

Woman power in the Mughal world

Ruby Lal has created a remarkable portrait of an empress by locating her in the historical situation in which she found herself, writes **Rudrangshu Mukherjee**



An idealised portrait of Nur Jahan, circa 1725-1750

narrative where history and biography come together. The focus is, of course, a remarkable woman, Nur Jahan, who wielded almost unlimited power in a man's world. To understand the unprecedented achievements of Nur Jahan, the author sees her in the historical situation in which she found herself and which in many ways she could not alter but was able to use to her advantage.

She was the daughter of a Persian nobleman who, like many other noblemen from Persia and Central Asia, had left his homeland with his family around 1577 to seek his fortune in Al Hind, as India was known. Large parts of north India were then ruled by the great Mughal, Akbar, the third emperor in dynastic succession. Nur Jahan or Mihr un-Nisa, as she was called before she became an empress, was in fact born as the caravan made its way from Persia to India. Ghiyas Beg, Mihr's father, through family connections, made himself part of Akbar's court. Lal breaks the chronology of her narrative at this point to provide a description of the structure of Akbar's court and the apparatus of the Mughal Empire. Readers are thus introduced to one crucial aspect of the context in which Nur Jahan operated as an empress.

There was another equally important context. This was the Mughal harem, the subject of Lal's first book. The first two great Mughals — Babur and his son Humayun — had been camp emperors, moving from place to place and ruling from large tents rather than from forts and palaces. It was Akbar who began the practice of ruling from a fixed court and of sequestering the Mughal women in a specially protected part of the fort/palace. This cloistering did not necessarily mean that all women of the harem became passive onlookers to the play of politics and power that surrounded the persona of the Mughal emperor and the way he ruled. Lal shows here that there were some very powerful women in the harem and they could influence decision-making in critical matters. It was in this harem with its somewhat unique ambience that Mihr un-Nisa found herself after the death of her first husband Ali Quli Khan, a Mughal *mansabdar* who had been

posted in *subah* Bangla.

Life in a remote province as a young and intelligent woman shaped Mihr un-Nisa. She was free from the confines of life in a harem and thus could train herself in certain skills that in the Mughal world were considered "masculine". She learnt how to shoot, to hunt, to practise the art of poetry and, most importantly, she could observe the ways of politics in the Mughal empire. It was these skills and, of course, her remarkable beauty that attracted Jahangir, when she was back in the harem as a widow.

Jahangir married her, renaming her Nur Jahan and she became his favourite wife. They were inseparable. Thus began what Lal calls Nur Jahan's "ascent". Her power and position became synonymous with that of the emperor. This was unprecedented and never to be repeated, since Mughal *badshahs* styled themselves as elevated personalities. Several of her close family members held some of the most important administrative positions: her father was Jahangir's wazir; her brother's daughter Arjumand Banu (later famous as Mumtaz Mahal) was married to the heir apparent Shah Jahan; her daughter by Ali Quli Khan, Ladli Begum, was married to another of Jahangir's sons, Shahryar. Nur Jahan was at the centre of a web of power and patronage. The historian S Nurul Hasan, in a now forgotten essay, described this as the Nur Jahan junta. She

was also, as Lal records, a woman of exceptional generosity who arranged for the care for orphaned girls.

Nur Jahan, thus, entered the world of Mughal legends. She also had her share of contemporary and later critics, all of whom — and not surprisingly, all males — described her as ambitious, power-grabbing, manipulative, vengeful and so on. It is one of the strengths of Lal's book that it points out that these traits (used to condemn Nur Jahan) were considered virtues in Mughal males, signs of their virility. Male strengths were unacceptable in a woman. Nur Jahan broke the stereotype. Lal's book helps us understand the woman and the world over which she triumphed. *Empress* is an outstanding work because of its masterly craft, its sensitive and penetrating reading of sources, its imaginative recreation of the colour and the grandeur of the Mughal court and its matchless unravelling of the interplay of human agency and the forces of history. This is the work of a first-rate historian writing at her best.

