



“The Court is crazy.”

It was that statement that the aide remembered. It took him back, to the kotha of Rashidabai, some months ago. The evening was nearly over, the music softer, the chandelier lights lower, the conversations louder and looser around empty pitchers. He was sitting on a stool behind Shamsheer’s couch, watching him lose at cards. Murmurs about the increased taxation on Kafir merchants could be heard from behind a couple of pillars.

At another table, more visible, a drunken conversation about horses among some well-to-do youngsters, not unlike Shamsheer’s own party but Rajputs from clothes and ornament, was interrupted by the arrival of a young man of notable good looks. The enthusiasm with which he was greeted attracted attention.

“Mashallah! Huzoor, salaam! But you were in Narnaul?”

“Abhaysah’b! How was your war, janaab? You look well, jai Ramji ki!”

“And after fighting women, so we heard!”

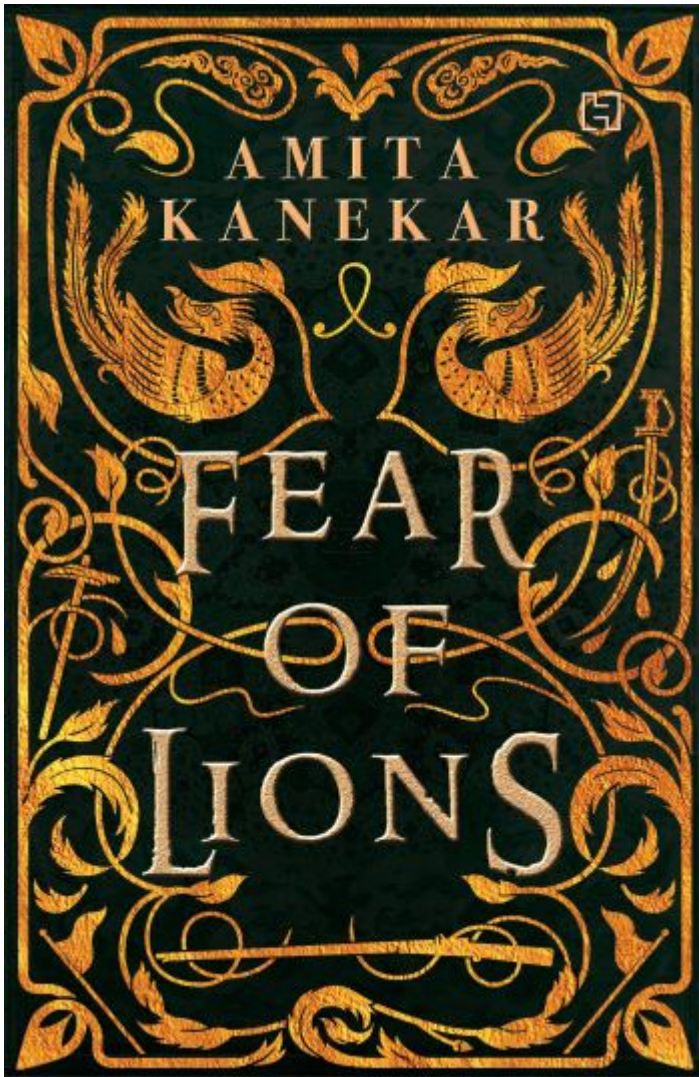
Loud laughs. The young man smiled, rather contemptuously, but returned the greetings.

“Aadaab! We are off-duty for two days, so - “

“But do tell, janaab, is it true about the women?”

“Please!” begged another dramatically.

“Yes, enough jokes! How can women fight?”



Book Excerpt: Amita Kanekar, Fear of Lions

“Like devils!” He sat down, ignoring the tray of goblets proffered by a serving woman, and cast a sharp look around the hall instead. The aide saw a typical young officer’s face, of well-fed birth and arrogance, though the bright stare was too ambitious for dignity.


His dress was sober, a vest of plain black satin over a cream silk jama, none of the colours or embroidery or scarves or brooches of his friends. A modest pearl necklace on his chest, a red tika on his forehead, a sword in a plain sheath on one side of his belt, and a dagger stuck into the other. A bandage around one wrist.

“What - ? Quiet, all of you! Huzoor, tell us more!”

“Actually fighting? What did they look like?”

“Did you see the witch?”

He shook his head but smiled, accepted a goblet now and sipped, then paused, smoothing his moustaches again. He wanted everybody’s attention. Ambitious, for sure.

 “Well...She did not introduce herself, no doubt with good reason.” Another smile. “But the truth is they fought savagely and it was only when the day was done that we realised they were women. By god, it was not easy to face. The men were shaken. We were almost driven from the field.”

Book Excerpt: Amita Banerjee, Fear of Lions

He drank some more.

