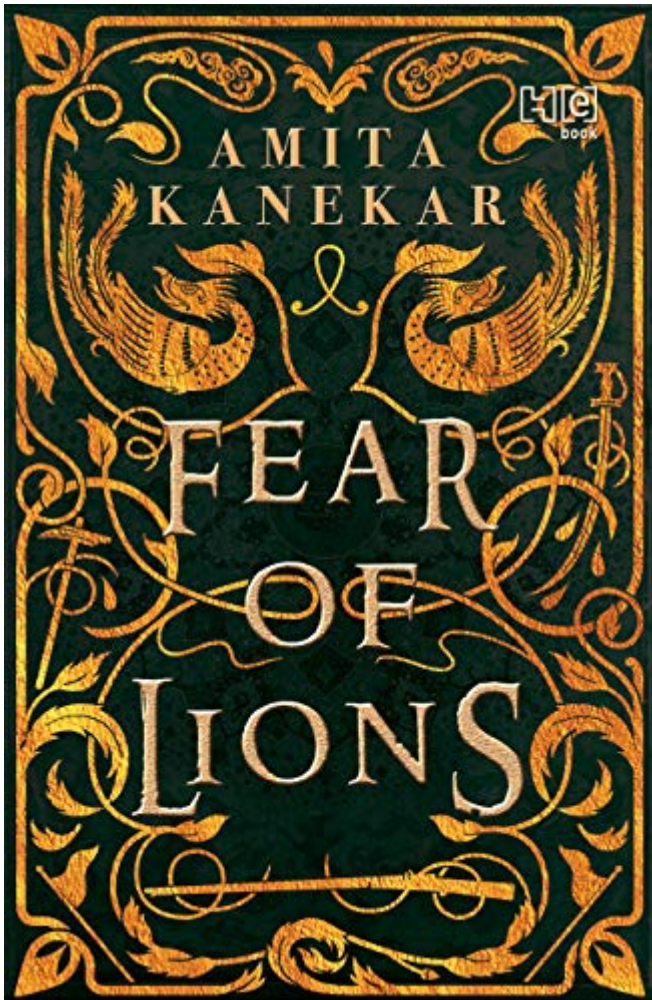





If history is to be creative, to anticipate a possible future without denying the past, it should, I believe, emphasize new possibilities by disclosing those hidden episodes of past when, even if in brief flashes, people showed their ability to resist, to join together, occasionally to win. I am supposing, or perhaps only hoping, that the future may be found in the pasts fugitive moments of compassion rather than its solid centuries of warfare

The above quote from Howard Zinn's classic, *A People's History of the United States*, captures the essence of Amita Kanekar's, *Fear of Lions*! Unlike what the blurb would lead you to believe, it is not the recounting of the adventures of two young Mughal nobles, but the story of a people who want only dignity and peace and are exterminated for that desire as sacrifice on the altar of caste imperialism. The nobles are the spark for igniting the narration.



This story could have happened at any point of time in South Asian history. It reminded me of a case that I was peripherally involved in, that happened in a Maratha fortified village/town called Puntamba, 16 kilometers from Shirdi in 2001. A group of landless people, mostly Bhil adivasis cleared uncultivated fallow land – that technically belonged to Maharashtra State

 Farming Corporation (MSFC) – off thorny undergrowth and started cultivating the same with sustenance crops like jowar, bajra and gram. Add to this the fact that MSFC had not paid wages to 3000 agricultural labourers since 1990. This seemingly innocuous attempt of these people to be self sufficient had farfetched consequences for the caste rural economy. For one, these people who were otherwise a source of cheap labor became suddenly unavailable. Secondly, they were not dependant anymore on the village economy for their sustenance, which meant that they did not need to participate in the village caste hegemony either and finally they had created magic out of fallow land that the dominant Maratha caste believed rightfully belonged to them. Upset over the change in the village socio economic tableau, the Marathas mounted a relentless attack through state machinery like MSFC, the police etc., apart from regular violence and harassment. The adivasis resisted effectively this by organizing themselves as Bhoomi Hakka Andolan Samiti (locally known as ABHA) which enraged the Marathas further. So, on 25th June 2001, when around 200 people were peacefully protesting against the release of a local Congress leader involved in the abuse of a minor girl, the police got the pretext to try and break the agitation and opened fire at the crowd targeting the leaders of the movement. Two of the leaders who were present at the agitation were shot to be killed at short range. When there was a public outcry against the killing – the remaining leaders and the movement was branded as Maoists and the police filed counter cases against them. This could be Amita's story, except set in Aurangzeb's period and intrigues and technology of that time.

