

A FEAST OF ROSES

Reader's Guide

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Mehrunnisa, Jahangir's twentieth wife, has ambitions beyond the veiled silence behind the *zenana* (harem) walls. In Chapter One, the narrator explains: "All her life she had wanted the life of a man, with the freedom to go where he wished, to do what he wanted, to say what came to his mind without worry for consequences" (p. 5). How does Mehrunnisa eventually become the power behind the throne? Does she ever really acquire the "freedom" for which she wishes?
2. In order to secure her rising power in the Empire, Mehrunnisa forms a *junta*, or an alliance, with her father, brother, and Khurram, the heir apparent to the throne. She is certain that "her father and brother, could always be trusted. Their blood was hers" (p. 89). Discuss greed as a motivation and how it serves to break familial ties and form unlikely alliances.
3. In her later years, when all her influence is lost, Mehrunnisa realizes that she faltered by "not consolidating her power among the women, in the women's world in which she lived" (p. 378). Do you think she would have earned the support of the *zenana* women in her quest for power? Would you consider Mehrunnisa a pioneer for women's rights?
4. Marriages of Mughal India during the 1600's seem to be more about lucrative unions and less about love. But a few are fortunate enough to marry for love, as is the case of Jahangir and Mehrunnisa. Do you think Mehrunnisa exploits Jahangir's love for her own advancement? Why is marriage so important to Indian women of this time?
5. When a man, such as Emperor Jahangir, has twenty wives, there are bound to be rivalries, jealousies and hierarchies amongst the women. Discuss the politics that occur in the *zenana*. How do you feel about polygamy? Considering the context, does it empower or demean women?
6. Discuss the significance of "the feast of roses" as it occurs in Chapter Ten. What are the implications of Jahangir's gesture? Why do you think the author chose to title the novel thus?
7. Describe the nature of the relationships between the Indians and the English and Portuguese *firangis*, or foreigners. How did the foreigners view the Indians?
8. Abul betrays his sister, Mehrunnisa, and aligns himself with Khurram who, he hopes, will be the next emperor. Abul understands that "In being born a man, and being born with no imperial pretensions, he could never change his status"(p.322). Does this mean that women are at a social advantage since they can marry-up?
9. Discuss the male-female power dynamic. Why do you think both women and men are disturbed and threatened by Mehrunnisa's power? Inevitably she seems to be disliked by almost everyone. Do you find Mehrunnisa a likeable character? How would you rate her performance as "queen"?

10. "Emperor Jahangir had once said that kingship knew no kinship"(p. 291). Discuss the many rivalries for the throne. Out of all of Jahangir's sons, Parviz, Khusrau, Sharyar, and Khurram, who do you think truly deserves to be prince?

Reviews

Weaving another rich historical tapestry...Sundaresan colors the life of a fascinating woman whose female wiles inspired the Taj Mahal.—*Booklist*

Impressive....Readers who enjoyed the first volume will find similar pleasures tracking the fate of one of history's most intriguing women.—*Publishers Weekly*

Sundaresan [is] a bright addition to the new generation of women writers from India.—*The Seattle Times*

There is no question that Sundaresan is a gifted storyteller with an obvious passion for history.—*USA Today*