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INDU SUNDERESAN'S *THE TWENTIETH WIFE*: A ROMANCE WITH HISTORY.



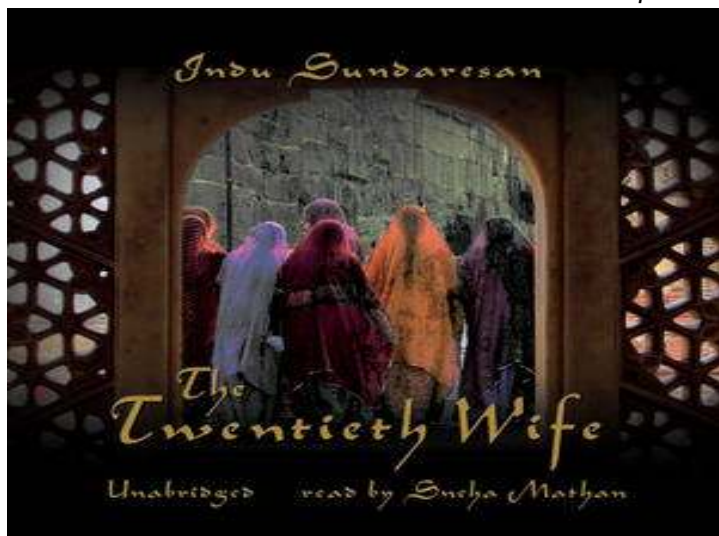
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ABSTRACT

The girl sat on the edge of a goldfish pond, her feet dangling in the water. It was a heat-smothered day, but the courtyard was cool. The stone floor was chilled by a running stream of water underneath, falling into pools dispersed artistically around the courtyard. Lotus flowers and lilies bloomed white and red in the reservoirs, and huge banyan trees provided shade. The hush was broken by the soothing drone of bees and the musical tinkle of water rushing through the channels." (Sunderesan, *The Twentieth Wife* 56)

KEYWORDS : *The Twentieth Wife*, historical detail, political tension.



INTRODUCTION :

The above lines are a beautiful example of how Indu Sundaresan's debut novel, *The Twentieth Wife*, soars through time with historical detail, political tension and, throughout, a nearly unrequited love story. Political power, social customs and court life in the Mughal Empire are rendered with the sense of the poet and the eye of the researcher. Not only is the reader treated to lyrical descriptions of sight, smell, texture, and sounds of the time, but also to authentic historical and social details. Lush

landscapes, brilliant silk and muslin clothing, the scents of an evening grilled meal, and floral trees blowing in the breeze all bring the dusty and nearly forgotten story of a woman - without whom there may be no Taj Mahal - to life.

The Twentieth Wife, Indu Sundaresan's story of Mehrunnisa, the Persian refugee who became Empress of India during the Mughal Empire, is above all a tale of ambition. Mehrunnisa spies Prince Salim, the prince who will one day be Emperor, when she is eight years old. Despite her age, she is determined to marry him one day; she's ambitious even before she understands what she wants. The ideas of a young girl are conveyed as:

What bliss to be in the emperor's harem, to be at the court? How she wished she could have been born a princess. Then she would marry a prince – perhaps even Salim. (Sunderesan, *The Twentieth Wife* 21)

These lines exactly predict the condition of a girl who is completely bedazzled by the glamour of the court of the Mughal prince. At a tender age of eight when she is informed of the wedlock about to take place between the prince and a beautiful princess, she insists to accompany her parents to the event. Ghas and Asmat couldn't refrain and allow their daughter to come along with them. The little girl, unlike any other young girl of the same age, does not think of any festivities, delicacies she would get to eat but immediately thinks about the power associated with the position. "EMPRESS OF HINDUSTAN" a title which has glamour and power attached to it, appeals to her. She forms her first impression from her father who narrates the stories at home.

