

A FEAST OF ROSES

A Conversation with Indu Sundaresan

Q: Both *The Feast of Roses* and your previous novel, *The Twentieth Wife*, are based on the life of an actual woman, Mehrunnisa. What is the most difficult part of writing historical fiction?

A: I spent a lot of time researching 17th Century Mughal India, reading about the customs of the time, the politics at court, the almost-invisible life behind harem walls. The most difficult task in putting all of this down on paper, in this medium of fiction, was staying true to historical documentation as much as possible. And this was not always easy. As I revised the original drafts of each of the novels, I invariably took out some history and added some fiction to smooth out the bumps in the plot line, or changed a few dates to suit the purposes of the story.

Still, I consider both novels to be historically accurate. They do give a detailed snapshot of Mughal India, and Mehrunnisa's life did follow the main threads of narration. When I read historical fiction, especially fiction based on the life of actual players in history, I invariably go in search of other work (mostly nonfiction) to check the facts against what I have just read. And so, mindful of this, I have been very careful about retaining the essence of Mehrunnisa's documented life in both the novels.

Q: Why does the rest of the world not know about Mehrunnisa? And is she well known in India?

A: For most of the world, India is the Taj Mahal. And the Taj was built for Mehrunnisa's niece, an empress in her own right. But Mehrunnisa has no such magnificent monument to celebrate her death, no tangible result of the deep and abiding love Emperor Jahangir had for her. She was, however, much more powerful than her niece, did not just ruffle the political waters of her time but created a veritable storm, and in doing so, shaped the course of India's history. Though Mehrunnisa does not have a lasting monument to love, Jahangir and she had, in its place, a trust, understanding and respect that were much more enduring.

I have to confess that I didn't know very much about Mehrunnisa either before I started researching *The Twentieth Wife* and *The Feast of Roses*. While in school, my history textbooks made only a fleeting reference to her—as the wife of Emperor Jahangir. The legend of Mehrunnisa though, is well and alive in India through songs, ballads and even Bollywood movies that celebrate this royal love story. What has been washed away through the years is the substance of this woman—who she was, why she was powerful, what her attraction was, what were her strengths and her weakness.

And this is what I have explored in *The Twentieth Wife* and *The Feast of Roses*. They are both love stories, but go beyond the happily-ever-after end of most love stories, showing the relationship between Mehrunnisa and Emperor Jahangir to have been a substantial, lasting one.

Q: How did writing the two novels change your views about Mughal India? Did it shatter any preconceived notions you might have had?

A: Like most people, I started off with the assumption that the women of the Mughal Empire were vapid, unthinking creatures. They lived in a harem, lived only to please the male principal in their life. Their entire lives revolved around this one man. They were veiled, not allowed to step beyond harem walls, and their voices would then have but been whispers in a wind, carrying no strength or substance.

What surprised me was discovering them to be have been intelligent, resilient creatures. Almost all my earlier notions were shattered as I researched and wrote and read about the women of the empire. They were physically confined, yes, but that was almost all there was to their loss of freedom. In fact, the veil, the confinement, acted as an advantage of sorts. It provided them with the status of wealth (or the semblance of it anyway), and security and respect.

While the male principal ruled their lives, they also had to learn, with the diplomacy and tact befitting the greatest monarch, how to survive in a harem environment, where every woman was in competition for the same thing—the ability to not just attract the man's attention, but to, eventually keep it for the rest of their lives.

The more common women were not veiled in 17th century India, but they also did not have the advantages of wealth, education, and the ability to use that education that the imperial women had.

Q: Did the fact that Mehrunnisa had no children contribute to her freedom?

A: Yes. Well, she had one child, a daughter from her first marriage to a Persian soldier. And I think had she been consumed with child bearing and rearing, she might have had less time and energy to involve herself in the affairs of the empire. A point in case is her niece, the woman for whom the Taj Mahal is built.

This niece had fourteen children, and died while giving birth to her last child. She was also empress for only four short years (Mehrunnisa ruled until the end of Emperor Jahangir's reign, for sixteen years) and spent most of her time having children.

And while the Taj is branded on our imaginations as the world's greatest monument to love, it was Mehrunnisa, and not her niece, who welcomed the first official ambassador from England to the empire, who played the English and the Portuguese Jesuits off each other to the empire's advantage, who built three tombs that still stand today, who designed gardens and rest houses for weary travelers. She also had coins minted in her name, unofficially designating her sovereign, and did all of this living in a time when women were not seen and rarely heard.

