



## Empress by Ruby Lal review - the rise and reign of a self-made Mughal queen

A compelling feminist historiography of the 20th wife of the Mughal emperor Jahangir

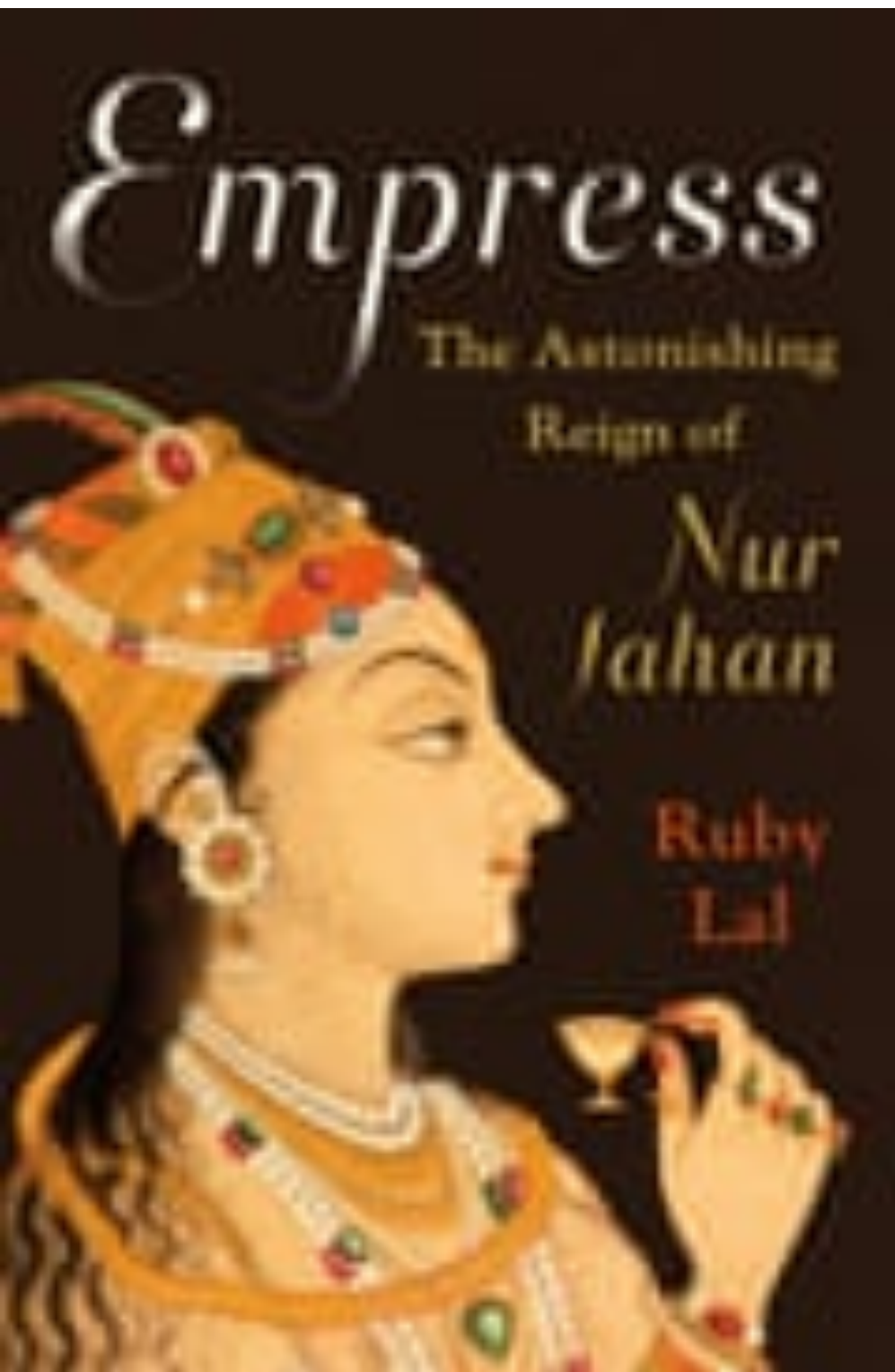
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“Jahangir’s course is directed by a woeman and is now, as it were, shut up by her so that all justice or care of anything or publique affayres either sleeps or depends on her, who is most unaccessible than any goddesse or mistery of heathen impietye.” So wrote in 1617 the disgruntled Thomas Roe, then British ambassador to the Mughal court, of the influence of the emperor’s 20th wife, Nur Jahan. Men everywhere, it seems, were threatened by the rise and reign of women, their racism and misogyny tied together in knots.