The reviewer is chancellor and professor of history, Ashoka University



EMPRESS
THE ASTONISHING
REIGN OF NUR JAHAN

Author:
Ruby Lal
Publisher:
Penguin
Pages: 304
Price: ₹599

Biography and history are closely related but it is not always a very easy relationship. In the world of Indian scholarship, the problem is further complicated by the fact that biography very often tends to become hagiography. The writing of history requires a certain amount of distance and perspective whereas biographers tend to remain very close to their subjects, often seeing the world and events through the papers and the recollections of their subjects. Biography, by definition, is focused on an individual more often than not on a famous individual — someone who it is assumed made the times and was also made by the times. It is precisely here — a woman in her times — that history and biography begin to intersect. History, especially since the influence of Marxism and of the Annales School became predominant, has been seen as the interplay of vast impersonal forces over which human beings have little or no control yet these forces shape the destiny of human beings. The classic statement on this came from none other than Fernand Braudel in his magnum opus: *The Mediterranean And the Mediterranean*

World in the Age of Philip II, where he wrote, "When I think of the individual I am always inclined to see him imprisoned within a destiny in which he himself has little hand." Braudel was, in a different way, echoing and with greater emphasis the views of Marx as articulated in that famous opening paragraph of *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: "Men make their own history but they do not make it just as they please. The dead hand of the past hangs over their present activities." The issue that Braudel and Marx were raising is the one of human agency, which is at the heart of the biographical enterprise. The challenge before a historian-biographer is to locate and analyse the interaction between human agency and the vast impersonal forces.

These prefatory words are necessary because Ruby Lal has, in a masterly and enviable manner, crafted a riveting

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Love, war and the end of Empire

VEENU SANDHU

It is the winter of 1941. With the Japanese closing in, after victories in Hong Kong, Malaya and Singapore, World War II has almost reached the Indian border. Within the country, too, the freedom movement is gaining momentum. And for the residents of Pipli, a sleepy railway town in eastern India, the world as they know it is changing. As the events of the time play out in different ways in their lives, they know that nothing is certain anymore.

Set in the final years of the British rule in India, Daman Singh's *Kitty's War* is a fine example of realistic fiction. The book progresses through the stories of four people: Katherine Riddle (Kitty); her widowed father, Terrence; their house help who is identified only as Ayah; and assistant stationmaster Chuckerbutty, the first native officer at the railways at Pipli.

As she moves from one character to the other, Singh, in her elegant and understated style, paints a descriptive picture of the time and the mood of the time. The family photographs on the wall in the house of Kitty's friend, for example, serve to chronicle the years gone by — through the change in fashion, the appearance of a locomotive in the pictures or through the photograph of a dreamy young man who we are later told was dragged from his house and slaughtered in front of his wife and two children during the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857.

The story begins with Kitty, who works as a schoolteacher, returning to Pipli with a broken heart. The war has already affected her.

Jonathan, the Anglo-Indian man to whom she is engaged, keeps putting off meeting her father because he is convinced the time is not right — not with London being battered in the Blitz, and then not during the siege of Leningrad, and so on.

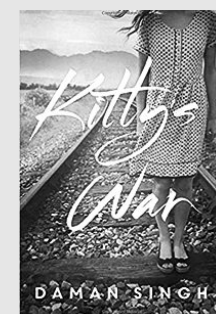
Then there is the nameless Ayah, whose son is fighting for the British in Rangoon and who, like Kitty, is no longer herself as she waits for a letter from him. A tribal, she questions if her life of oppression will change even after the British leave India. The war outside has affected her more than the freedom from the British will. Unlike her, the family cook, Latif, is certain that the ouster of the British from India will turn their lives around.

Chuckerbutty, meanwhile, wants the British to stay. He aspires to be like them. And though the British have distorted his name "Chakravarty" to "Chuckerbutty", he is pleased about it and thinks this means they consider him one of them. But he begins to question this as the book progresses. His staff certainly don't consider him a sahib (the master) and insist on calling him babu (a mere aide).

As the plot deals with the characters' state of mind, their class struggles and their approach to existing hierarchies, it also reveals their attitudes towards women's sexuality. Ayah, the tribal woman who has accepted her subservient position in society, is perhaps the most emancipated and confident about her sexuality. The cook, Latif, is openly disapproving of Kitty's. And Bela, a local woman, is punished, harassed and ostracised for sleeping with a man from outside the clan.