Bapa came home with stories about his day, little tidbits about Emperor Akbar's rulings, about the zenana women hidden behind a screen as they watched the court proceedings, sometimes in silence and sometimes calling out a joke or a comment in a musical voice. The Emperor always listened to them, always turned his head to the screen to hear what they had to say. (Sunderesan, *The Twentieth Wife* 27)

The importance given to the empresses by the almighty emperor fascinated Mehrunnisa the most. Right from childhood she wanted to be in the centre of all activity. And thus the mind imagining what fun it would be to be a princess and marry a prince or for that matter prince Salim himself. The time the idea crops up in her brain, she herself is not aware of the implications. The daughter of a petty employee of the emperor, a man who was at mercy of king Akbar, there was hardly any chance of any kind of faceoff between these two, leave aside the marriage happening. The reader cannot estimate that a young child who was just there to witness the union the prince and the princess could at any time of the day could share a connect.

Mehrunnisa blinked rapidly to adjust her eyes to the blinding sunshine in the Diwan-i-am and gazed at the figure seated on the throne at the far end. Akbar was dressed in his magnificent robes of the state, the jewels on his turban glittering as he nodded graciously to his ministers. The emperor's eyes were suspiciously bright when he looked at his son.

Mehrunnisa shifted her gaze to Prince Salim and held her breath. From here she could only see him in profile. He held himself with grace, shoulders squared, feet planted firmly apart, right hand on the jewelled dagger tucked into his cummerbund. (Sunderesan, *The Twentieth Wife* 29)

The little girl is determined to see the prince at that tender age that she even goes to the heights of breaking the existing rule of standing behind the concubines, and ventures right at the front to be bedazzled by the aura and the glamour of the court, however she is reprimanded for the same and is spared the horror only by the intervention of the Padshah begum of the harem. She gets scared but is also determined about what position she will be looking for in the future. She leaves her mark on the empress by the way she conducts herself in the court during the wedding, and by the conversation she has with the empress. The empress commands her presence in the court:

As they were leaving, Ruqayya said, without looking in their direction," the child amuses me. Bring her to wait upon me soon.".....a few days later, Ruqayya sent an imperial summons commanding Mehrunnisa's presence at the royal zenana. (Sunderesan, *The Twentieth Wife* 31)

This is how knowingly or unknowingly a timid little girl steps into the world of her dreams, or the world where her dreams are to take form and also to materialize. She now becomes a permanent member of the royal harem, a prime witness to the games and politics being played there on the day to day basis, how the concubines and the begums are always at loggerheads with each other to be the primary focus of Emperor Akbar. She observes all the skirmishes live and thus knows how to deal with them later on.

The second chapter begins with lines from *A Dutch Chronicle Of Mughal India* talking about the

love Mehrunnisa has for Ruqayya Begum.

....Mehrunnisa began to look forward to these visits with Akbar's favourite wife. She was fascinated by Ruqayya's chameleonic moods, her calm and quiet, her fiery rages. She was fascinated too by how important she was and thrilled that Ruqayya found her interesting. (Sunderesan, *The Twentieth Wife* 36)

There is something unusual in the little girl as if she is actually destined for the royal Mughal Empire only and it does not go unnoticed from the seasoned eyes of the Padshah begum. Mehrunnisa is mesmerized by the authority that the Padshah Begum has over all the other concubines and the begums of the emperor. Ruqayya is the one to whom Akbar turns for mental relief and shares all the minutes of the empire, friends and foes and seeks her advice on all the important affairs of the state. It is Ruqayya begum who motivates the emperor to start giving allowances to the concubines and the begums and also some provinces so that they can be financially independent and will be answerable to the development and well being of their territories. Within the confinement of the harem the women are more emaciated than they are outside it. And the Padshah Begum has a very important role to play in it. She is the richest of all the Mughal ladies, and she deserves to be, she even has the Portuguese and the Dutch give her royalties on the trade conducted in her territory. Mehrunnisa carefully observes it all and absorbs it all as if training to be the next on the seat. To be on the seat only to observe the one sitting on it was not sufficient, it is essential to have eyes out for the one who will finally lead her to the pedestal. Mehrunnisa had the glimpse of the prince at the day of his wedding, it is a very far-fetched image and she cannot make out much of it. The second and a very close encounter is soon to happen. She is there in the zenana with only one desire and that is to look at prince Salim.