Q: Was Mehrunnisa's power a result of her strength or of Jahangir's weakness? The most

popular portrait of Jahangir is of a half-drugged, hard-drinking man, yet you portray him more kindly.

A: It's true that I don't dwell upon Emperor Jahangir's opium eating or his drinking habits, though both are mentioned in the novels, especially in *The Feast of Roses* when he falls gravely ill and Mehrunnisa had to make the decision about continuing his opium, for she feared that in his debilitated state, the withdrawal symptoms would kill him.

The reason I don't dwell upon these habits, however, is that I did not consider them to have affected Emperor Jahangir's reasoning or intelligence. Both the drinking and the drug taking were royal prerogatives during the Mughal period; almost everyone at court, and within the walls of the imperial harem used some form of intoxicant on a daily basis.

Jahangir continued writing his memoirs until his death, and these writings show him to be a clever, thinking man. He does not come across as weak -- self-indulgent, perhaps, but that again was a royal prerogative. There is no doubt either about Mehrunnisa's strength of character, but I do not believe she could have been powerful without Jahangir's blessing and support. It wasn't that she was strong and he was weak—their relationship was a communion of two forceful characters who found the ability to trust and understand each other.

Q: In the end, did Mehrunnisa bring about her own downfall?

A: In some ways, I think yes. In *The Feast of Roses* you see how she miscalculated the strengths and weakness of her opponents, especially the two men who ambush her (figuratively) when Emperor Jahangir dies. Both Prince Khurram (Jahangir's son and later builder of the Taj Mahal) and Mehrunnisa's brother Abul were early allies—she formed a *junta* of sorts with these two to help her rule.

But she tried too hard to force circumstances in her favor, which might have been all right, as long as they favored Khurram and Abul also. Though Mehrunnisa did have the upper hand as long as Jahangir ruled, she lost everything upon her husband's death. And having placed her trust and faith in these men early in her rule, she failed to consolidate her power properly and diplomatically in the imperial harem. Had she done the latter, it's possible the women of the harem would have pulled together to support her against Khurram and Abul...and then history would have taken a very different path.

If Khurram hadn't come to the throne after Jahangir's death...there would have been no Taj Mahal!

Q: You were born in New Delhi, India and currently live in the Seattle area. Has your experience visiting India changed since having written about the region and its history while living your life in America? Do you find yourself noticing or wondering about things that you had taken for granted during your years living in India?

A: It is, in many ways, easier for me to write about India living in the U.S. The distance gives me a perspective that is clean. I am writing from memory and so there is a more complete focus (and this is especially true of my short fiction, which is contemporary). In *The Feast of Roses* and *The Twentieth Wife*, my research revealed an almost new world. One with which I was familiar (given my background and the ease with which I understood Persian or Urdu words) and one that was at the same time unfamiliar (life in a harem, at the imperial court).

The things I took for granted while I was in India are more sharply contrasted when I compare them to my life here, not so much when I visit India—there it's easier to fall back into a familiar routine!

Q: What kinds of books do you find yourself drawn to? As a creator of richly detailed historical fiction, do you consider yourself more a fan of fiction or nonfiction? Who are some of the writers you most admire?

A: I divide my time almost equally between fiction and nonfiction. For nonfiction, I tend toward a lot of history—life in the Victorian age, early America, during the British Raj in India, letters from the past, biographies. I also like adventure and discovery stories about expeditions to the Himalayas, to the North and South Poles, the trading routes by sea—stories that capture the persistence and unsettle the confidence of men and women.

I grew up reading a lot of British authors (mostly as a result of my formal education) and they are still favorites I turn to for comfort and familiarity—Jane Austen, the Brontes, Thomas

Hardy, Elizabeth Gaskell. Agatha Christie is also a great favorite, as is P.G. Wodehouse, and I am still amazed by his ability to fashion sentences that are so irresistibly humorous. The authors I admire most for their writing style are Joanna Trollope, Margaret Atwood, Chitra Divakaruni, Carol Shields, Michael Ondaatje and V.S. Naipaul. I also tend to read a lot of fiction set in the southern U.S.