It is the disentanglement of some of these that Ruby Lal attempts in *Empress*, a luminous biography of a woman dabbed out of history, first by vengeful successors to her husband, the emperor Jahangir, then by colonialist historians and ultimately bynationalists who wanted to write their own history of the empire. What Lal presents is the story of a woman from the imperial

harem without the usual obsession with the harem as a realm of cheap erotic associations. It is a captivating account, its depth of detail recreating a world whose constraints of lineage would seem to preclude the advance of an unknown, self-made, widowed queen. Nur Jehan was born Mihr-un-Nisa to noble but refugee parents, Asmat and Ghias, who fled Iran following Ghias's fall from favour in the court there. It was a hurried exit; the two and their retinue had to join a commercial caravan despite the fact that Asmat was visibly pregnant. The baby, the intrepid empress-to-be, was born by the side of the road, near the town of Kandahar, her birth "a moment of pleasure to the caravan community amid the hardships of the road".



Propelled by the optimism and ambition that is such a part of migration, then and now, Ghias and Asmat managed to make good in their new home. Their noble Persian lineage and the connection of a cousin led them, in just a few years, into courtly circles. The Mughal monarch at the time was Akbar, the second of the Four Great Mughals; a man deeply committed to exemplifying a religious and cultural cosmopolitanism unparalleled in the era. Lal translates what this meant for those raising daughters within the ambit of the court. Girls of nobility were not educated in the traditional sense, but were well taught in lore and legend, ritual and tradition, not to mention the management of relationships that could translate to social mobility. By the time Mihr, the Nur Jehan to be, reached puberty, her mother had managed invitations to visit the royal harem as guest of the emperor Akbar's Persian wife Salimeh.

It may well have been on just those visits that the audacious Mihr encountered the young Prince Salim, who would eventually obtain the title Jehangir. There are multiple versions of the pair's first rendezvous. All agree that it must have been momentous, so much so that the emperor Akbar, irked at his already betrothed

prince's infatuation, hastily helped to arrange Nur Jehan's marriage to another man. In a seeming instant, the 17-year-old Nur was sent off in 1594 with her new husband to the far-flung province of Bihar, where he filled an imperial post. For the next 12 years, Mihr-un-Nisa languished in Bengal with only her wet-nurse Dai Dilaram for company and her husband away on military campaigns. He returned long enough to get her pregnant and a few years after being wed, Mihr gave birth to a daughter called "Ladli" or "loved one". Back at court, Prince Salim became Emperor Jehangir, an aesthete renowned as a "sensuous person with no fewer than 300 young and beautiful women attached to his bed". None were enough, apparently, to make him forget his childhood sweetheart.

On 11 May 1611, Mihr-un-Nisa, whose husband had conveniently perished, married Jehangir. Her

ascent up the ranks of the harem had been rapid. Amid the women, she set about winning over the Persian matriarchs with know-how and respect for her lineage. Before her new husband, she was witty and audacious, displaying the grit of a huntress and not failing to massage his ego.

Paintings from the time show a pair taking a moon-lit walk in the Palace Gardens, engaged in the hushed and secret *tete-a-tete* of lovers. Nur Jahan encouraged the emperor's penchant for travel, not least because it allowed her to escape the constraints of the court in Agra and to deepen her relationship with her husband. The two (accompanied by servants, horses, elephants, tents and carpets) went everywhere, from overnight trips to melon fields to months-long excursions to the gardens of Kashmir on the edge of the Himalayas. All was well until it wasn't. Nur Jahan's "rise to power had been relatively swift"; her fall was "even swifter".

Lal's book is an act of feminist historiography. Beyond its excavation of the achievements of a queen deliberately "effaced from the record", it usefully portrays Nur Jahan as an imperfect character, though an exceptionally courageous one. In a world and time in which a woman's power depended on the men she could manipulate, Nur Jahan deployed charm, wit and threat in the service of her own influence.

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