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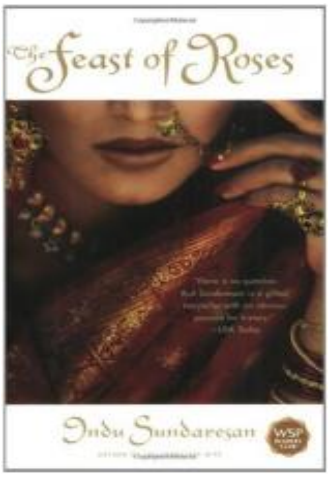
The Feast of Roses: A Novel

by Indu Sundaresan



About the Book

The love story of Emperor Jahangir and Mehrunnisa, begun in the critically praised debut novel **The Twentieth Wife**, continues in Indu Sundaresan's **The Feast of Roses**. This lush new novel tells the story behind one of the great tributes to romantic love and one of the seven wonders of the world -- the Taj Mahal.

Mehrunnisa, better known as Empress Nur Jahan, comes into Jahangir's harem as his twentieth and last wife. Almost from the beginning of her royal life she fits none of the established norms of womanhood in seventeenth-century India.

Mehrunnisa is the first woman Jahangir marries for love, at the "old" age of thirty-four. He loves her so deeply that he eventually transfers his powers of sovereignty to her.

Power and wealth do not come easily to Mehrunnisa -- she has to fight for them. She has a formidable rival in the imperial harem, Empress Jagat Gosini, who has schemed and plotted against Mehrunnisa from early on. Mehrunnisa's problems do not just lie within the harem walls, but at court, too, as she battles powerful ministers for supremacy. These ministers, who have long had Emperor Jahangir's confidence and trust, consider Mehrunnisa a mere woman who cannot have a voice in the outside world.

Mehrunnisa combats all of this by forming a *junta* of sorts with three men she can rely on -- her father, her brother, and Jahangir's son Prince Khurram. She demonstrates great strength of character and cunning to get what she wants, sometimes at a cost of personal sorrow when she almost loses her daughter's love. But she never loses the love of the man who bestows this power upon her -- Emperor Jahangir. **The Feast of Roses** is a tale of this power and love, the story of power behind a veil.

Discussion Guide

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?

Author Bio

Indu Sundaresan, born and raised in India, came to the United States for graduate school. Trained as an economist, her short fiction has appeared in *The Vincent Brothers Review* and on iVillage.com. She lives in the Seattle, Washington, area.

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Publication Date: May 18, 2004
Paperback: 416 pages
Publisher: Washington Square Press
ISBN-10: 0743456416
ISBN-13: 9780743456418