

## VEILS AND POWER: FEMALE AGENCY IN THE MUGHAL COURT IN ALEX RUTHERFORD'S THE SERPENT'S TOOTH

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### **Abstract**

A complex depiction of women's lives within the power laden Mughal court may be found in Alex Rutherford's *The Serpent's Tooth*, which is a part of the *Empire of the Moghul* series. The paper explores the relationship between female autonomy in the story and veiling, both literally and metaphorically. Although the purdah regime supposedly limited women's freedom of movement and public appearance, Rutherford's portrayal shows how royal ladies cleverly got around the restrictions to exert control over dynastic, familial, and political issues. People like Nur Jahan, who used courtly networks, patronage, and persuasion to influence imperial policies, stand out as crucial examples of subtly but decisively intervening. As a result, the veil takes on a dual meaning as a shield that permits clandestine power struggles and a weapon of patriarchal control. The paper highlights the intersections of gender, space, and authority in imperial contexts by placing Rutherford's fabricated stories within a larger Mughal historiography through a literary historical lens. In the end, the analysis shows that veiled women in the Mughal court were not passive subjects but rather engaged agency in ways that reshaped the limits of legitimacy and power.

**Keywords:** Mughal court, female agency, veiling, gender, space

### **Introduction**

Both historians and novelists have long been fascinated by the Mughal Empire because of its lavish courts, complex hierarchies, and established customs. Although the actions of emperors, generals, and male courtiers are frequently highlighted in its chronicles, the roles of women especially those of the imperial zenana remain fascinating and little understood. Part of the *Empire of the Moghul* series, Alex Rutherford's *The Serpent's Tooth* provides a dramatic yet historically relevant depiction of life in the Mughal harem under Jahangir. The protagonist of the story is Nur Jahan, whose political savvy and cunning defy stereotypes of royal women as submissive representations of dynasty prestige.

The purdah system's paradox is encapsulated in the novel, although it was supposed to restrict women's public participation, it simultaneously established a regulated environment in which they could exercise influence. For example, Nur Jahan uses the ceremonial and domestic domains of the court to forge alliances, control networks of patronage, and even influence imperial decrees. The extraordinary political power that Jahangir possessed is supported by historical evidence, ranging from her personal memoirs, *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, to later Persian chronicles.

Rutherford's story is positioned in the study as a cultural text that reframes gendered power in Mughal history as well as a piece of historical fiction. The paper explores how the veil, both literally and figuratively, functions as a site of negotiation between female autonomy and patriarchal control by reading *The Serpent's Tooth* alongside historical accounts. By doing this, it aims to shed light on the methods by which Mughal women who were frequently unseen in public could play a significant role in imperial politics.

### **Literature Review**

Though most of it is dispersed over literary, feminist, and historical studies, the role of women in the Mughal court has garnered a great deal of scholarly interest. Historians of the early colonial era, like William Erskine (1854) and A. L. Srivastava (1952), preferred to depict imperial women as supporting characters who were mostly involved in court adornment and domesticity. But scholarship from the 20th and 21st centuries has contested this marginalization by highlighting the cultural, political, and economic agency of women in the Mughal zenana.

In her groundbreaking book *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (2005), Ruby Lal makes the case that the harem was a vibrant political arena where women could have an impact on succession issues, diplomacy, and governance, rather than just a private home. In a similar vein, Ellison Banks Findly's *Nur Jahan: Empress of Mughal India* (1993) portrays Nur Jahan as a clever political tactician who was able to establish power through the *purdah* system without directly challenging gender standards. These power relations are reimagined for a contemporary audience in literary contexts through historical fiction, such as Alex Rutherford's *The Serpent's Tooth*. Historical novels can serve as "counter-histories," elevating underrepresented voices, according to critics like Pramod K. Nayar (2016). In line with feminist historiography, Rutherford presents the veil as both a barrier and a tactical tool that permits clandestine political participation.

Postcolonial feminist theory has studied the symbolism of veiling, particularly by Leila Ahmed (1992) and Deniz Kandiyoti (1988), who emphasize its dual function as a weapon of self-assertion and patriarchal control. The concept, when applied to the Mughal era, shows how imperial women were able to function both inside and outside of the restrictions of seclusion. The basis for examining Rutherford's dramatized portrayal of Mughal women is the corpus of research. It allows for a more complex interpretation of *The Serpent's Tooth*, placing the work at the nexus of literary reinterpretation, gender politics, and recorded history.

