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The Lights of History in Indu Sundaresan's *Shadow Princess*

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Abstract

Aims: In this paper, the aim is to identify various issues such as historical, cultural, economic, artistic, religious, political, and social forces. The article focuses on Indu Sundaresan's novels through a new historical perspective. Sundaresan's historical discourses provide the history of the Mughal Empire as a lived experience for readers. This article exposes the historiography and presents an in-depth study of how Sundaresan attempts to bridge the gap in representing women's roles in her historical fiction novels.

Methodology and Approach: The authors have consulted both primary and secondary sources as part of their research. Furthermore, the researchers have applied New Historicism theory in this work, with the intention of bringing out the perspectives of both the text and history.

Outcome: Through this paper, the researchers have found that examining the gender hierarchy that charts the lives of women denied agency in the fiction of Indu Sundaresan provides insight into understanding the historical values, thoughts, needs, desires, and relationships of the women portrayed.

Conclusion and Suggestions: To sum up, *Shadow Princess* leaves behind the readers with a great mix of Mughal history, architecture, love, food, luxury, lavishness, clandestine, policies, taxations, Harems, Zenena, siblings dispute, betrayal, confinement, unconventional attitudes and of course Jahanara's staunch, selfless yet powerful political life. Every aspect in *Shadow Princess* can be brought and examined under the historical lens and provide an exemplary example for perfect historical reconstruction.

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Indu Sundaresan, the author of the Taj trilogy was born and brought up in India. Later she got settled in Seattle, Washington. As a historical fiction writer, she has revisited the glorious Mughal era in India. She tries to revive the reign of Padshas and Beghams through her picturesque novels *The Twentieth Wife* (2002), *The Feast of Roses* (2003), and *Shadow Princess* (2010). Unlike other contemporary diasporic writers, Indu Sundaresan does not centralize the theme of alienation or loss of identity rather she tries to popularize the historical roots of her mother nation. In one of her interviews with Indian Express Indu Sundaresan mentions that she is not interested in diasporic writing which is not suitable for the global audience instead she tries to reflect more on historical events that detail the lives of people not just simply dates and facts. This paper aims to bring out the rise of Mughal rule, politics in court, women in the Mughal era, and their roles in court unveils richness, luxury, architecture and futuristic rule of Mughal rulers

Indu Sundaresan's historical recounts are authentic which makes her readers witness the Mughal courts and harems. She takes up a strenuous task in representing the historical events in her writings. Being true to the history and findings of historians is not facile. She has done multiple readings and a lot of research before presenting the picture of Mughal India in her novels. Her Taj trilogy covers the period of important Mughal emperors in Indian history. In her first novel *The Twentieth wife*, Emperor Akbar reigns over entire India and some parts of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh. Later in the second half of the novel emperor, Jahangir ascends the throne. Emperor Jahangir successfully reigns the entire Hindustan throughout the sequel novel, *The Feasts of Roses* only till the arrival of Emperor of Shah Jahan to overpower emperor Jahangir. In *Shadow Princess*, the third novel of the Taj trilogy Shah Jahan becomes devastated after the demise of his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal. Emperor Shah Jahan is dethroned and taken as a captive by his son emperor Aurangzeb.

Indu Sundaresan has captured the life and rule of Mughal emperors for generation after generation in her Taj trilogy. Taj trilogy is incomplete without the history of its captivating Mughal Begams and daring princess. All the women characters are equally valorous and challenging in their prowess. Mehrunissa-empress Nur Jahan the royal wife of Emperor Jahangir; is found to be more powerful and inquisitive than her husband. Mumtaz Mahal the beloved wife of

Emperor Shah Jahan whose tombstone the great Taj Mahal stands as a symbol of love. Jahanara the beloved daughter of Emperor Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal is found to be more powerful and strategic than her father and siblings. For California Literary Review on April 3, 2007, Indusundaresan in an interview with Uma Girish says, that All his work is constructed around female protagonists (except for a couple of short stories) and he always wants to explore in these women the possibilities of stepping beyond society's restrictions and to see then what would happen, how they would react., what would really matter to them.