One day, as Mehrunnisa ran back to the zenana gates after spending time with the empress, she entered the grounds of an adjoining palace by mistake.....Mehrunnisa looked around and tried to retrace green even in the heat, the bougainvillea vines drooping with watermelon-coloured flowers.....Even as she stood there a man came into the courtyard carrying a silver casket. He was dressed simply in white: a loose Karta and pyjama, his feet in leather sandals. Mehrunnisa straightened from the pillar and started to call out to him. Then she drew back. It was Prince Salim. She slid down behind the pillar and peeped around it. Why was he alone, without attendants? (Sunderesan, *The Twentieth Wife* 36)

This was the first visual Mehrunnisa remembers of prince Salim, and she cherishes it for time immemorial; an innocent looking man feeding the pigeons. He always turns to the pigeons whenever he needs recluse, peace and quiet. The little girl is mesmerized and stands there quietly behind a pillar absorbing the image and the figure of prince Salim, for whom she has been looking for the day she steeped in the zenana. The fascination has now given place to infatuation. The little girl now has some seedling aspirations and is looking forward to their fulfilment, but she herself is not aware of them. This very chapter also marks the entry of a very important character of the "Salim story", that is the vigil, strong, shrewd and smart eunuch of the emperor, Hoshiyar khan.

Hoshiyar khan was the head eunuch of Salim's zenana, the most important man in it other than the prince. It was he who ran the harem with metronomic efficiency, settling squabbles between the various women: wives, concubines, slaves, maids, cooks. He also doled out their allowances and advised them on their investments. (Sunderesan, *The Twentieth Wife* 54)

Hoshiyar Khan is the one who monitors and controls the harem of Salim. The bitching, fighting, jostling for the undeterred attention of the prince, is all controlled by Hoshiyar khan. He is the one who spots Mehrunnisa standing behind the pillar of the mardana, and can be agreed upon on the basis of the facts displayed that he is also the one who very promptly observes and could make out the feeling of

Mehrunnisa for the prince. He at that moment sternly deals with Mehrunnisa

'What are you doing here? A hand caught Mehrunnisa by the shoulder and spun her around. Mehrunnisa stood up and dusted off her Ghaghara, lifting her face to meet the gaze of the eunuch....she argues, too. I find her making moon eyes at prince Salim and she tells me she was lost.' (Sunderesan, *The Twentieth Wife* 38)

"Moon eyes", the phrase used by the eunuch itself is the indication of the fact that Hoshiyar Khan notices the love lost expression in the eyes of Mehrunnisa. He is surprised by the obstinacy with which the young girl replies, completely oblivious to the status and position of the one she is talking to. The girl does not fail to surprise the eunuch. Mehrunnisa that day itself realises the importance of this man to prince Salim, and she has plans of her own.

She is a headstrong, mischievous girl, who does not refrain from entering into the area restricted for the girls. She even goes into the nashakhana with her brother who later blackmails her to get his work done.

"And I will tell Bapa that you went with Mehrunnisa three nights ago. Dressed as a man, with kohl- painted moustache and got drunk on three sips of wine. That I had to carry you home early. That my friends still ask after the pale face youth who has such a weak stomach that "he" puts even a baby to shame." (Sunderesan, *The Twentieth Wife* 39)

These lines are spoken by Abul the elder brother of Mehrunnisa is the one who accompanied her to the nashakhana, a completely prohibited area for girls, leave alone girls of good families. But here one can see the veil clad girl daring and dressing up as a male and leaving the secure premises of the home to accompany her brother and go visit the nashakhana. It provides the glimpse of the childhood of the queen to be. Right from the childhood she is ready to go out and explore the unexplored areas. She does not believe in following the dictates of the society. Through the expression of the novelist, readers can very well form the impression of a liberated and free spirited young girl. She handles the jibes for her behaviour without being perturbed. The personality of a person does not alter it remains the same, and so the queen she goes on to become, completely fearless, following her mind without being influenced and venturing into the untreaded path.

On the other hand Salim is already ready for the second marriage with the princess Jagat Gosini. Mehrunnisa was getting ready to be a part of this royal marriage, when she is interrupted by her brother with this threat or blackmail. Her brother also succeeds to some extent in gazing the heartfelt desires of his sister. He can sense the disturbance of his sister on the occasion of the prince remarrying. He also knows that his sister is working in the palace only because she wants to get hold of the prince's attention, which she has failed to muster till now.