### **Historical Contextualization**

The sociopolitical realities of the Mughal zenana are reconstructed using primary historical materials, such as *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* of Jahangir's memoirs, court chronicles like Abu'l Fazl's *Akbarnama*, and contemporary historical works by Ruby Lal (2005) and Ellison Banks Findly (1993). This historical foundation guarantees that Rutherford's fabricated story is evaluated in light of historical occurrences and hierarchies of power.

A thorough understanding of the historical facts of the Mughal court, especially during the reign of Emperor Jahangir (1605–1627), is necessary in order to comprehend how female

agency is portrayed in Alex Rutherford's *The Serpent's Tooth*. In Mughal palaces, the zenana, or women's quarters, was a strictly controlled area intended to uphold the purdah regime of seclusion. The zenana was not politically inconsequential, despite its physical separation from the male spheres of power. Historical accounts from the present and the past show that the women of the imperial household, particularly those who were connected to the emperor, had the power to influence diplomacy, court politics, and even succession issues.

Primary sources that shed light on the emperor's reign and his interactions with powerful women include the *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, or Jahangir's memoirs. Jahangir himself frequently mentions his wife, Empress Nur Jahan, emphasizing her brilliance, wisdom, and beauty. These memoirs acknowledge Nur Jahan's advisory role even if they are partially self-representational and intended to convey the emperor's authority. She is said to be entrusted with the imperial seal, influence imperial decisions, and take part in courtly ceremonies an exceptional honor for a Mughal empress.

Even though they were published during the reign of Akbar (Jahangir's father), court chronicles like Abu'l Fazl's *Akbarnama* are essential to comprehending the administrative and cultural structures that Jahangir inherited. Recording political systems, the *Akbarnama* provides early evidence of how imperial women including Akbar's own family members supported the arts, mediated conflicts, and arranged marriages in order to maintain political stability. Nur Jahan's unparalleled power was made possible by the persistence of women's participation in politics.

The historical image is furthered by contemporary research. The conventional understanding of the zenana as solely a domestic domain is contested in Ruby Lal's *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (2005), which contends that it was actually a "site of statecraft" where women developed influence through familial ties, cultural patronage, and control over access to the emperor. According to Lal's research, purdah produced a contradiction because it limited women's public appearance while also establishing a safe space where they could function without facing direct competition from men.

Banks, Ellison A biographical viewpoint is provided by Findly's *Nur Jahan: Empress of Mughal India* (1993), which presents Nur Jahan as one of the most prominent and politically engaged Mughal empresses. Findly records her involvement in military operations, commercial regulation, and even imperial architecture design. Because Nur Jahan issued imperial directives in her own name and had her portrait on coinage symbolic acts of sovereignty in a male dominated empire her political involvement went beyond the zenana.

When evaluating Rutherford's fictionalized portrayal in *The Serpent's Tooth*, the historical context is crucial. The novel primarily references the established political and cultural realities of Jahangir's court, even as it dramatizes events and introduces creative debate. The analysis can distinguish between literary embellishments and historically documented acts by contrasting Rutherford's story with the *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, the *Akbarnama*, and contemporary scholarly interpretations. This kind of contextualization guarantees that the portrayal of Nur

Jahan is regarded as both a literary reconstruction of one of the most powerful ladies in Mughal history and as a fictional character.

### **Feminist Literary Criticism**

In order to understand how Rutherford's portrayal navigates themes of gender, power, and seclusion, the research draws on feminist historiography and postcolonial feminist theory (Ahmed, 1992; Kandiyoti, 1988). By highlighting both resistance and adaptation to patriarchal standards, the lens highlights the agency of women functioning within the purdah system.

The theoretical framework used in the study to examine Alex Rutherford's *The Serpent's Tooth* is feminist literary criticism, specifically with regard to the novel's portrayal of female autonomy within the patriarchal framework of the Mughal court. Feminist criticism opposes conventional literary and historical accounts that have a propensity to downplay, romanticize, or ignore the contributions made by women to political and cultural history. By using the concept, the Mughal zenana might be seen as a place of influence, strategy, and negotiation rather than as a place of passive solitude.

Like many other imperial institutions, the Mughal court was essentially patriarchal, with male monarchs and their designated bureaucrats holding the official authority. However, as feminist historians like Ellison Banks Findly (1993) and Ruby Lal (2005) have noted, imperial women created forms of authority that functioned in tandem with formal rule and occasionally overlapped with it. This is consistent with the seminal idea of "bargaining with patriarchy" put forth by Deniz Kandiyoti in 1988, according to which women operate within the bounds of gendered norms to get resources and influence without openly contesting the validity of male supremacy.

