

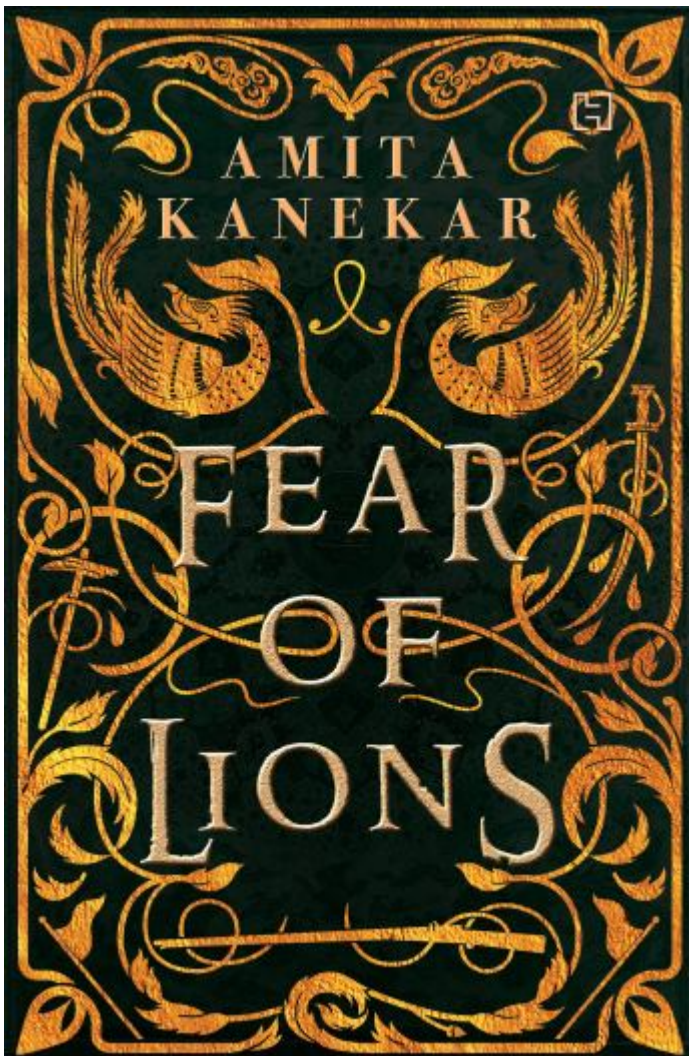
Courtesy: Iris C F Gomes, Prutha Goa.



Amita Kanekar: Interview at the Launch of “Fear of Lions”

Amita Kanekar’s new historical novel Fear of Lions transports us into the world of Aurangzeb – a world of contradictions, where extravagant lifestyle and abject poverty are prevalent side by side...where a rebellion so powerful, led by a rumoured witch, threatens the Mughal Empire. This is Amita’s second novel after A Spoke in the Wheel which was set during the period of Emperor Ashoka’s rule.

The novel took about 15 years to reach its culmination with the interspersed other works such as The Portuguese Sea Forts of Goa, with Chaul, Korlai and Vasai along the way. It was mainly reworking the original writing and more in depth research that took up time. ‘I changed my attitude to the story and the way I looked at how it should be written because of exposure to ideas about caste, about anti-caste struggle, because basically this is an anti-caste story,’ says Amita. The struggle of taking the research she had done and drawing a well-crafted appealing story out of it was a real one. Lack of personal knowledge or not enough information about rural conditions of the time proved a hindrance in the continuity of framing the storyline. It was finally in 2017 that Amita worked intensively to complete the novel.



Unlike *A Spoke in the Wheel*, *Fear of Lions* has all its sources listed. Amita says, 'A big question that came up later for that book (*A Spoke in the Wheel*) was, "What are your sources?" I was unprepared at the time because it was my first work of historical fiction.'