Singh takes the reader to that period in time with the proficiency of an intelligent writer — from the names of the places (Jubbulpore, Cawnpore) and the companies that actually existed then to the music and movies of the era. So you have Kitty going to watch *Gone with the Wind*, which released in 1939 and which the girls of Pipli are especially excited about because of Vivien Leigh. They claim the star as their own, because she was born in Darjeeling, where many girls from Pipli went to school. The music that Kitty's father, Terrence, would play on the piano, before he decided that he was happiest in his own company and withdrew from society, also points to the time: "Bill Bailey, Won't You Please Come Home" by Lorraine Foreman & The Singing Waiters or Nat King Cole's "Fascination".

Kitty's War moves slowly. The story is told as much through the events around as through the minds of the characters. The railway colony and the railway junction remain a constant in the backdrop. At the turn of every page, you expect something to happen. In this strange, tangential way, *Kitty's War* recalls *Anna Karenina*. It is disorienting, almost like a dream. And yet, in the end, it all comes into focus.



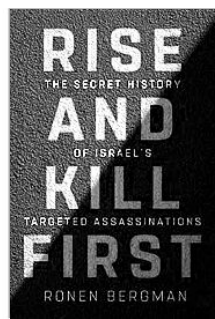
KITTY'S WAR
Author:
Daman Singh
Publisher:
Tranquebar
Pages: 243
Price: ₹350

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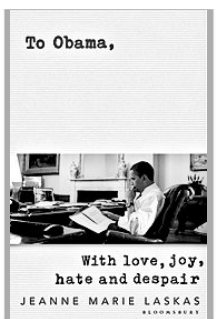
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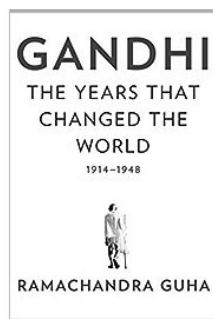
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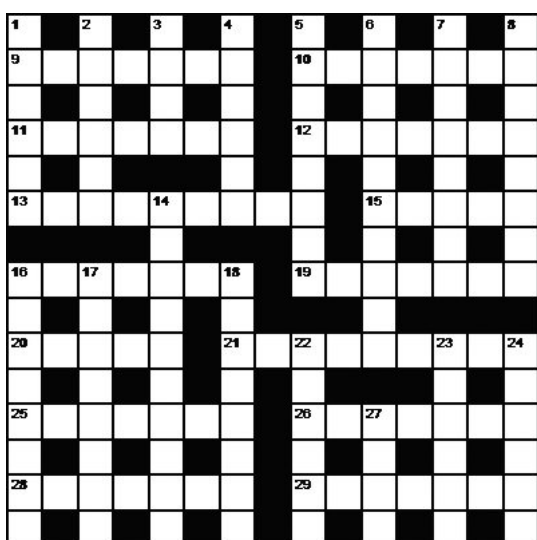
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ACROSS:

- Before university, leap at rocky mesa (7)
- Rocky, Neil, Ira, or Delta, perhaps (7)
- Depending on the call about an old English town (7)
- Penny has a plan to complete (4,3)
- Acts badly with a parasite around ... a situation promising inevitable defeat (4,5)
- Around the North this might be seen to be legally intervening (5)
- Loud quarrel with son produces litter (7)
- Mouth full of water? (7)
- Audibly slate American chap (5)

- Conforming to good taste, I cast thee out (9)
- Exhausted after a time, got dressed (7)
- He displays resolution 60 minutes after midnight (7)
- Just say no, it must be returned by the soldiers (7)
- Almost departed with the wrong load on the canal (7)

DOWN:

- April's eccentric helix (6)
- Qualified to be in the first and last fictitious stories (6)
- Half-hearted retain one military cap (4)
- Think you can ring off? You only finish up fighting (4,2)

- Wyatt! That's Church Aid in hearing (8)
- Game for an experimental marriage? (5,5)
- Part of the Indian Ocean - parts are moist (5,3)
- Rugged pastureland the railway followed (8)
- Evidence of perversity and contrariness in wreckage of Ringo's cars (5-5)
- Are stirring up concerns about weapons (8)
- Infer gut trouble when making a denial (8)
- Getting very heated in a wet sort of way (8)
- Refuse stitch on time (6)
- Instrument stand - carelessly

- drop it (6)
- Engagement for a doctor in Ulster, perhaps (6)
- Some people like grilling such fish (4)

SOLUTION # 3136