'That is ...I mean...if I wanted to marry him what would stop us.' (Sunderesan, *The Twentieth Wife* 41)

These are her words when her brother teases her regarding her desire to be the Mallika of Hindustan one day. She is very determined and readily answers back. By this time her desire to be the queen of queens is very audaciously visible, so much so that even her not so grown up brother can also feel it. However this is all to halt as the emperor has some other designs for her father in mind. Ghias is sent to Kabul with family to take care of the trade going on there. He is sent away from court and is called back later when the emperor himself is very pleased and satisfied by his services. By the time there has been an inconsolable tussle between the father and the son that is prince Salim and Akbar. Salim resented the long and healthy life his father was leading as the same is hindering his progress towards the throne, he is a grown up man and has sons now, but Akbar is not in the slightest way bending towards passing on the throne to his immediate heir. Akbar mistakenly believes that the

ambition of his son to become the emperor had driven him to the extent of trying to poison his father. Salim never dreamt of doing so.

It is during these rifts and differences that the family of Ghias is called back to the capital, his family has also grown in the last four years. The girls have continued with their education, the boys are well trained now in all sorts of things and weaponry, and Mehrunnisa who is now 16 years old, looks beautiful.

Mehrunnisa –ah she was now sixteen and seemed to live up to her name, Ghias thought. Sun amongst women- she was a beautiful child, physically as well as in spirit.....her smile, her laughter, the mischievous glint in her blue eyes filled Ghias with a paternal contentment. If it were socially acceptable to have a daughter live at home all her life, Ghias would choose Mehrunnisa to be with him without hesitation. (Sunderesan, *The Twentieth Wife* 58)

Soon after they arrive in the capital Asmat and Mehrunnisa are called upon by the empress to wait upon her, and so Mehrunnisa gets back to the place she wants to be most at. In the last four years things have changed drastically at the court also. The drift between the emperor and his son have lead the emperor to order the son of Prince Salim and Princess Jagat Gossini to be placed in the custody of Ruqayya Begum. The rules formulated to meet the Prince are so strict that the mother and the father can visit him only once a week. Once in the harem Mehrunnisa becomes aware of the tiny toddler, who addresses Ruqayya as mother. This kid is responsible for the full throttle encounter between Mehrunnisa and Prince Salim. A new character is also introduced in the chapter named Ali Quli Khan who is the emperor of Istajlu. He is also of Persian decent like Ghias Be, he is a brave commander and has distinguished himself in various battles, Akbar has designs for him and wants to tie him and provide a stable ground for him. Settling a warrior can be done by providing him a wife. So Akbar starts looking for a suitable marriage proposal and on the suggestion of his better half, Ruqayya begum, he informs Ghias Beg that his girl is chosen for a perfect boy. Mehrunnisa finds her first life partner the crude and the brute Ali Quli. Asmat, the mother of Mehrunnisa is not open and disagreed to this decision-

'But a common soldier, Ghias,' Asmat protested. 'What would he know of the classics and poetry and music? Would he be the right choice for a daughter we have so carefully reared, one who is so proficient in the literary arts, so well educated and so....delicate?'

....Listen to yourself, Ghias. Is this what we wanted for Mehrunnisa? Is this what we have talked about? Are you so blind to your daughter's needs that you cannot see this will not be a good alliance? It is your responsibility to make sure she is happy?' (Sunderesan, *The Twentieth Wife* 74)

These are the doubts that a concerned mother has but Ghias turns a blind eye to them all because it is the emperor's wish, and his wish is Ghias's command. He is indebted to the emperor for providing to their needs in times they were all desolate, they were taken in and given shelter by this very emperor and so Ghias can under no circumstance defy the emperor. So he moves forward with the preparations of the upcoming wedding.

