

Q3. What is the **traditional interpretation** of Nur Jahan? What do the public ‘think they know’ about her?

Q2. How does Ruby describe her identity as an historian? What limitations on women’s history did she want to challenge?

Q1. Read the first two paragraphs. Which three female leaders from history did Ruby learn about when she was young? How did she learn about them?

3 The Mughal Empire

Scholarship reading

*Empress: The Astonishing Reign of Nur Jahan*

by Ruby Lal

I first met Nur Jahan when I was a restless nine-year-old growing up in Dehradun, India, 150 miles north of Delhi. I loved stories, and my motherhad a bagful of wondrous tales for my two younger sisters and me. She would dish out selections as she played with us on hot summer afternoons, oil in our hair, or when she put us to bed. We heard about the brave Rani of Jhanshi who fought against British rule, and the British Queen Victoria.

One afternoon, I was getting bored. ‘I want a story,’ I said. So my mother told me the story of Nur Jahan, wife of the seventeenth-century Mughal emperor Jahangir. My mother called her *Maharani,* Queen of Queens in Hindi. As she told me the story, Nur Jahan felt real to me.

In time, I became a feminist historian. I was interested in challenging the idea that there were no sources to tell us about women’s lives in the history of India. I was invited to write a biography of Nur.

Nur Jahan is a household name in South Asia. She has been the subject of at least eight movies, several plays, an opera, and numerous historical romances in Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, English and other languages of the Indian subcontinent. As I began researching my book, one of my first tasks was to explore what the public knows (or thinks it knows) about Empress Nur.

Many people I interviewed responded enthusiastically about the famous legend of how Nur and Jahangir met. Only two of the 30 Pakistanis that I interviewed in Lahore, however, knew that Nur had been a politically powerful queen and an accomplished poet. All of them began with the royal romance. They told the story of Nur from her birth in 1577 to her marriage in 1611. Secondary school textbooks mention Nur briefly, but they don’t discuss her as a leader.

The emphasis on the romance with Jahangir shortens Nur’s biography in a way that diminishes her. In the popular imagination, Nur’s story seems to stop at the very moment when her life’s best work began.

Historians writing in the 1960s and 1970s told the story of Nur with a fuller biography, as a distinguished queen and great ruler, but they were mainly a list of bullet points. There is no sense of the anger or playfulness we’d expect of a living woman. No details about her support of Jahangir, her ambition, her vulnerability and strengths.

In my book, I don’t intend to undo the imperial romance: Nur and Jahangir earned their love story. But other factors are important, such as Nur’s leadership skills, which deepened and broadened on the road. As she became increasingly responsible for governing, Jahangir was able to pursue his interest in nature.

Nur sat where no other Mughal queen had sat before or would after: in the *jharokha*, a carved balcony projecting from the palace wall, from which government business was conducted. She was the only woman ruler in the long history of India’s great Mughals.

***Abridged and adapted from:***

**Ruby Lal, *Empress: The Astonishing Reign of Nur Jahan,* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018, pp5–13).**

Extract: credit line. Book cover: *Empress: The Astonishing Reign of Nur Jahan* by Ruby Lal, published by W.W. Norton. Reproduced with permission of W.W. Norton.

Q5. Why does Ruby think that Nur Jahan was such a remarkable woman?

Q4. What new parts of Nur Jahan’s life did historians in the 1960s and 1970s include in their histories of Nur? Why wasn’t this enough for Ruby Lal?