“But we recovered, for Hazrat Padshah was with us. Ya Khuda, we cannot imagine what the situation would be now otherwise! Actually, we prepared for battle in the wrong frame of mind, thanks to the reports. The local regiments destroyed. The rebel forces growing. And the reports of magic, of this witch. What was the point of fighting – the men asked – when every time your sword brought down an enemy, you were only giving birth to more of his kind, or worse – her kind! We officers had no answer. All the world’s armies have no answer to magic! We still remember the morning of our departure from here, a horribly gloomy morning, the sky cloudy and the horses skittish. Bad signs everywhere. The astrologers advised us not to leave. But that was before Hazrat Shahinshah arrived at the Lahore Darwaza...”

A pause, everybody held their breath. “Mashallah, that moment! He climbed the podium and personally unwrapped new banners for the pennants, and began to pray over them. The effect was amazing. The entire world became quiet as he prayed, we could hear even the...”

The whole hall was leaning forward, completely rapt, but the aide heard something too. A giggle? Surely not?

“He was as in a trance, whispering to the banners. We could not move, or breathe even. One hour, perhaps more. The new banners were then raised on their stands, carrying invocations to all the gods, in Arabic, Farsi and Urdu, and a new strength seemed to enter all of us. Suddenly we were eager for battle – “

He stopped because the sound was unmistakable now. The speaker looked around

sharply and located the laughter at the table which had earlier muttered about the taxes on Kafir merchants.

Book Excerpt: Amrita Kanekar, Fear of Lions

He raised his voice. "Huzoor? Do you laugh at us?"

"Apologies." The voice. The aide could not see the speaker though. "Apologies...Please continue. It is very entertai - I mean - " A smothered giggle. "Interesting."

The officer rose, his cheeks dark, and a carved dagger suddenly in his hand. The entire hall leant forward again. But he took only two steps before a serving girl carrying drinks managed to rush into him. The aide heard gasps and the breaking of glass as she was thrust aside.

Other girls followed, however, with kebabs and hookahs. The musicians began a new beat as a new dancer - as lissom, doe-eyed and scantily draped as the others, but perhaps a little bit more so - appeared on the dance floor. If all this was not enough, the owner of the kotha, the renowned Rashidabai herself, shimmering in silk and diamonds, appeared from nowhere to lay a plump, bejewelled and distinctly imperious hand on the young man's arm.

"Bismillah! Let us introduce you, janaab. Huzoor is recognised far and wide as Miyan Abul Mamuri of the Intelligence Office, the man who knows everything worth knowing." She paused to smile at the pillar, warningly. "And how can we ever do justice to Huzoor, our lord Abhay Singh? Our most promising ahadi, inshallah soon to be mansabdar!"

That explained the look, both arrogant and ambitious. Ahadis were usually of good family, but not the best. The right caste, but poor or unconnected.

"Huzoor," said the voice, sounding more sober. "I am at fault. Huzoor's account is quite accurate. Sadly so. I recall the reports of how Hazrat Akbar Padshah would have been on his horse and halfway to the battlefield within minutes of learning of rebellion. But here, I was embarrassed. Was this really the same blood, I asked myself, that needs not just prayers to defeat ganwaar, but also magical dust and potions, not to mention blessings from every shrine and matha, and holy fool - ?"

"Huzoor!" snapped Rashidabai. Silk brocade, gold filigree 34 earrings and bold décolletage,

all wobbled together emotionally.



Book Excerpt: Amita Kanekar, Fear of Lions

“Huzoor,” echoed the promising ahadi, but with a smile. “Be assured, this is indeed the same peerless blood. Why, it was Akbar Padshah who never raised his sword without the blessings of his priests, of every faith. Our Padshah is certainly as humble, and, as we know, as blessed.”

“We do not want to interrupt...” A manifest lie from the lady of the house. “But we must remind our honourable lords that this may be our last few days with you. The kanchanis have been told not to perform at Court. Only Khuda knows what the future holds for us...”

It was an excellent change of subject. An argument began between those who could see the end of civilisation and others who could see no problem at all, since the kanchanis were still welcome at Court and receiving better salaries than before. Besides, the Court was not the world, nor even the city.

That was when the voice had announced that the Court was, in fact, crazy. The announcement was followed by a pause. The aide knew why. It was not an unusual opinion, but to hear it expressed in a mixed gathering, and by one from the Intelligence Office, was a bit startling.

The lady’s response was soothing. “Mamuri Sahib, these are the decisions of Huzoor Muhtasib”s office, not the Court.”

But the mention of the religious officers in charge of maintaining public morals, nowadays endowed with extra powers, had the opposite effect.

“The great Muhtasib - well, let us rejoice! Let us ban the kanchanis, overtax the Kafirs, and pour away all the evil liquor!” He paused to do the last, into his own throat.

“Mamuri Sahib...”

“At least we have jokes. Do you know, when the Padshah asked his lords to plan a campaign to crush Shivaji, Mahabat Khan asked why - couldn’t a fatwa from the Qazi do the job?!”



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Book Excerpt: Amita Kanekar, Fear of Lions