The engagement ceremony is a formal event where Mehrunnisa just sat through the whole event without even once glancing at the bridegroom or her father. And Ghias is seen avoiding making eye contact with his daughter. The formal tie up is finally concluded and Mehrunnisa now committed to a man for life. As she continues to visit the harem, it is here that the fateful instance happens: prince Salim for the first time catches the glimpse of Mehrunnisa. The writer has portrayed the whole incident beautifully, bringing it live in front of the readers eyes with her pictorial language. The narration makes it come alive in front of the readers;

He caught the flutter of white muslin through the corner of his eye and stopped short, lifting his head for a better look.

Ya Allah! Was he in Paradise? Words from the holy book came unbidden to his mind: the believers shall find themselves reclining upon couches lined with brocade, the fruits of the garden night to gather; and will therein maidens restraining their glances, untouched before them by any man or Jinn, lovely as rubies, beautiful as coral.'

She was all that and more. He stared at her, his gaze riveted, everything else fading around her. (Sunderesan, *The Twentieth Wife* 81)

The beauty of Mehrunnisa has been given new dimensions in the lines by the author. No where earlier has the beauty been discussed with this propensity in the novel. Picture perfect or an angle descended from Paradise above can be the apt words for the beauty of Mehrunnisa as felt by the prince. The readers are acquainted here with the enchanting looks of Mehrunnisa. The first impression is the result of the perfect combination of beautiful serene features and lovely complexion that she has.

It is the first encounter between the Prince and Mehrunnisa. The Prince initiates a dialogue at this point which completely surprises Mehrunnisa, as she is in a deep reverie, Mehrunnisa also shows off her mental strength and fearlessness as she back answers the Princess Jagat Gossini, right in front of the Prince and leaves the place, however leaving the prince completely mesmerized. The meeting ignites the hidden sparks in Mehrunnisa for the Prince and also leaves the Prince desirous of more meetings. The images of their first encounter forever fresh in their minds. Mehrunnisa could always recall the first glimpse of the prince:

There was an aura of royalty around him. It was there in his rich silk qaba embroidered with rubies, the thick rope of precious white pearls around his neck, the gorgeous airgrette with an emerald on his turban, the diamonds on his fingers and the buckles of his shoes-all as glorious as the sun that shone upon them in the courtyard. And more than that, Mehrunnisa thought, was Salim's princely bearing. His tone, his manner, had been gentle and polite. (Sunderesan, *The Twentieth Wife* 86)

The following chapter has the Prince and the girl thinking about each other, one more fateful meeting between the two, which happens only accidentally and leaves the prince all the more desirous of the mysterious girl. The prince inquires of the royal eunuch Hoshiyar Khan for the whereabouts of the girl and is made aware of the fact that she is the waiting girl of the empress and visits the empress, thereafter there is romantic and physical encounter between the prince and Mehrunnisa which leaves both of them in want of more. The prince leaves the harem with a promise that he would ask his father to arrange matrimony for them, the prince is very sure as it will not be a problem for the emperor to revert the engagement:

You will come to me soon, Mehrunnisa. I know your father is Mirza Ghias Beg. I will ask the emperor to send a formal proposal to your house tomorrow-no today.' (Sunderesan, *The Twentieth Wife* 101)

The prince however has no idea to what extent has he hurt his father, by trying to poison him, the emperor refuses to grant his wish, or rather does not give his son importance over the faithful, brave Persian soldier, Ali Quli Mirza, who he thought was appropriate to marry Mehrunnisa. The estrangement between the father and the son is known to the people of the court and also to Mehrunnisa; she is not much hopeful of the union and even tries to dissuade the Prince. Akbar is summoned to the quarters of Ruqayya Begum, and Salim also steps in trying to coerce his father to agree to the union. But as is evident the emperor cannot get himself to forgive his son for his misdemeanour, and cannot bring himself together to agree to his demand, he refuses out rightly saying that he cannot revert the command once he has given it.

'No, Salim. The engagement took place by our command and we shall not break our word.' Akbar turned away from his son as he spoke.