Shadow Princess is a masterpiece of Indu Sundaresan. It gives a real picture of Mughal life, Shah Jahan's royal palace is filled with impeccable architecture, lavish life of Mughal noble men and women, the multitude of personality traits, feelings and emotions make the book more and more authentic. The novel opens with the death of Arjumand Banu aka Mumtaz Mahal due to her medical complications giving birth to her fourteenth child. Shah Jahan is extremely devastated by her demise. Mumtaz Mahal on her death bed calls out to her eldest daughter Jahanara to promise her that Jahanara shall never desert her father even at the rate of the worst situation. Jahanara is highly sensible and takes everything under her control to maintain serenity. Without Jahanara and her diplomacy Mughal rule must have dwindled in imperial India:

Jahanara stepped back and glanced at him. A regency would also be unwise.....There is no precedent for this Bapa. Would you be willing to allow another man to counsel your son in matters of state? Shah Jahan rubbed the side of his neck thoughtfully. Tell me, how much has this lunacy of mine affected your brothers? Dara... he thinks he will be your choice, as I think also. Shuja goes know yet. Aurangzeb wants to be Emperor, but Bapa he is only thirteen. (63).

Shah Jahan grows more attached towards Jahanara as she is the sole console after the death of Mumtaz Mahal. Shah Jahan endorses Jahanara as the Padshah Begam Sahiba of the royal Mughal palace, which makes Jahanara's sister Roshanara and the first wives of Shah Jahan grow detestation towards Jahanara. Under the care and control of Jahanara Shah Jahan, his kingdom attained full-fledged growth which makes Shah Jahan grow more passionate towards Jahanara and he never allows her to get married. Other reasons are also given by historians for Shah

Jahan's refusal to marry off Jahanara. Along with direct heirs of the Mughal kings their sons in law, are also found to be an equal competitor for the royal throne. The desire for kingship makes heirs grow more ambitious and they fight among themselves. Shah Jahan must have decided not to encourage more competitors after his throne. Indu Sundaresan has done a lot of research before presenting the history of Jahanara in her novel *Shadow Princess*. It is rumoured that Jahanara has a secret lover named Najabat Khan but nowhere in history, it is mentioned. Indu Sundaresan in her interview to "The Hindu" daily states that she has a lot of background work to find everything about Najabat Khan. Najabat Khan is a noble court man who belongs to the scion of Timur the Lame and the kings of Badakhshan. Najabat Khan also belongs to a noble family; therefore, the alliance must have been formed between Jahanara and Najabat Khan. But Shah Jahan never approves both his daughters Jahanara and Roshanara to get married thinking of upcoming repercussions. Jahanara and Roshanara summon men into their chambers for gratification. Indu Sundaresan mentions that Jahanara and Najabat Khan has been in a clandestine relationship with many other people in their later lives yet their love for each other exists even after decades. Indu Sundaresan presents the sensual love between Jahanara and Najabat Khan as they both play a night game called Chaugan and their delightful journey in boat Shikara through Dal Lake on snowy nights. I put together a love story for Jahanara and Najabat Khan in *Shadow Princess* from these three parts of my research- the stray mention of his name; the fact that Jahanara never married; and the gossip from the bazaars about her clandestine affairs! (Zakkir, 2011).

Indu Sundaresan's *Shadow Princess* gives a detailed account of how Jahanara a seventeen-year young girl undergoes an instantaneous transformation after the sudden demise of Mumtaz Mahal. While being the Padsha Begam Sahib to run on the inner court of Shah Jahan and Mughal harem, she takes up all other responsibilities like bringing up her siblings and getting her brothers married to appropriate spouses. In annexing Srinagar under his control Emperor Shah Jahan wages war against King Prithvichand and defeats him. King Prithvichand begs to show some mercy on his kingdom to Princess Jahanara. Jahanara asked her father Emperor Shah Jahan to pardon King Prithvichand. When Prince Aurangzeb took control of Golconda Fort which was ruled by Abdul Qutb Shah, he sent an arz dast

a royal request to Jahanara. Princess Jahanara interceded in this affair and resolved it. Jahanara was one of the royal Mughal princesses to own commercial cargo ships which travel across the red sea. Shah Jahan had an unbreakable trust in Jahanara, as she was the only daughter to whom Shah Jahan made thirty million as a royal income to her:

The fact of Jahanara's life when and where she was born; the income her father gave her; her hold over him and the love he had for her (which led to the speculations about their true relationship, based upon, as far as I can see, some loose bazaar gossip which probably had its origin in harem itself) are readily documented in official court papers and the travelogues of foreign visitors in India. (316).

