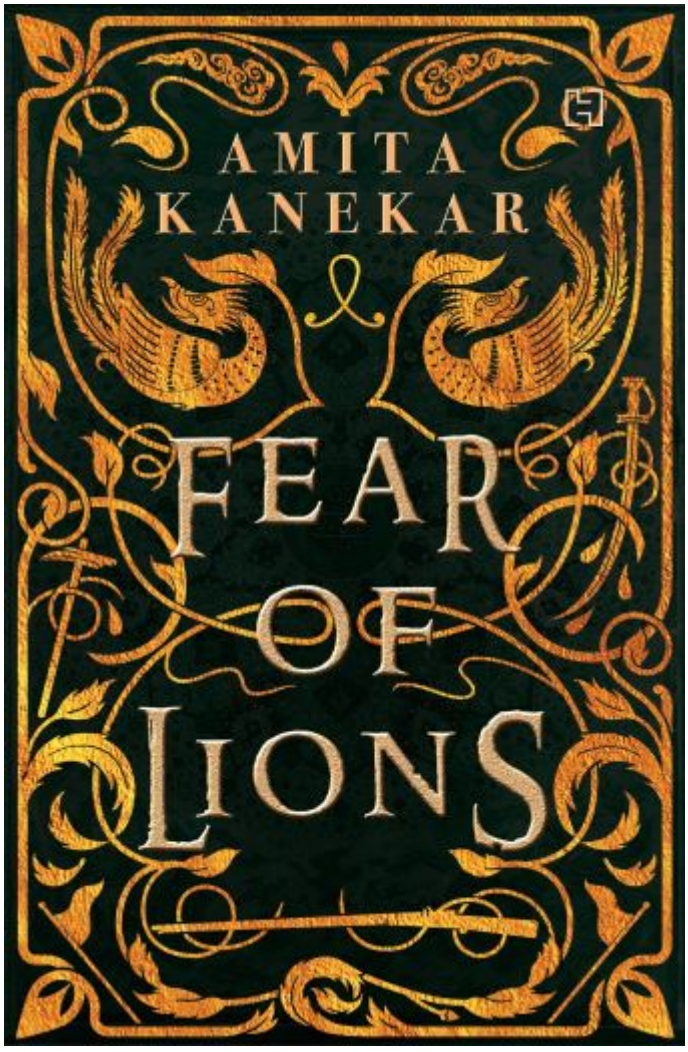
Courtesy: Surpriya Nair, Mumbai Mirror.

In 2005, Goan historian Amita Kanekar published A Spoke in the Wheel, her first novel. It retold the story of the Buddha, and of his mighty disciple Ashoka, through a Marxist lens, challenging the myths of their popular legends by restoring their political and economic narratives to them. A decade later, Kanekar published a new edition of the novel, having rewritten parts of it. The changes "were inspired largely by Ambedkarite interpretations and critiques" she added in the acknowledgements, "…all part of my own ongoing struggle against the casteism that colours the thinking and practice of every savarna person of South Asian heritage."



I was struck by this decision, which seemed to indicate an unusual artistic humility. Perhaps another critic would argue that any story so dominated by political ideas must be a brittle and formulaic one. Certainly, A Spoke in the Wheel is sometimes exegetical to the point of being preachy, but it is thrilling and absorbing at other times. Above all, it establishes Kanekar as a writer with a generous and expansive view of Indian history.

Her new novel, Fear of Lions, reimagines a little-regarded episode of that history: the Satnami rebellion of Narnaul, Punjab, in 1672. Not far from Mughal Delhi, this community of caste-

rejecting, musket-wielding agriculturists rose up against unfair taxation, and successfully fought back waves of imperial force before they were crushed. Inspired by Shaikh Raidas, as they must have called the anti-caste guru who is better known today as Sant Ravidas, the 'Followers of Truth' in Fear Of Lions create a proud, self-reliant community tills the land, shares its resources and teaches women how to shoot.

Their life is a rejection of the brutal humiliations of the surrounding world, where caste Hindus and Muslims alike render them untouchable, even "unseeable". The emperor Aurangzeb is a puritan, and seemingly a zealot, but his India teems with the energies unleashed by centuries of Mughal rule. The words of Kabir flow through the societies of the Gangetic plain, seeking freedom and the light of reason. The Deccan "mountain rat" Shivaji disturbs the dreams of Hindustan's complacent aristocrats.

Sikh gurus reject old social codes and organise against Mughal might; Catholic Goa's Portuguese merchants and preachers alike find takers in markets upstream from the Bay of Bengal. Many of these streams feed into the story of the Satnamis. But Kanekar doesn't ventriloquise for these revolutionaries. Instead, their story accumulates in layers, through the rumours, reports and inquiries of their enemies. One, a free-thinking intelligence agent struggling up the ranks, finds himself a reluctant admirer. Others, like the teenaged Muslim noblewoman fleeing her zenana to meet a Rajput soldier she loves, can only interpret their stories as tales of
witchcraft and madness.

As Fear of Lions unfolds, so does Kanekar's interpretation of the story's distortions and erasures, subject to the power structures of imperial Hindustan. There has been an efflorescence of popular writing about the Mughals in recent years, but few highlight what seems obvious after Fear of Lions – that Mughal society was deeply indebted to, and protective of, the caste system. The empire after Akbar was shaped by its influential brahmins, as well as by the Rajputs whose bloodlines intermingled with that of the imperial family. (The historian Ira Mukhoty offers a good account of how this changed the Mughal zenana in Akbar's time in her book, Daughters of the Sun.)

There are times when historical context threatens to weigh Kanekar's narrative down, throwing us out of the story – the array of religious influences on the creed of the rebels, for example, should expand readers' imaginations, but can sometimes read like the author debating with opponents invisible to us. Her characters have a tendency towards public address, careful to fill in the gaps in our knowledge even in their innermost thoughts. The narrative's own staccato asides smartly lecture readers on what would sometimes be better inferred. Still, all long and ambitious novels run the risk of unwieldiness, and Kanekar largely

steers us through the dark and complex waters of her story with bold, even stubborn momentum.

The poet Karthika Naïr re-interpreted parts of the Mahabharata through the voices of the epic's marginal characters. She called her book Until the Lions, inspired by the proverb, "Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter." Fear of Lions not only recalls the truth of this motto, but infuses it with promise. The voices of free people may be stifled by powerful enemies. But rebellion against injustice, even brutally suppressed, can trouble history in unexpected ways. Erased or transformed out of existence, truth may nonetheless be rediscovered in time. It may even show up in fiction.

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