Salim knew he was dismissed. He rose slowly, bowed to his father and walked out of the room on leaden feet. (Sunderesan, *The Twentieth Wife* 103)

With this the hope of a union between Mehrunnisa and Salim vanishes. As time passes the development is shown in the story. The readers are made aware of the happenings at the court as well as the life of Mehrunnisa. After five years of marriage Mehrunnisa fails to yield any child to Ali Quli and knows the fact that his husband is going astray with other women of the house, even more insulting fact is that it is with the maids. They do not share a healthy relationship as her parents. Her husband is out on most of the occasions and when at home is busy troubling her than loving her. But she has reconciled with her fate as she thinks and consoles herself with the words:

He was not a bad man, Mehrunnisa thought. He did not beat her, was not openly cruel to her as other women's husbands were, as if their wives were dogs, unclean, untouchable, fit only for the most carnal satisfaction. This pain Ali Quli did not give her but his silences were almost more painful. It was as though he did not care. (Sunderesan, *The Twentieth Wife* 109)

The development with prince Salim's life comes next, he is busy plotting against his father under the guidance of his trustworthy assistants. Two of his brothers have died, first Murad and then Daniyal, both due to excessive drinking. And Salim is sent to Udaipur to conquer the territories in Rajasthan, as Rana Pratap has died and the Rajput clan have no one to guide them now. Mehrunnisa's husband is also put under the command of Salim. Ali Quli here earns the title of Sher- Afghan, meaning tiger slayer. He saves the life of Prince Salim by pouncing upon the tigress as it is about to kill Prince Salim. As a token of gratitude Salim gives him the title of Sher-Afghan. He becomes a trusted soldier of the prince. Here on, after leading a victorious campaign, Salim decides to march towards Agra to capture the royal treasury. Everything is favourable and he is on the brink of fulfilling his ambition when he is notified that the Dowager empress Dowager Empress Maryam Makani, is in the fortress. He does not have the courage to visit his grandmother when he is in revolt with his father as he confesses that he can be turned into a small child by one loud shout by his grandmother. He leaves the premises but the news does reach the emperor's ears, Salim continues to rebel as he refuses to disband the army when the emperor commands. To consult as to what should be done Akbar calls upon his most trusted advisor Abul Fazal. He has been shown as the trusted confidant of Akbar, a friend he holds very close and dear. Akbar has entrusted him with the responsibility of writing down his biography to Abul Fazal. He happens to be the teacher and councillor of Salim also, but Salim believes that to a certain extent Abul Fazal is responsible for the crooked relationship the father and son share. The hatred builds on and he decides to get the man assassinated. Abul Fazal is murdered on the dictates of Salim. He was Akbar's confederate and Akbar breaks down when he loses him, all the more when he is made aware that it is schemed by Salim. Akbar raised a trembling hand and wiped his tears. His soldiers had found Fazl's beheaded body under a tree. The minister was not even allowed to die with dignity. Now his spies told him that the head had been sent to Salim. How could his son cold-heartedly murder his father's friend? Rebellion was one thing, but murder.... (Sunderesan, *The Twentieth Wife* 158)

Akbar suffers the greatest loss of his life time, as Abul Fazl was his life, the one who was writing the biography for him, had been his lifelong companion, his son's mentor and also his guide in the tough times. This treachery of Salim hurts Akbar very badly. The dear son of Akbar whom he had begot after a long wait, with the blessings of Shiekh Salim Chisti and he nicknamed him Sheikhu Baba, the dear son of him is showing true colours at this time of age when his father really needs him, this thought is time and again tormenting the emperor. At this time Akbar resorts to none other than his lifelong consort Ruquyya begum and Salima begum. Both the ladies comfort him and console him to their utmost capacity. They realise once again what their life partner needs most at this time and so the two women

go about setting the world of Akbar right, by moving towards Allahabad as Akbar wants to see his son now. The father and the son meet after a gap of three years and in front of the whole Darbar Akbar hugs his son and places his sovereign turban on his son's head, making and naming him the heir apparent. The incident of Akbar crowning Jahangir is repeated twice. When first given the turban the Prince returns it and goes back to serving the emperor's command, second time he is presented with the crown when he returns from his trip and this time Akbar's health is not good, it was continuously deteriorating. Finally on his death bed he makes the prince his heir.