Jahanara's unfading care and love for her father reaches the zenith when he decides to stay along with her father when he is imprisoned by Emperor Aurangzeb in Agra Fort. Though Aurangzeb offers Jahanara power and positions in his Mughal court she modestly rejects his offer, which shows Jahanara's durable nature. During the period of internment of the deposed emperor, Shah Jahan and his daughter Jahanara never feels despondent; rather they spend happy moments together by recounting childhood stories of Shah Jahan's precedents:

Emperor Jahangir, Emperor Akbar and their families. Jahanara makes Emperor Shah Jahan's imprisonment wrapped with ecstasy which is presented by Indu Sundaresan as follows, you have been good to me, Jahan." He tried to speak again, but the words choked his throat and he cried soundlessly. Jahanara at her arms around him and laid her head lightly on his chest. They stayed like that for a long time, until she heard her father breathing calm into rhythm as he slept. She closed her eyes, willing him to live, knowing that he probably would not. (314).

Jahanara is worried not only about her father but also about the common mob in Emperor Aurangzeb's rule. Emperor Aurangzeb is an orthodox Muslim king who imposes heavy taxes on Hindus. Jahanara is unhappy with Aurangzeb's impartial treatment of his subjects. She tries her level best to make her brother Aurangzeb take back the taxes he levies on Hindus but everything went in vain. This incident shows Jahanara as an impartial princess towards her Hindu and Muslim subjects which makes her a great stateswoman.

Indu Sundaresan has presented various other historical perspectives in her novel *Shadow Princess*, which are found to be very analogous along with other historical accounts of Emperor Shah Jahan and Emperor Aurangzeb. The hatred between Aurangzeb and his elder brother Dara Shikoh which is fueled by their father Shah Jahan himself can be taken as one of the instances to prove the historic authenticity of *Shadow Princess*. Both according to the novel as well as the history sibling's dispute for the throne has been evident throughout generations after generations. Shah Jahan, of course, has favourites among his children and he never treats them all equal which is the first reason for fight among royal siblings.

Shah Jahan is so fond of Jahanara and Dara Shikoh whereas other children receive only lesser love and power from Shah Jahan. Aurangzeb is more victimized because of this unfair treatment, which led him to turn him rebellious. When Dara Shikoh and Aurangzeb are about to start a war for Shah Jahan's throne, Shah Jahan blindly supports his favourite Dara Shikoh. Jahanara, the then Padsha Begam Sahiba of Mughal harem is also in favour of her father's decision. Jahanara's wit drives her to endorse Aurangzeb as more befitting to be Shah Jahan's successor but Jahanara's heart always reminds her to be more loyal and constant support to her father. Therefore, Jahanara is also in support of Dara Shikoh. As per history which is reconstructed in *Shadow Princess*, Aurangzeb defeats his brother Dara Shikoh and seizes the kingship from Shah Jahan.

Apart from her extensive research work, Indu Sundaresan tries to highlight only a few characters in her novel *Shadow Princess*, which makes other characters look bland. In order to swank more about protagonist Jahanara, Indu Sundaresan presents Jahanara's younger sister Roshanara to be malicious and makes Roshanara be politically dull. Indu Sundaresan's Roshanara at some point is contradictory to Roshanara in history. Roshanara plays a key role in the political history of Mughal India. She is found to be an ardent supporter of Aurangzeb in capturing the Mughal throne from Shah Jahan. Roshanara and Aurangzeb face partial treatment of their father which develops hatred towards Jahanara by the former and towards Dara Shikoh by the latter. Roshanara is the mastermind behind Aurangzeb's plan of action. Even though Aurangzeb stands against Emperor Shah Jahan and Jahanara the Padsha Begam Sahiba, Roshanara sides

with Aurangzeb and makes him the successor. Emperor Shah Jahan along with Jahanara and Dara Shikoh plans to assassinate Aurangzeb, as they feel Aurangzeb be the major threat to the throne. So, they invite Aurangzeb over to Delhi to resolve the familial crisis. Roshanara is well aware of Shah Jahan's treacherous plan to kill Aurangzeb, she warns her brother to be careful and stay away from Delhi to escape from their father's murderous plan. Aurangzeb is so thankful for the timely help of Roshanara. When he becomes the king he makes Roshanara an influential and powerful political member. Roshanara is so keen on making Aurangzeb to destroy his nemeses. Therefore, Roshanara makes Aurangzeb behead Dara Shikoh and presents Dara Shikoh's lifeless head to her father Shah Jahan. Roshanara is the successor of Jahanara and becomes Padsha Begam Sahiba during the reign of Aurangzeb. Aurangzeb is too displeased with Jahanara as she sides with Shah Jahan and Dara Shikoh. Jahanara is made to step out of all her powerful positions and she is replaced with Roshanara. Indu Sundaresan has presented Roshanara to be a sidekick rather she is a kingmaker and political game-changer:

