



# Empress: The Astonishing Reign of Nur Jahan

*Ruby Lal*

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Four centuries ago, a Muslim woman ruled an empire.

When it came to hunting, she was a master shot. As a dress designer, few could compare. An ingenious architect, she innovated the use of marble in her parents' mausoleum on the banks of the Yamuna River that inspired her stepson's Taj Mahal. And she was both celebrated and reviled for her political acumen and diplomatic skill, which rivaled those of her female counterparts in Europe and beyond.

In 1611, thirty-four-year-old Nur Jahan, daughter of a Persian noble and widow of a subversive official, became the twentieth and most cherished wife of the Emperor Jahangir. While other wives were secluded behind walls, Nur ruled the vast Mughal Empire alongside her husband, and governed in his stead as his health failed and his attentions wandered from matters of state. An astute politician and devoted partner, Nur led troops into battle to free Jahangir when he was imprisoned by one of his own officers. She signed and issued imperial orders, and coins of the realm bore her name.

Acclaimed historian Ruby Lal uncovers the rich life and world of Nur Jahan, rescuing this dazzling figure from patriarchal and Orientalist clichés of romance and intrigue, and giving new insight into the lives of women and girls in the Mughal Empire, even where scholars claim there are no sources. Nur's confident assertion of authority and talent is revelatory. In *Empress*, she finally receives her due in a deeply researched and evocative biography that awakens us to a fascinating history.

## Empress: The Astonishing Reign of Nur Jahan Details

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# **From Reader Review Empress: The Astonishing Reign of Nur Jahan for online ebook**

## **Sabrina says**

This book tells the story of an impressive and powerful woman. It is unique in part because the author refuses to downplay the merits of this woman or how exceptional she was for achieving what she did. In fact, the book makes a point of debunking common ways women in power have been devalued and underrated for centuries, continuing into the present. Not only is the content refreshingly honest about Nur's achievements (and her eventual decline), but it also narrates her life in a novel-like structure that keeps you engaged all the way through.

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## **Caroline Palmer says**

Very interesting !

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## **Kim says**

ARC review.

Dr. Lal's biography of Nur Jahan could be to an artist or writer what Ron Chernow's biography of Alexander Hamilton was to Lin-Manuel Miranda. Too many historians have diminished the accomplishments of truly extraordinary women and I'm so glad to live in a time where new lenses are re-examining historical figures that have been undersung or diminished by biased narratives. Many hear of Nur Jahan as the woman who stole an Emperor's heart, but she was a phenomenally educated, ambitious and accomplished woman in her own right.

I love the moments where Dr. Lal hasn't censored herself from sharing what she imagines with the wealth of knowledge she has guiding that imagination. It's a beautiful way to write a reference book for insuring the next generation of artists jump from these pages to new and improved storytelling about Nur Jahan, the first and only female co-sovereign of her time.

My one great frustration with this book is one of coverage; an enticing allusion that Nur Jahan was wearing a fabric she'd invented left me wishing for a chapter on that instead of a sentence fragment. Did she invent many things? Was she a renowned weaver or seamstress? It reminded me of a painting I saw when I was ten years old; an opening in a wall and a garden beyond. I leaned, hoping I could see more, when I could only see what was painted in the opening. While that was cruel in its lack of detail, some of the men's politicking left me wishing it'd been summarized in something shorter than a full chapter. In the end though, those longer chapters helped provide context for the various decisions Nur Jahan made and the alliances she formed.

Over all, the book is a wonderful look at the verifiable facts of Nur Jahan's life and helps clarify contemporary and post-humous embellishment (perspectives local and abroad) from what we actually know happened from reliable sources. Recommended! Would make a great read for Women's History Month.

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## Wonder Books says

This book is a historical account cum biography of the great and only Empress of Mughal empire who got the prestigious position of a co-sovereign in the Mughal empire, Nur Jahan (Light of the world).

This book contains the story of Nur Jahan from her Birth to Death and even before and after it. It is a collection of various incidents and achievements in the life of Nur Jahan. From her birth on a road beside Kandahar to her becoming the co-sovereign of the Mughal empire beside Jahangir and to her death in 1645. There are also very interesting incidents collected and included in this book like her hunting a tiger, rescuing Jahangir, etc. There is also factual information included about her like details about her parents, origin, family, etc. The best part of this book is that it includes information about her early life also, the period before her turning an empress, which is very hard to find.

The book is written after deep research and piecing together information from various sources like books, journals, stories famous among the common people, etc.

There are given notes regarding the sources of information and short biographies of more than 10 important personalities in the Mughal empire who had any significance in this book or the Mughal empire.

The only bit is that it is not written in a fictional and story-like way so some people will find it hard to read. But for those who want to learn about the great empress Nur Jahan, this is the very book they need.

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## Colleen Courtney says

I first encountered Nur Jahan years ago in the Royal Diaries book about her grand niece Jahanara, where Nur is an irredeemable villain. While I remember that book as one of my favorite in the series, this biography is undoubtedly a more accurate portrayal of an interesting woman. Lal places Nur in the context of her time and culture, showing the depth hidden by popular caricature.

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## Mary Odem says

Wonderful biography! Lal vividly recounts the life and world of Nur Jahan, India's first female ruler. She charts Nur's rise—from her birth to parents fleeing persecution in Persia to her ascent to the throne as co-sovereign of the vast Mughal Empire. Lal reveals how Nur's keen intellect, political acumen and extraordinary talents as poet, expert hunter and architect made her an effective and wise ruler. What gives the book real power is the author's deep knowledge and evocative portrayal of the culture, society and political world of Mughal India that gave rise to this remarkable woman ruler.