There are conflicting views among the researchers she has read with regard to what the prominent problems during Aurangzeb's rule were. Some writers say that taxation was an issue while others say it was the shortage of land to be given to those being asked to join the empire as nobles; still others say it was the religious beliefs of the time. 'In fact, this is why I started writing fiction. When I wrote about the Buddha in my first book, I was interested in nonfiction...in social struggles,' says Amita. The conflicting views she encountered as well as the fact that she was not an expert in the fields she was researching made taking a creative approach far more conducive in putting forth certain ideas in a book. She says, 'When the question came of choosing between the scholars, one could take a creative decision about what could be right. I don't justify it, I'm just going with it. Though to some extent the novels do justify it...why I think it's right.' There are arguments presented through characters in the book that debate ideas, and these are ideas of the scholars of today about what may have happened in the past.

Amita's process of putting together a historical novel involves laying the foundation of the historical facts and research chronologically and then filling in the spaces with her own creativity. There are also characters in historical records whose identities are disputed. For example, in *Fear of Lions* there is a character called Abul Mamuri who is a government servant in the novel. The real Mamuri has written a history of Aurangzeb's time. Earlier historians of Aurangzeb's time say he's a noble, an amir of Persian background, and this description of his character is what Amita went with originally in her writing.

Some of the information that forms a part of the novel has been taken from contemporary diaries of the time. These were extremely important for research because after the tenth year of his rule Aurangzeb put a stop to the tradition of maintaining a court diary about his life because he thought it was un-Islamic. One of the diaries which is written by Mamuri gives a positive picture of the rebellion depicting the rebels as being anti-caste and coming from diverse backgrounds right from sweepers to tanners to peasants, groups that never came together. These rebels did not have priests or rituals, women had a significant role to play, and they upheld the truth at all costs. There were other accounts too that portrayed the rebels in a bad light.

Mamuri's positive approach is why Amita included him as a protagonist. She changed his role to that of a government servant after reading some more recent research on the man which says that, on the basis of his writing, Mamuri could be three different men, two Persians and

a lower status individual. The writings conform to the dates of the third Mamuri, a non-Persian unknown. 'I chose that so I could invent a background for him which could explain why he looked at them (the rebels) in a positive way,' says Amita. Mamuri's background also served to show that the Mughal court had people from all types of classes and having different levels of credentials. Although the main aim of the novel was to show the anti-caste struggle, Amita has tried to describe Mughal society in its complexity where even a nonentity like Mamuri could climb the rungs of prominence.

The novel brings to light the connection of Goa with the Mughal Empire and its cultural significance. Trade with the Portuguese led to changing crops in agriculture besides other artistic influences. 'Continuously there are references to changing crops because it is based on a rural uprising. The issue of agriculture is big and agriculture is changing rapidly. Cash crops are coming in and cash crops are being encouraged,' says Amita. Along with the Mamuri-Goa link, there is also reference to Aurangzeb and his Viceroy of the Deccan having a taste for good quality coffee brought in by the Portuguese.

The story of the uprising of the rebels of Narnaul is told from the perspective of the Mughal elites and not from the point of view of the rebels. Amita says, 'There are some of us who belong to the privileged sections and benefit continuously from the existence of caste. If we ourselves tell the story of caste, of those who are fighting against us, we are appropriating somebody else's story while at the same time benefiting from caste. This idea of appropriating the story of these rebels disturbed me because I have never, and probably my family has never, gone through what they have gone through, so who am I to tell their story?'

One of Amita's main motivations behind writing a historical novel is the popularisation of history because she says most of what people believe to be history is actually myth and usually Brahmanical myth, for example, the story of Parashuram in Goa. She says, 'This intermingling of history and myth where myth is dominant is the norm.' If authentic historical facts are presented to the public in an attractive package, it will help educate them by making history more accessible. She says, 'The past is really important. The past is not over. We can see the past is part of the politics of today. The past is part of our identity. It is part of what you are proud of or ashamed of.'

Fear of Lions by Amita Kanekar is published by Hachette India and is priced at Rs 399.

(This article is based on the interaction between Amita Kanekar and Dale Luis Menezes at The Dogears Bookshop, Margao, Goa.)

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