliation between Akbar and Salim, death of Prince Daniyal, and final return of Prince Salim to Agra.

The quote mentioned before chapter ten is from *Ain-i-Akbari* and refers to the growing differences between Jahangir and his son Khusrau witnessed by Akbar. As mentioned in the quote, Indu Sundaresan has represented a fight between the war elephants of Prince Salim i.e. Giranbar, and Khusrau's elephant Apurva. Further, she has also given a reference to the attacks on Salim by the archers of Khusrau. This chapter also recreates the death of Akbar, the becoming of Salim, and the next Mughal Emperor, titled as Nuruddin Muhammad Jahangir Padshah Ghazi alias Emperor Jahangir.

The quote before chapter eleven is from *The Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* and refers to the date when Jahangir ascended the throne in the 38th year of his life on October 24, 1605. In this chapter, Indu Sundaresan has recreated the events after Prince Salim became Emperor Jahangir. It also includes the revolt of Khusrau against his own father, Jahangir, and his imprisonment and delivery of a baby girl, namely Ladli by Mehrunnisa. Thus, all the events mentioned in chapter thirteen revolve around the referred citation. Chapter twelve recreates the true story of escaping of Khusrau from royal imprisonment that has been written in support of the cited quote extracted from *The History of Hindostan*.

Chapter thirteen refers to the army raised by Khusrau against his father, Jahangir and capturing of the former by the latter. As the quote before the chapter refers to the horrible account of the hanging of corpses of the soldiers of Khusrau against the trees, Indu Sundaresan has also meticulously recreated the same horror. The quote before chapter fourteen is from *The History of Hindostan* and

refers to the absolute power Jahangir had as being the Emperor of India. But in this chapter also, Indu Sundaresan has written about the betrothal ceremony between Prince Khurram alias Shahjahan and Arjumand alias Mumtaz Mahal with a fabricated squabble between Mehrunnisa and Jagat Gosini.

Jagat Gosini's eyes glittered as she looked over Ladli's head at Mehrunnisa. 'Only a girl child for your husband, my dear?' And such an arrogant one. You must teach her humility. Commoners must never refuse a gift from royalty.' 'But our family is going to be associated with yours, Your Majesty.' Mehrunnisa said. 'Surely we are no longer common?' (259). Thus, the text and the citation are different.

Through chapter fourteen, Indu Sundaresan narrates the omnipotent power of the beauty of Mehrunnisa. In the said chapter, Jahangir asks Ghias Beg, the father of Mehrunnisa, to invoke the Tura-i-Changezi, the law of the Timurs, to get his daughter a divorce from Ali Quli. It also reflects the hatred and jealousy of Jagat Gosini towards Mehrunnisa and considering her as a real threat to her position and power in the royal Zenana. For her, Mehrunnisa was Ruqayya's protégée. No matter what logic dictated, Jagat Gosini swore to herself that neither of those women would gain ascendance over her (273).

Chapter fifteen refers to the extract from *The Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* where Jahangir grieved the death of his friend Qutbu-d-din Khan Koka. In this chapter, Indu Sundaresan fabricated the circumstances of refusal of Ali Quli for divorce, sending Qutubuddin Khan Koka to summon Ali Quli at Bengal and killing of the former by the latter and then killing of Ali Quli by the army of Koka and escape of Mehrunnisa and Ladli from the house. Hence, it won't be wrong to suggest that the text indirectly revolves around the citation because Mehrunnisa is separated from Ali Quli, although not through the divorce yet through his death.

The quote before chapter sixteen narrates the circumstances of the Mughal Court and is based on *A Dutch Chronicle of Mughal India*, and the same has been elaborated in this chapter. Moreover, this chapter also recreates the actual historical event when Khusrau on the instructions of Jahangir, was blinded.

In chapter seventeen, Indu Sundaresan had fabricated the circumstances when Mehrunnisa returned safely from Bengal to Agra, the presence of Portuguese Jesuit Catholic fathers at the court

of Jahangir, whereas the citation extracted from *The History of Hindostan* refers to the dexterity of Mehrunnisa in tapestry, embroidery, painting skills along with her other charms.

The quote before chapter eighteen has been extracted from *Storia do Mogor by Niccolao Manucci*, where Jahangir sent an order for the killing of Mehunnisa's husband, but the chapter exhibits the supremacy of Mehrunnisa's charm, love, and beauty over Jahangir and seeing Mehrunnisa as a potential threat by Jagat Gosini and the indirect influence of another powerful character Ruqayya Sultan Begum to decide the fate of Jagat Gosini. The conversation between Hoshiyar Khan, the eunuch slave, and the Jagat Gosini clearly exhibits the power of Mehrunnisa in collusion with Ruqayya Sultan.

Hoshiyar shrugged. 'Her Majesty, Ruqayya Sultan Begum, sent Mehrunnisa to the Emperor,'

'Why?'

'So that he would notice her, Your Majesty.'

'Find some pretext to call the Emperor away. I want Mehrunnisa out of the zenana by nightfall. The Emperor is not to see her again (332).

Chapter nineteen has been woven around the quote from *The Travels of Pietro Delia Valle in India*, where Jahangir tried to bring Mehrunnisa into his harem. Still, she refused to enter as a concubine. In this chapter, Indu Sundaresan fabricated the circumstances of how Jahangir tried to convince Mehrunnisa and how the latter refused.

'Come back to the zenana, Mehrunnisa. I want you there. I want to look after you, to take care of you. Come to me, my darling. Please say you will come.' He smiled and went on, 'All this country is tiring me. I am not young anymore. I need you with me' (347).

Choosing her words carefully, she said, 'Your Majesty, it is best you leave now. I cannot----I will not---be your concubine' (348). Thus, the chapter revolves around the citation. The quote before chapter twenty has been extracted from *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India* and provides a brief summary of Mehrunnisa and Jahangir's love story. Therefore, the chapter twenty also narrates the same where both of them finally got married. Hindu Sundanesse has created twenty chapters in this novel because Maharanis alias Nurjahan became the twentieth and last wife of Emperor Jahangir.

Considering the quotes before the chapters, one can easily make out that some of the chapters revolve around the citations, but some have completely been drifted away from them. But one thing is to ascertain that all the citations have been explained in detail either previous or next chapters. Although Indu Sundaresan has detailed these quotes' descriptions yet with a magical touch of her imaginative dexterity and feminine writing. Thus, it would be incorrect to state that the text has completely become a parasite on the quotes or vice-versa. The writer has done justice to both the text and the quotes. She has artistically-recreated women-centered Mughal history, whereas all the quotes are taking from the texts where Mughal kings have been put at the centre. Thus, it won't be wrong to say that *The Twentieth Wife* is an artistic blend of history and fiction where the writer has maintained a fine balance between the citations and the text.

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