Rutherford's portrayal of Nur Jahan in *The Serpent's Tooth* is a prime example of the tactical compromise. Nur Jahan is shown as actively directing the emperor's attention to state issues, forming political alliances, and influencing imperial policy despite being restricted to the zenana and subject to the purdah system. These acts are interpreted as manifestations of a systemic potential for female power within the Mughal court rather than as anomalies or the product of individual charm alone when viewed via a feminist critical perspective. The veil changes from being a sign of tyranny to a tool of discretion and strategic invisibility, and the zenana becomes a center of politics.

The study is further enhanced by postcolonial feminist theory, which takes into account the cultural peculiarity of veiling. Academics like Leila Ahmed (1992) advise against analyzing veiling exclusively in terms of Western oppressive paradigms, instead advocating for a contextualized interpretation that acknowledges its complex social connotations. Purdah served as a safeguard for women's autonomy in some areas and as a symbol of elite status throughout the Mughal era. This nuanced perspective is supported by Rutherford's story, which portrays the veil as empowering women to participate in politics covertly rather than as a source of helplessness.

A more thorough analysis of narrative voice, perspective, and characterization is also encouraged by feminist literary criticism. Rutherford's decision to offer Nur Jahan's ideas, tactics, and emotional fortitude a substantial amount of narrative space contrasts with past historical fiction when royal women are frequently relegated to supporting roles or romantic interests. *The Serpent's Tooth* engages in what Pramod K. Nayar (2016) refers to as "counter-historical fiction," which reexamines history from the viewpoint of people who have historically been left out of official chronicles, by emphasizing her as a political actor. Therefore, the study's feminist critical perspective goes beyond merely identifying examples of female agency; it also examines how those examples are told, what cultural function they serve, and how they engage with patriarchal myths and historical reality.

### **Symbolic Analysis of Veiling**

The veil is regarded as a key metaphor, serving as both a political tool and a physical barrier. The study looks at how Rutherford represents security, strategy, and concealment in the imperial court through the imagery of veils. The methodological paradigm allows for a detailed examination of how *The Serpent's Tooth* reimagines Mughal women as active participants in imperial politics while negotiating the limitations of seclusion by fusing historical fact with fictional depiction.

Veiling was a practical activity and a deeply ingrained symbolic system in court culture during the Mughal era. In *The Serpent's Tooth*, Alex Rutherford used the veil as a multi-layered emblem that highlights the conflicts imperial women face between agency, protection, and concealment, rather than just as a sign of purdah. The physical and metaphorical aspects of veiling are treated in the work, and their meanings vary according to the viewpoint and situation in which they are used.

In the past, the veil served as a component of the larger purdah system, which kept men and women apart in affluent homes. The seclusion served as a sign of aristocratic status in addition to enforcing patriarchal rule. Veils gave Mughal royal women a sense of exclusivity and holiness, signifying their high status. According to Ruby Lal (2005), women were able to indirectly cultivate power because of the zenana's physical limits, which were reinforced by veiling. Therefore, the veil could be used as a shield to allow women to operate in political and diplomatic affairs without being seen by the public, rather than just as a tool for limitation.

The dichotomy is embodied in Rutherford's portrayal of Nur Jahan's veil use in *The Serpent's Tooth*. On one level, it serves as a weapon of discretion, enabling her to receive intelligence from outside the zenana walls, give orders without face-to-face conflict, and handle court matters through middlemen. On a deeper level, the veil turns into a political statement that quietly affirms her status as an imperial consort who exercises great authority while adhering to recognized cultural norms. This is in line with Deniz Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of "bargaining with patriarchy," in which women use culturally accepted symbols to achieve power without directly opposing the system.

Rutherford frequently refers to shadow, screens, and partial visibility to convey the empress's unseen yet pervasive power. Scenes where Nur Jahan watches political events from behind a

screen, for instance, are visual representations of her style of governance present but invisible, directing results with little evidence in official documents. The narrative technique is consistent with postcolonial feminist interpretations, like those of Leila Ahmed (1992), which emphasize the possibilities of veiling as a means of self-fashioning and strategic anonymity rather than seeing it only as oppression.