Fear of Lions is a simple narrative with multiple layers. It sets the bar for South Asian historical fiction. Aurangzeb is neither vilified nor celebrated, he and his reign are showcased with all its problematic and a rare honesty. The book sets up describing every aspect of socio political life during this period – caste, bureaucracy, political intrigues, army, revenue system, administration, aristocracy, commerce, migration, mobility etc. through an intertwined fictionalized narratives about individuals. If I were teaching a course on this period of history, I would prescribe this as an essential reading.

The fascinating part of the book for me is the protagonist who holds the stories together. Rather than a protagonist, Abul Mamuri is the person who holds together the diverse characters and narratives that make this novel. Born as a half caste, he owes his social mobility to his linguistic and knowledge skills and apprenticeship to a leading and liberal scholar in the good books of the royalty. The same skill sets gets him a job as a spy with the intelligence network of the regime and that is the context that he sets about investigating the mysterious story of a rebellion, the history of which the regime wants to erase from public memory – for the rebellion was by outcastes – unseeables as Amita calls them – and unseeable women at that, not following the decorum of women, wielding swords and modern guns who humiliated the mighty Mughal army successfully. It is in this investigation that

Mamuri unravels the fascinating array of characters and their lives.



Another important facet of the book is the narration of the process in which memories of histories and cultures of marginalized peoples are deliberately erased or manipulated so the hegemonic status quo can be perpetuated – the process of dehumanizing peoples. This is what Mamuri is trying to subvert with the limited means that he has within the system. For me, it underlines my belief that only people from oppressed communities can understand marginalization and therefore this is further argument for adequate representation in positions of powers, so the tribe of Marmuri may increase.

Review: Fear of Lions

But, for me the most touching narrative was about war – not the war of rebellion that this book is about, but a war for power, the war of control over nations. This story set in the war of succession between Dara Shukoh and Aurangzeb is narrated by a Muslim barber Ali and his experience with his childhood unseeable friend Bali. It captures the pointlessness of war and more importantly demonstrates effectively who the people who join armies are and why they do it, often in the face of certain death. Amita de-exoticizes war and brings it down to the level of humanity. This part of the novel reminded me of the classic Yeats poem, – *an Irish airman foresees his death!*

The novel becomes complete only through it's setting in the liberatory framework of Kabir – introduced into this book by a strange mystic fond of modern guns and hobnobbing with the unseeables called Birbhan – and an equally strong woman Tara – who though not explicitly characterized is the person who carries the story on her straight shoulders. Of course the caste society believes her to be a witch because of her strength!

The motif of the novel is of course the stranglehold of caste system and how Brahminism ingratiate itself, co-opts and corrupts any system that it comes in touch with. The paradox of the power of the Brahmins in Aurangzeb's political society cannot be lost – given that Aurangzeb is sold as the hated poster boy of Muslimophobia by Hindutva!

There are some books that the reader doesn't want to get over. *The fear of Lions* is one such book. I wouldn't hesitate to call it the best narrative on Aurangzeb's period that I have ever come across. After *Spoke in the Wheel* that deals with Ashoka's imperialism and this book dwelling on Aurangzeb, I hope Amita sits down to do sequels set in British and post British India.

If there is any fault with the book, it is that it doesn't have a glossary of terms or an introductory note to the language and cultural references used making it slightly inaccessible to people who aren't familiar with the language and cultural context.



The memory of oppressed people is one thing that cannot be taken away, and for such people, with such memories, revolt is always an inch below the surface.
Review: Fear of Lions

- Howard Zinn



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