Nur Jahan suffered the fate of other powerful women in history: her real political achievements were erased from the historical record by male chroniclers suspicious of female power and obscured in myths and legends about her romantic relationship with Emperor Jahangir. Lal's biography restores to history Nur Jahan's amazing life and full range of accomplishments.

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### **Fran Fisher says**

Very interesting and well-documented, though not as much atmosphere as I like. The Mughal emperor's of India, dropped off by the conquering hordes of Chingiz Khan, are but a whisper in the wind in my world. And that there was also a powerful empress. . .astonishing. I would like to read more of this amazing time in the subcontinent, when religions were tolerated and few Europeans were present.

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### **Ruby says**

"Europeans like Roe and Mundy seemed especially bewildered by the phenomenon of Nur Jahan. She hadn't inherited an empire, as had Queen Elizabeth I of England, crowned twenty years before Nur's birth, nor was she exactly a favorite, the familiar adviser-minister figure they knew, a staple of European courts but always a male. They couldn't wrap their minds around a woman's coming to power because of her own talents, but they could understand a wily consort winning the indulgence of a love-blind emperor."

"Although the idea of universal education for women didn't exist, there was a tradition in Persia and Al-Hind of men acknowledging the intellectual achievements of women. Poets and compilers of biographical compendiums wrote of women who were literary stars, and of those learned in religion. According to these books, thirty-two female scholars lived in Baghdad in the eleventh century; two hundred "noteworthy" women lived in Damascus in the twelfth century. A fifteenth-century Egyptian, Al Sakhwai, wrote Kitab al-Nisa, an extensive collective biography of several women in his time who were transmitters of the traditions of the hadith, the records of the Prophet's words and deeds."

"Nur overrode this tradition of silence. In act after act-hunting, advising, issuing imperial orders and coins, designing buildings-she ensured that her name was etched indelibly in public memory and in history."

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### **Meghna says**

Well researched book. Really wonderful story telling

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### **Bharat D Apte says**

Ruby Lal has written a brilliant and compelling biography of Nur Jahan, that is thought provoking and hard to put down. There are several versions of the story of Nur and Jahangir's first meeting, and her meteoric rise to power as co-sovereign of the Mughal Empire. However, the best part of this detailed, well researched book is that it helps see Nur Jahan and the Mughal Empire in context. What role did Nur's upbringing play in helping her gain power within the Mughal court? What did it mean for her to serve as co-sovereign, and how did Jahangir come to rely on her political savvy? The superb narration of several important episodes in Nur's life answers these questions and more, highlighting her accomplishments as a political advisor, hunter, diplomat and aesthete. A definite must-read!

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## Jason Park says

First-rate historical research produces a focused vision on women and power in the Mughal Empire. My full review: [https://medium.com/@jpark\\_21/empress-...](https://medium.com/@jpark_21/empress-...)

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## SM says

The Light of the World has returned. Nur Jahan Begum is the history of India. She was a Shia married to a Sunni Muslim who was also half Hindu Rajput. Further, Nur Jahan is the only woman ruler among the great Mughals of India. Nur's life history shows her dynamism and boldness. However, there is a very long history of the erasure of Nur Jahan's power that Lal has brilliantly restored.

When it came to hunting, Nur Jahan was a great tiger huntress with a master shot as depicted in a classic portrait that shows her tamping down the gunpowder in a musket. She designed gorgeous gardens and the tomb that became the model for the Taj Mahal itself. She was an accomplished soldier, planning the operation that rescued her husband from a kidnapping. Remnants of imperial orders issued by her, coins minted in her name, paintings that paid homage to her sovereignty and bravery are all evidence of the powerful figure Nur was.

Renowned historian Ruby Lal uncovers the rich life and world of Nur Jahan, restoring her full splendor in the process. Lal has not only rescued this dazzling figure from patriarchal clichés of romance and intrigue, but has also given new insights into the lives of women and girls in the Mughal Empire. In this revisionist feminist biography, Nur Jahan finally receives her due in this deeply researched and evocative biography that awakens us to a fascinating history. This page-turning, eye-opening biography shatters our impressions of India and is an imperative, indispensable, and integral masterpiece that must be read.

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## Holly says

I read a lot of biographies about powerful women, so as soon as I saw it, I was excited.

But sadly, it's just...soulless. There are massive chapters about what the men thought of her, or what her family is doing, or alliances being forged. But she makes very few choices of her own. She makes two interesting decisions, once at the start and once at the end. But the whole book is hyper focused on how the men reacted to her, ironically stripping her of her power once again. Seeing as it's her own biography, she appears shockingly little.

For instance, there's a section that says "(she) May well have actively engaged in both business and charity." And then it just move so straight on to what a man thought of her. There are lots of odd little fragments like that, that are interesting, yet glossed over.

good female biographies include:

"Catherine the great, portrait of a woman" by Massie

"Empress dowager CIXI, the concubine who launched modern China" by Jung Chang

“Joanna the first of Naples...the lady queen” by Goldstone

“Isabella the warrior queen”. By Downy

“Obsessive genius” (a biography of Marie Curie) by Nancy Goldsmith

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## **Rebecca says**

A wonderful, comprehensive biography of a figure I'd only heard about in passing, and then she was always portrayed as a villain. Nur Jahan was truly a remarkable woman, but unfortunately not much of her own voice survives, which explains my only frustration with the book, which is that we seemed very distant from the subject herself and focusing more on what went on around her. However, Lal provides a comprehensive picture of her time, detailing everything from Mughal political intrigue to childbirth practices from different parts of the Mughal empire. This is why we need more female historians: to dig deep and uncover the true histories which have previously been dismissed as frivolous.

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