The veil serves as a distinction between the public and private domains in the book, which Nur Jahan masterfully negotiates. She takes advantage of her seclusion by avoiding public scrutiny when necessary and using semi-public ceremonial functions to establish her influence. The veil's function as a political tool is highlighted by its oscillation between invisibility and selective visibility, which may be used to either reveal or conceal power according to the needs of the moment. The study places Rutherford's fictional portrayal within a range of academic readings by examining both the historical practice and the symbolic significance of veiling. According to this interpretation, the veil is a dynamic tool material, cultural, and narrative that enables Mughal women in *The Serpent's Tooth* to exercise political power while maintaining a façade of isolation, rather than a static symbol of oppression.

#### Nur Jahan as the Embodiment of Strategic Agency

Nur Jahan is a pivotal character in Alex Rutherford's *The Serpent's Tooth*, and her impact goes well beyond the zenana's private quarters. Although historical narratives recognize her unparalleled power co-signing imperial farmāns and minting coinage in her name. Rutherford exaggerates the means by which she obtains this authority. For instance, her capacity to influence court alliances, steer Jahangir's decision-making, and gently affect succession politics indicates an acute knowledge of the interaction between visibility and concealment. She never explicitly challenges patriarchal systems; instead, she operates inside the ceremonial confines of the court, making her interventions seem like logical progressions of imperial rule.

One of the most influential and mysterious ladies in Mughal history, Empress Nur Jahan, is vividly portrayed by Alex Rutherford in *The Serpent's Tooth*. Rutherford creates a picture of Nur Jahan as the archetypal strategist, whose political savvy enabled her to overcome the restrictions normally imposed on women in the Mughal court, by combining historical authenticity with narrative exaggeration. She is portrayed as having a profound impact on imperial decision-making that goes well beyond the zenana's exclusive, secluded rooms.

#### Strategic Navigation of Visibility and Invisibility

Numerous historical documents attest to Nur Jahan's unique standing in Jahangir's court. In addition to co-signing imperial farmāns with the emperor, she also had coins made in her name, which was a first for the Mughals and a tangible and visual affirmation of her power. She is described as a trusted counselor whose advice was sought in areas of governance, diplomacy, and military expeditions in the *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* of Jahangir's memoirs and subsequent royal chronicles. She became a co-sovereign in all but name as a result of these activities, not just a royal consort. Rutherford makes extensive use of this historical basis, enhancing Nur Jahan's influence in succession disputes and political talks.

Rutherford's portrayal highlights Nur Jahan's skill at regulating her visibility a delicate job of juggling her presence and absence in political activities. She followed the purdah rites and appeared behind veils or latticed screens in public or ceremonial settings. However, in private, she directly influenced Jahangir by presenting political topics in ways that influenced his choices. The tension between access and seclusion is a reflection of what Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) refers to as "bargaining with patriarchy," in which women work within gender norms but use them to further their own agendas.

Nur Jahan avoided inciting outright resistance from conservative court factions by staying inside the zenana's culturally approved area. Therefore, rather than being presented as a direct challenge to male authority, her influence was presented as an extension of imperial concord and wifely loyalty. Rutherford encapsulates this nuance in the book, demonstrating how her political interventions frequently conceal their strategic goal by posing as worries for the emperor's welfare or the security of the empire.

As portrayed in *The Serpent's Tooth*, Nur Jahan's capacity to create and preserve networks of allegiance is one of her greatest assets. She placed her brother, Asaf Khan, in high level administrative positions and her father, Itimad-ud-Daulah, as prime minister, in positions of influence. In addition to strengthening her family's influence, these appointments made sure the court was full with supporters who could support her. Rutherford dramatizes her behind the scenes talks, demonstrating how she uses marriage relationships to cement political ties, gives favors to courtiers, and offers patronage. She arranges marriages between powerful families, for instance, in order to win allegiance and stifle possible competitors. These strategies are consistent with historical narratives that credit Nur Jahan with having a deep awareness of court politics and the need to restrict access to the monarch.

Rutherford demonstrates Nur Jahan's ability to exert control over Jahangir without coming out as overbearing. She frequently conveys her points in a way that gives Jahangir the impression that he made the choices. Her strategy is characterized by the nuance; rather than confronting the issue head-on, she bases her recommendations on imperial custom, ethical obligation, or pragmatic need. She guarantees their approval by lining up her suggestions with Jahangir's own perception of herself as a capable and just leader. In the past, Nur Jahan had influence over Jahangir over issues including tax policy, military appointments, and diplomatic relations with neighboring nations. Even though she maintains the decorum expected of an empress, the narrative dramatizes these activities to show off her quiet confidence and persuasive competence in handling political affairs.

