

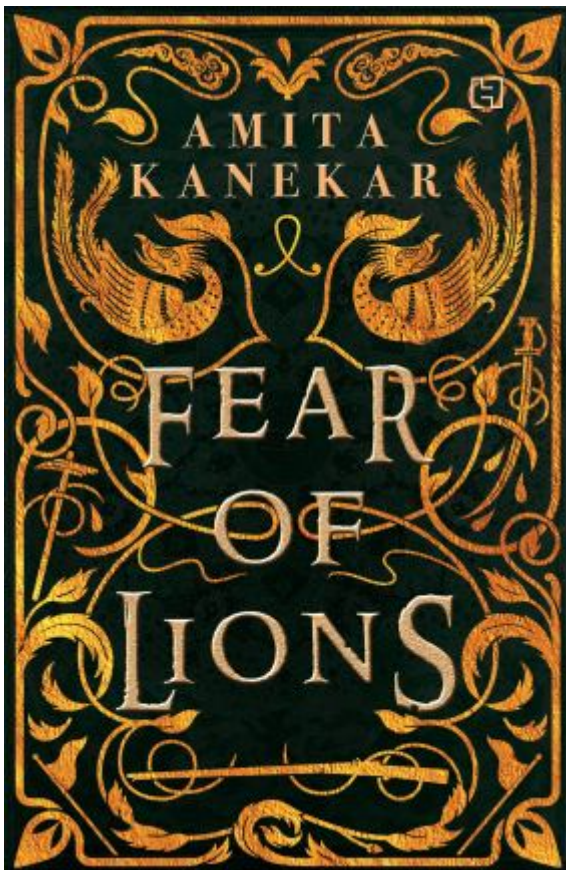
Courtesy: R. Krithika, The Hindu.



Amrita Kanekar's brilliant second novel is based on a little-known revolt of the late 1600s. The Satnami Revolt drew its name from the community involved; farmers, artisans, traders and others who eschewed caste and religious boundaries and lived as self-reliant groups. The revolt in Narnaul, near Delhi, was triggered by a fight between a foot soldier and a Satnami: it escalated into an armed conflict that dragged Emperor Aurangzeb into the field.

Review: Fear of Lions

Kanekar adds another kind of rebellion to this foundation: Zeenat, the daughter of a high-ranking noble, is running away from an arranged marriage to join her lover, a Rajput, who lives near Narnaul. As the author cuts between the two, the reader is introduced to a range of characters — members of the nobility, important army officials, soldiers from the ranks, women from different socio-economic classes, peasants, traders — who react to the events around them in different ways. Kanekar does not zoom in on individual character but paints the happenings in broad strokes and uses this to show how a story changes with each telling; that it's the teller's perspective which is crucial.



The other important aspect is the role of caste and religion. With a lot of historical material drawn from records of the Satnami community, Kanekar examines the nature of society in Mughal times. While Akbar had an overarching interest in religions and even founded a syncretic creed called Din-i-Ilahi, the empire on the whole kept the foundations of the caste system intact.

In the book, both rebellions are doomed to failure. Zeenat's lover sends her back to her father. She is imprisoned in a dungeon and offered a knife. We are left with a picture of Zeenat blaming her maid for bewitching her when the latter has actually risked all for her mistress.

Some portions are heavy going, but overall Kanekar keeps the reader hooked. Just like she did with her earlier book, *A Spoke in the Wheel*, Kanekar shows here too that history is not, as our school textbooks would have us believe, top down.

A bottom-up approach could help change how we look at things.



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