The decision of announcing the heir is influenced by the developing enmity between the son and grandson of Akbar. Khusrau the eldest son of Salim is seen claiming the position of the king. Irritated by this constant tension between them Akbar commands them to set up an elephant fight in the main courtyard of the Lal Qila. The fight makes it very clear and obvious that the rift between the two is widening and if allowed to grow it would lead to a civil war in the country. Akbar is not ready for his empire to be plagued down by the rivalry between his son and grandson, and so he passes on his throne and his sceptre to his only son alive and his rightful heir Salim. Salim is with his father when he was breathing his last; he feels the void that his father leaves in his life. Taking care of such a huge empire is not a child's play' it requires a lot of energy and concentration. Meanwhile Mehrunnisa is also in Bengal with her husband who is planning to take part in the rebellion to be led by Khusrau, hoping that a young king will be very easy to control. He goes along with the armies of Khusrau, but they are crushed and the whole army is punished brutally by the emperor and the Prince is held captive. However the prince escapes again and plans an assassination of the emperor, this really agitates Salim. He decides to punish Khusrau in a way that it becomes an example for posterity. After much thought and deliberation he blinds him and puts him in confinement along with his wife.

Seated on the throne comfortably, the emperor moves to the personal front. He promotes Mirza Ghias Beg to the post of the diwan of the court and also honours him by asking the hand of his granddaughter Arjumand, who happens to be the niece of Mehrunnisa, for his son Khurram. During the engagement ceremony he has a brief encounter with Mehrunnisa and gets nostalgic about the brief encounter they had before his marriage. The situation has however changed as the eldest brother of Mehrunnisa is given the life sentence for plotting against the emperor, and her husband Ali Quli has killed the governor of Bengal, both of these being authority defying acts from the close associates of Mehrunnisa. These incidents are stalling the emperor from approaching her again. Whenever he mentions the name of Mehrunnisa, people near him, like Mahabat Khan and his wife Jagat Gossini, remind him of the deeds that have happened in the past. Mehrunnisa is blessed with a baby girl after many miscarriages who she calls Ladli. Salim has taken two more wives with the passage of time, but with political reasons. He commands that Mehrunnisa be summoned to the court from Bengal where he is recruited, but Ali Quli refuses and is later killed in retaliation by the forces for the murder of their leader, governor Khoka. Mehrunnisa is hidden by the faithful people of the king for 6 months and then brought to his father's place, in Agra, where she is called upon to wait upon the Dowager empress Ruqayya begum. The Padshah begum is Jagat Gossini, who is the closest to the emperor now.

Ruqayya begum purposely sends Mehrunnisa to the prince so that he will take note of the girl once again. It is in the meena bazaar that the emperor sees her and with due permission of the mother he takes her around the bazaar. The visits continue not in the harem but at the house of Mirza Ghias Beg. When the emperor asks Mehrunnisa to come to harem she refuses to come there as his concubine, and then Jahangir (the self given title) decides that it is high time that she comes down to the zenana as the wife of the emperor. Despite all the efforts put in by the empress and Hoshiyar Khan, she comes into the zennana and that also as the most beloved and sought after queen of Jahangir. On

the day of the marriage she is also given a title:

'I have an announcement to make.' He glanced down at her. 'From today, my beloved Empress shall be given the title Nur Jahan.' (Sunderesan, *The Twentieth Wife*)

Nur Jahan meaning "light of the world", a brilliant title for the woman he loves. Mehrunnisa is overwhelmed with pride, the emperor has already given her so much, a separate courtyard, a bathtub and now this beautiful title, and it is far more than what she deserves.

Together, Jahangir and she would make the Mughal empire the brightest and most brilliant in the world. She wanted to do this for the man she loved so deeply, because this was what he wanted. And Nur Jahan thought-already at ease with her new title-she wanted to be the force to reckon with behind the throne.

She wanted to be the power behind the veil. (Sunderesan, *The Twentieth Wife* 372)

As the name suggests the novel ends with Mehrunnisa becoming the twentieth wife of Jahangir. The first to the last encounter have been discussed in the minutest of the detail. The birth of the girl and the boy, their lives and the happenings, have been dealt with simultaneously. The novel has twenty chapters and keeps the interest alive till the end and when complete leaves one yearning for more.

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