Succession politics was arguably the most delicate political area in which Nur Jahan worked. There was a lot of intrigue, factionalism, and potential instability surrounding the topic of who would inherit the throne. Nur Jahan is shown by Rutherford in *The Serpent's Tooth* as being very interested in ensuring a succession that would uphold her status and her family's power. She quietly supports politicians who share her views while excluding those who could disagree with her. Historically, these moves were dangerous since violent conflict frequently resulted from succession disputes. However, Nur Jahan was skilled at hiding her involvement by

pretending to be acting in the interest of the stability of the empire. While working to make sure her chosen candidates were in a good position to succeed Jahangir, she maintained the appearance of a devoted consort who was only focused on his legacy.

Nur Jahan, played by Rutherford, is not presented as flawless; rather, her versatility is what makes her strong. In reaction to changing court dynamics, outside threats, or modifications in Jahangir's health, she is fast to reevaluate tactics. In a political climate where coalitions could fall apart at any time, this adaptability guarantees her survival. Her narrative, as told in *The Serpent's Tooth*, turns into an analysis of the skill of political survival under patriarchal rules. She shows that in such a setting, influence is more dependent on the capacity to shape perception, foster loyalty, and strike a balance between audacity and tact than it is on overt authority.

Nur Jahan is portrayed in Rutherford's story as the epitome of strategic agency, a lady who recognized the significance of time, presentation, and indirect control. She reshaped the gender order from inside without directly questioning it by working within the Mughal court's ceremonial and cultural norms. Thus, feminist historiography, which acknowledges that women's political participation in patriarchal settings frequently takes the form of adaptability, nuance, and the delicate balancing of visibility, finds resonance in her portrayal in *The Serpent's Tooth*.

#### The Zenana as a Political Arena

Rutherford's account supports feminist historiography's claim (Lal, 2005) that the zenana served as a hub for political and diplomatic negotiations, defying the notion that it was only a household area. Nur Jahan creates networks of allegiance among female relatives, attendants, and eunuchs in the zenana, which turns into a regulated setting. She can influence appointments, resource allocation, and policy choices without violating purdah thanks to these networks that reach into the male dominated court. Historical accounts of the zenana's functioning as a parallel power structure are consistent with this description.

Traditionally, the zenana simplistically defined as the women's quarters in Mughal palaces has been seen as a remote, apolitical area that is cut off from the hubs of decision-making. *The Serpent's Tooth* by Alex Rutherford and historical studies, however, both refute this myth and show how crucial and strategically important the zenana was to Mughal politics. The zenana served as a parallel political arena where choices were made, alliances were forged, and imperial plans were affected, despite being geographically distinct from the emperor's public court.

According to historical accounts, the Mughal zenana housed female relatives, attendants, and eunuchs in addition to royal spouses and concubines; each held a specific status within the court hierarchy. Ruby Lal (2005) asserts that this community functioned as a miniature version of the empire, complete with its own administrative, security, and protocol framework. Because of Nur Jahan's enormous agency, the zenana's political significance peaked during the reign of Jahangir. According to Ellison Banks Findly (1993), the zenana served as a venue for political

scheming masquerading as domesticity. Without seeming to violate purdah, women might receive emissaries, communicate privately, and offer policy recommendations through reliable middlemen.

The zenana is reframed as an operational command center in Rutherford's story in *The Serpent's Tooth*. Despite being physically confined, Nur Jahan creates a network of loyalists by using the safe and regulated environment of the Zenana. She ensures that she has access to information from all around the empire by selecting and guarding attendants who can serve as spies and messengers. The eunuchs, who were permitted to wander between the male and female quarters, were particularly crucial in carrying out her directives and delivering intelligence. Rutherford provides examples of how the zenana's architectural layout private passageways, concealed chambers, and screened windows allows for subtlety in political discussion. This architecture serves as both a practical tool and a symbol of limitation, enabling Nur Jahan to meet with allies in private, listen in on conversations, and manage who has access to the emperor.

