

Courtesy: Percy Bharucha, National Herald.

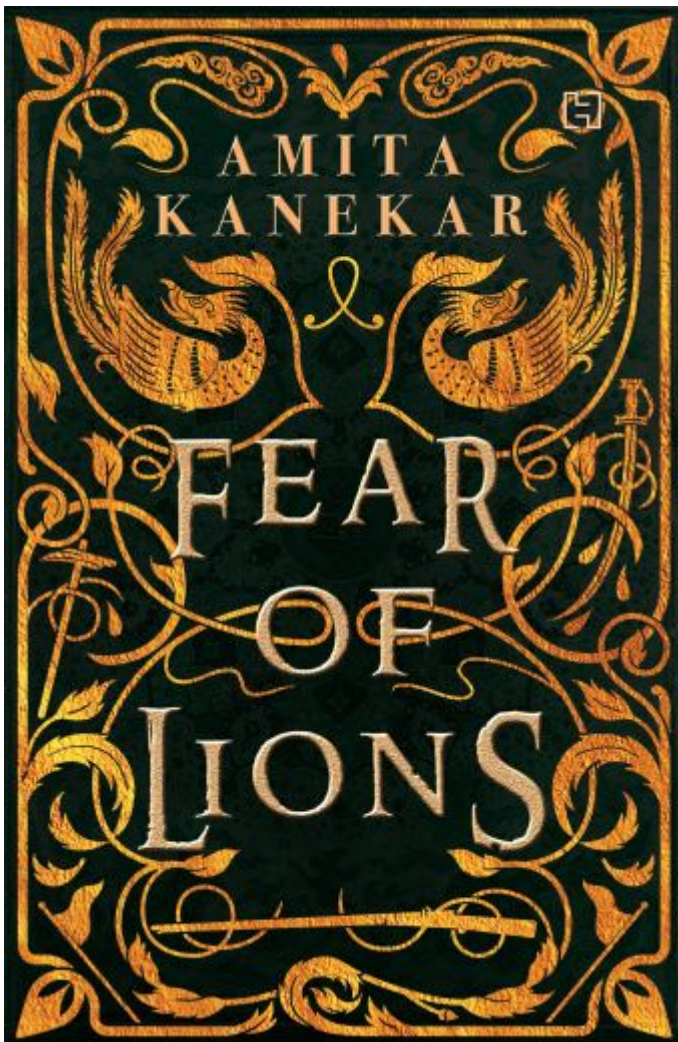


Review: Fear of Lions

A botched-up hunt and the summary execution of a rude peasant seem to be just another day in the life of a nobleman. Unbeknownst to them, this sets into motion a complex chain of events leading to an insurrection that questions dharma and challenges the very foundation of Hindustan. One so insidious that it forces the couch-potato badshah Aurungzeb out of the comfort of Shahjahanabad and into battle.

Amita Kanekar's second novel, *Fear Of Lions*, chronicles a period of change and unrest 12 years into the rule of the pious Aurangzeb Alamgir. Having deposed of his father and brothers, he introduces austerity measures that disrupt the hedonistic lifestyle of his courtiers. Science had just begun making inroads - aided by the firangi traders and priests - into a society so far run by tradition and faith. Their insistence on *aql* rather than *taqleed* (proof over faith) found unwelcome appeal amongst those that had been relegated by birth as the lowest of the low. Under Aurungzeb, modernism clashed with the traditions that had formed the social fabric of India's agrarian economy. The ancient Indian order that defined identity and kept the peace between the subjugated and the landowners, the menials and the noblemen, the unseeables and the Kshatriyas, the Mughals and the Rajputs; and allowed for the rules of unjust taxation, unpaid labour and lifelong debt was now forced to contend with a group of guerrilla peasants led by a mysterious priest and a witch, both followers of the mystic Kabir.

In striking, intricate detail, the author stages the glory of Delhi and the opulence of the Mughal court. Painstaking attention has been paid to sartorial style, the food and the architecture of the time, for instance, Kanekar's vivid description of Zeenat's zenana covers the seasonal variations in upholstery (white muslin during summer and dark-pink Chinese satin during winter), the use of muslin curtains for mosquitoes and silk curtains for privacy; the ubiquity of Belgian glass lamps and Irani carpets. These descriptions make the setting as visually tangible as an Ikea catalogue page. 'Ma'jun hemp chews', the nobleman's candy; the ruby set amongst diamonds ring- these minutiae transport the reader into the author's historical world and bring to life her characters, the state life, and the customs and traditions of the time. The phrase 'impossible wealth' as it appears in the blurb is amply demonstrated in resplendent depictions. The use of the majestic plural or 'the royal we' takes a bit of getting used to, but it further augments the realm that Kanekar invokes.



A remarkable observation of the book is how unified the various castes and men are across religions upon the singular point of women and their place in society. Rajputs, Mughals, Brahmins - all of them get along when it comes to the confinement of their women as a mark of their status. Mughal nobles had co-opted the idea from the Rajputs, boasting that their daughters had never seen the entrance of their own zenana and on the rare occasion they were allowed out they would always be in purdah and in noble company.

What is remarkable in this story is the author's exceptional capture of the emotional reactions of her male characters when confronted with the quiet confidence of a woman - alienation caused due to the feeling of unfamiliarity in such a situation; the reciprocal need to frighten, perhaps through violence; and the smattering of fear at the potential loss of servility they have so far enjoyed.

Another spectre that haunts Indian history is the caste system. The book dissects it in great detail within the fictional setting. Kanekar does a wonderful job of demonstrating how this system strips away the basic rights of certain communities - of 'menial' widows raped by nephews of the Muqqadam, of the unseeables who can only build their huts close to the cemetery gates, of the shepherd boys who fail to return home and are found in the morning

bruised and bleeding between their legs. One wonders how long modern India has taken to repeat these horrors – or if it even has. The silent exodus of the menials and the steps they take next is a potent example of their ingenuity.

Review: Fear of Lions

The succession wars that preceded Aurungzeb’s rise to power have been excellently narrated. Kanekar aptly describes the broad sweeps of combat, the epic proportion and scale of the armies, the betrayals and violence that follow.

She insightfully traces the aftermath of these wars in the cities that are near the battlefield – the famines, the constant looting and pillaging, and the addition of new women to brothels.

*Fear Of Lions* is a masterful combination of history and evocative prose. Kanekar brings new dimensions to the intrinsic links between tradition and greed, land and power. It is a joy to follow her characters, in particular the lover’s journey to meet her beloved far from the shadow of the crescent moon; and Abul Mamuri, the eternal gadfly and irreverent interrogator. Mamuri’s unquenchable curiosity and diplomacy to uncover the machinations within the walled city are amusing and a treat to read. The book is surprisingly complex, and it is intriguing to see how it brings out the interdependence of faith, land, occupation, identity and the fear caused when these delicate systems are questioned. Much like her witch, Kanekar writes with fury and gunpowder. This book is not to be missed.



Share this...