Roshanara was regarded as the most powerful and superior women in the empire. She was also granted the right to issue farmans and nishans. This exceptional privilege was allowed only to those who held the best and highest rank in the imperial harem. She was appointed as Mansabdar, a high-ranking position in the emperor's army that was used to enforce his rule and maintain his authority, especially during his absence. (Roshanara Begam – np).

Indu Sundaresan has strictly followed the timeline throughout her Taj trilogy. The first two novels *The Twentieth Wife* and *The Feast of Roses* strictly adhere to historical events in accordance with timeline. Whereas *Shadow Princess* subtly skips a generation and moves on to narrate the story of princess Jahanara. Indu Sundaresan purposefully skips the phenomenal love story of Emperor Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal as she may have felt that their story is immortalized in history and literature. Beyond every other facet, the great monument Taj Mahal itself is found to be a symbol of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal's endearment. In *Shadow Princess*, Indu Sundaresan gives a great account of dates and years. Every chapter is specified with dates in which the incident takes place makes the readers and

critics cherish the novel's genuineness. In one of the chapters in *Shadow Princess*, Indu Sundareshan gives a detailed account of the construction of the Taj Mahal. This particular chapter gives a vivid visualization of how every brick is laid upon into a stunning world wonder.

In *Shadow Princess*, Indu Sundareshan celebrates Princess Jahanara. In her first two books of the trilogy, she details the life of Mehrunnisa aka Nur Jahan who is a familiar historical personality. According to the title given by Indu Sundareshan, Jahanara was quite unfamiliar to the common mob. Jahanara is shadowed in the books of Mughal Indian history. Jahanara breaks all the conventional clutches that binds Mughal women who have lost themselves under their veil. Jahanara's bold and daring anti-conventional attitude may be one of the reasons which never allows her to be praised in the history written by men. Jahanara is the one who never left her father Shah Jahan's sight to the very end of his life. She deliberately dedicates nine years of her life in confinement to serving her father. On January 31, 1666, Shah Jahan becomes bedridden. As per the wish, Jahanara is the one to be near her father when he dies. When the noblemen of the Mughal court never approve to her father's funeral, Jahanara contravenes the policies being laid upon women. Jahanara comes out of her veil, escorts Shah Jahan's dead body and attended her father's funeral. This is presented as follows. They hesitated when the veiled princess followed them and one of the men began to protest, but her stride was firm, her attitude inflexible- Jahanara meant to bury her father herself; she earned the right to do (*Shadow Princess* 316).

To fulfill Shah Jahan's last wish his dead body is taken to the Taj Mahal to be buried near his wife Mumtaz Mahal. Jahanara stood near the corner pillar to send off her deceased father. When Shah Jahan is placed into the pit Jahanara moved forward to toss a handful of sand over him. These actions of Jahanara are unimaginable by other Mughal royal women. Jahanara herself voices out her actions in the novel "You are with Mama now Bapa," She whispered, then moves back to her place as the gravediggers piled mud over the grave and laid a white marble slab on top of it." (316). Jahanara's life is not quite simple as the life of other princesses. Jahanara's entire life has been decided at the age of seventeen. She has no choice but just to adhere to the flow of her life. Unlike her father and brother, Jahanara never uses her power in a corrupted way rather she spends her

power in favour of common people. She has sponsored for construction of various architectural sites and bazaars. Jahanara's Architectural vision is replicated in her construction of Delhi's infamous Chandni Chowk. To sum up, *Shadow Princess* leaves behind the readers with a great mix of Mughal history, architecture, love, food, luxury, lavishness, clandestine, policies, taxations, Harems, Zenena, siblings dispute, betrayal, confinement, unconventional attitudes and of course Jahanara's staunch, selfless yet powerful political life. Every aspect in *Shadow Princess* can be brought and examined under the historical lens and provide an exemplary example for perfect historical reconstruction.

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