The zenana functioned as a political training ground for the development and maintenance of coalitions. Courtiers, artists, and entrepreneurs were frequently patronized by female relatives who offered them security and privileges in return for their allegiance. Nur Jahan rewards people who back her objectives, including approving trade laws or promoting dependable generals, by using the patronage system. She establishes an enduring power base by integrating her influence throughout both political and economic systems. In Zenana politics, marriage alliances were yet another essential instrument. In order to strengthen her hold on succession politics and court factions, Rutherford portrays Nur Jahan arranging marriages between her family members and powerful aristocratic families. Through these relationships, the Zenana's interests were incorporated into the greater Mughal administrative structure, expanding its influence beyond its geographical borders.

One of the most important political resources of the Zenana was information. Controlling the flow of information was crucial in a court where allegiances could be determined by rumors. Rutherford depicts Nur Jahan's network of informants providing her with updates on commercial talks, military operations, and royal intrigues. She can outsmart competitors and put herself in a favorable position by being the first to recognize changing alliances or dangers. In the past, some of the most knowledgeable people in the empire were reputed to reside in the zenana. Specifically, Eunuchs served as dependable messengers between the private women's quarters and the emperor's public court. Rutherford portrays them as essential to Nur Jahan's strategic activities, effectively capturing this relationship.

In Rutherford's zenana, influence is exercised through dialogue, persuasion, patronage, and the deliberate development of allegiance. The zenana's politics are more subdued but no less significant than those of the emperor's public court, where rulings may be openly challenged. In fact, the zenana's lack of official authority structures gives women like Nur Jahan more freedom to move around without being constrained by the male court's formalities. Rutherford's portrayal is consistent with contemporary feminist historiography, which acknowledges that

the zenana was a sophisticated political institution in itself rather than just a place of confinement. In the Mughal universe, political authority could function efficiently from behind the latticed screens of seclusion, as seen by Nur Jahan's ability to turn the Zenana into a hub of imperial policy.

#### The Veil as Metaphor and Tactic

Rutherford frequently uses the metaphor of a veil to highlight the contrast between empowerment and concealment. The physical veil allows women to act discreetly while also enforcing seclusion and protecting them from prying eyes. The veil serves as a tactical cloak for Nur Jahan, allowing her to transmit orders through reliable middlemen, listen in on court sessions without being seen, and escape direct accountability for contentious rulings. This is consistent with Kandiyoti's (1988) idea of "bargaining with patriarchy," in which women use roles that are accepted by society to increase their level of agency.

The veil serves as both a tangible garment and a complex metaphor in *The Serpent's Tooth*, capturing the interplay of gender, power, and secrecy in the Mughal court. Rutherford transforms the veil into an active political instrument, despite the fact that it is typically seen as a representation of female seclusion under purdah. According to Nur Jahan, the veil is a purposeful tool for restricting access, influencing perception, and influencing political results rather than just an artificial wall separating her from the outside world.

Purdah was a fundamental aspect of elite female life in the Mughal court, which was strictly gender segregated. Veiling served as a tangible symbol of imperial status as well as a cultural need. For women in the royal household in particular, the veil represented honor, morality, and dynastic legitimacy, as Ruby Lal (2005) points out. However, the veil also provided strategic advantages within this framework. Women could function with a certain amount of anonymity by restricting their physical visibility, which allowed them to select when and how they exposed themselves.

In the past, strong women like Nur Jahan were adept at enhancing their mystique through purdah. When they did happen, public appearances were planned events designed to increase political impact. Rutherford expands on the historical basis by portraying the veil as a changeable symbol that may be used as a statement of authority or restriction. Nur Jahan recognizes in Rutherford's representation that invisibility is just as powerful in politics as visibility. She can choose the conditions of her presence thanks to the veil. When she decides to be exposed before a chosen audience, it is a purposeful gesture of closeness or trust. On the other hand, she intensifies the sense of untouchability that envelops her when she is still shrouded.

Although Rutherford flips it, this relationship is consistent with Laura Mulvey's (1975) concept of the "controlling gaze" in this case, Nur Jahan subverts the male gaze by determining when it is permitted and when it is not. Rutherford explains how the veil is not only worn for modesty but utilized as part of diplomatic drama. For instance, Nur Jahan's voice is filtered through silk while she appears behind a lavishly embroidered screen during audiences with foreign envoys.

Her words take on greater significance as a result of the sensory limitation this produces, which compels her audience to pay close attention to them. Thus, the veil turns into a theatrical prop that shields her from direct inspection while heightening the solemnity of her words. Since absence is a form of presence in and of itself, the veil blurs the distinction between presence and absence in certain situations. Even though the envoy will never see her face, the controlled distance makes the interaction profound.

The ability of the veil to disguise not just the body but also strategic intents is its most powerful political function in *The Serpent's Tooth*. Rutherford describes instances in which Nur Jahan moves through palace areas covertly, listening in on discussions or meeting allies without raising suspicions, thanks to her concealed incognito. In this way, the veil serves as a shield as well as a disguise. Through the assistance of eunuchs and dependable servants, she is able to move outside the zenana's physical bounds without breaking the purdah code. By remaining undetected, Nur Jahan manipulates a system that was intended to control her and uses it as a tool to exert power over her.

The veil also acts as a psychological weapon in political battles. Because opponents can never be certain of what the empress sees, hears, or means, Rutherford illustrates how ambiguity may be unpleasant. Assuming she is not present, rivals may talk openly, only to have their acts foreseen and retaliated against. Thus, the veil becomes a component of a larger ambiguity strategy that keeps adversaries off balance. This is in line with Edward Said's theory of "strategic opacity" in power dynamics, which holds that concealing knowledge can have just as much of an impact as disclosing it. The opacity of the veil conceals Nur Jahan's actual political plans until the point of execution, acting as an extension of her political thinking.

#### Metaphor of the Veil in Narrative Structure

Rutherford uses the veil as a narrative metaphor for the process of historical interpretation itself, going beyond its literal use. The narrative offers bits and pieces of events and viewpoints, forcing the reader to piece together the truth from incomplete knowledge, just like the veil hides and reveals selectively. The story's layers of rumor, reserved words, and half-seen gestures are reminiscent of the texture of royal intrigue. In terms of theme, the veil also reflects the larger conflict in Mughal politics between the public and private domains. It represents the liminal place that Nur Jahan resides in, both within and outside of masculine power structures. She makes the most of the uncertainty of her role by placing herself at this threshold.

Rutherford's approach of the veil is arguably the most subversive since it transforms a patriarchal restriction into a feminist tactic. The veil increases Nur Jahan's impact rather than stifling her. She transforms a tool of control into a symbol of agency by establishing the parameters of her interactions with the outside world. This reversal is consistent with Deniz Kandiyoti's theory of "bargaining with patriarchy," in which women negotiate constrictive structures in order to achieve power. In the book, the veil transforms from a fixed symbol of female limitations to a dynamic, adaptable instrument that represents Nur Jahan's control over the very structure designed to keep her in check.

The veil is much more than just a piece of clothing in *The Serpent's Tooth*; it serves as a narrative emblem, a tactical tool, and a political statement. Rutherford's depiction breaks down the dichotomy of tyranny and freedom by demonstrating the nuanced, culturally rooted ways in which agency can be used. For Nur Jahan, the veil marks the start of regulated power rather than the end of visibility.

#### Power, Gender, and Legacy

Nur Jahan's authority is waning due to Jahangir's deteriorating health, by the end of the book; she has permanently altered the Mughal court. Rutherford gently criticizes the brittleness of female power under patriarchal structures, pointing out that although it can achieve remarkable heights, it is still dependent on the support of male rulers and the longevity of political coalitions. Thus, the veil serves as a reminder of the boundaries set by gendered power structures as well as a symbol of agency.

By the end of *The Serpent's Tooth*, Nur Jahan's incredible rise in the Mughal court has reached both its pinnacle and its unavoidable downfall. Two realities are reflected in Rutherford's portrayal: the first is the extraordinary administrative and political power she possesses, and the second is the inherent instability of female authority in a highly patriarchal imperial system. The conflict between precarity and empowerment becomes essential to comprehending Rutherford's historical relevance as well as the narrative's depth of theme.

Nur Jahan's political career reflects her historical standing as the sole Mughal empress with such institutionalized and direct authority. In addition to becoming Jahangir's confidante, she also actively participates in government through her marriage, co-signing farmāns (royal decrees) and issuing instructions under her own name. In a culture where royal women were hardly ever seen or recognized in public, her image can be found on imperial coins, which is a remarkable transgression of gender norms. Rutherford dramatizes Nur Jahan's methods of consolidating power by using these historical facts as narrative anchors. These include establishing alliances with important courtiers, effectively running the imperial household, and making sure that her family members hold important administration positions.

Rutherford also clarifies that Nur Jahan's authority is based on a precarious foundation. It heavily depends on the loyalty of a court whose divisions are frequently unstable as well as the stability of Jahangir's rule. The empress's ability to shape policies and manage succession politics is eroding along with Jahangir's health. Previously subservient ministers now negotiate with her gingerly, fearing that her authority may soon dissipate. Rutherford conveys this change in the tone of court relations in a subtle way. Thus, the story demonstrates how the patriarchal attachment to a male ruler's vitality may weaken women's political influence at the Mughal court, regardless of how great.

The politics of female portrayal exacerbate this instability. Although there are no denying Nur Jahan's accomplishments, her memory is sometimes distorted by male authored histories that either extol her as a political genius or demonize her as an overbearing woman who upset the natural order of government. By portraying Rutherford as both human and astute strategic yet

deeply involved in her family's survival her dramatized perspective provides a counterbalance to this dichotomy. In this instance, the veil functions as a multifaceted symbol: in previous sections of the book, it is a weapon of strategic invisibility that enables her to impact policy without directly questioning patriarchal decorum. However, the veil acquires a new meaning in the latter chapters, serving as a reminder of her limited autonomy and a concrete and symbolic barrier that she is eventually unable to cross.

The gendered temporality of political power is further highlighted by Nur Jahan's diminishing influence. The Mughal court's male rulers were able to withstand political losses, exile, or even a brief loss of power, frequently regaining it with the help of the troops or factions. However, for women, political power was typically linked to their position as a mother of a prospective heir or their closeness to the monarch. Their ability to influence imperial policy quickly declined as those ties deteriorated. The disparity is highlighted in Rutherford's story: as succession issues worsen at the end of Jahangir's life, Nur Jahan's strategic prowess is no longer enough to defeat the deeply ingrained patriarchal logic of legitimacy and inheritance.

Her legacy, however, endures. Nur Jahan's prior political networks and reforms continue to have an impact on the Mughal court, despite its downfall. The normative exclusion of women from formal politics is challenged by her example as a powerful woman, opening up a discursive space where future generations may envision different roles for royal women. Long after her political downfall, her administrative reforms, philanthropic endeavors, and architectural patronage were remembered historically. The legacy is shown as bittersweet in Rutherford's version although she was able to change the imperial court; she was unable to completely eliminate the gendered systems that restricted women's sovereignty.

The *Serpent's Tooth's* epilogue provides a thoughtful analysis of the nature of female authority in ancient civilizations. Rutherford does not romanticize Nur Jahan's accomplishments as evidence of a long-lasting shift in gender politics, even as she honors her intelligence and tenacity. Rather, the story acknowledges that her ascent and decline represent the potential and constraints of autonomy in a patriarchal society. In the end, the veil which alternates between representing empowerment and concealment throughout the book acts as a visual reminder of these boundaries. It represents not just the tactics women used to maneuver through the court but also the imperceptible obstacles that limited their power to specific relational and historical settings. This makes Nur Jahan's story more than just a history of personal aspirations; it also serves as a commentary on the systemic framework that allowed women to wield authority throughout the Mughal era. Her career shows that although female agency could thrive when certain conditions were met personal charm, political savvy, and the confidence of the sovereign it was susceptible to disintegration when those circumstances changed. Thus, Rutherford challenges the reader to think about the timeless conflict between systemic limitation and individual potential, which is still pertinent in today's debates over gender and political leadership.

## Conclusion

The influence of royal ladies is not incidental or merely ornamental in Alex Rutherford's gripping recreation of the Mughal court in *The Serpent's Tooth*. The novel depicts the intricacies of female agency in a strict patriarchal and hierarchical institution through the character of Nur Jahan. A major element that represents the opposing forces of empowerment and constraint that influenced women's political responsibilities is the veil, both literally and figuratively.

Rutherford's story deepens our understanding of the Mughal imperial women's ability to make significant decisions in succession, diplomacy, and government by highlighting their more nuanced methods of influence. The zenana is shown as a vibrant political arena supported by complex networks of patronage and devotion rather than as an inactive household area. Nur Jahan's maneuvering through the areas demonstrates a kind of power that is based in cultural conventions yet has the capacity to subvert and transform them from inside.

In the end, the book challenges readers to reevaluate how solitude and sovereignty relate to one another. *The Serpent's Tooth* is consistent with feminist historiography, which acknowledges women's ability to exercise power even in restricted settings, by presenting the veil as both a protection and a tactic. The way that history and fiction interact highlights how important it is to revisit gendered authority in colonial settings.

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