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Book Review

MEMORY OF LIGHT

by Ruth Vanita, Penguin Random House India Private Limited, India, Kindle Edition, 2020, pp. 159, ISBN 978-0-143-49766-0 (e-book)

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Memory of Light by Ruth Vanita, Penguin Random House India Private Limited, India, Kindle Edition, 2020, pp. 159, ISBN: 978-0-143-49766-0 (e-book).

Reviewed by Kashish Dua, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi.

Memory of Light is Ruth Vanita's first novel but its seeds were sown and nurtured in the years of her academic research on gender, sexuality, and *rekhti* poetry. While it is possible to read the novel separate from the author's scholarly reputation, it cannot be seen in isolation from the cultural world of 18th century Awadh. For it is this world that simultaneously brought the book to life, and gets a life of its own through the story of love between two women who belong to different courtesan households located in Lucknow and Kashi.

The novel takes the reader to the interiors of *kothas* and amidst an atmosphere of conversations, poetry, dance and wine, sets the foundation of love between Nafis Bai and Chapla Bai. While making the modern reader privy to the poignantly articulated passion, envy, yearning and uncertainty, the novel reveals what happens to a same-sex relationship that blossoms in a comparatively tolerant pre-colonial India. The major plot of Nafis and Chapla's relationship intersects with the love story of Hazrat Khwaja Hasan, a not so affluent poet, and Murad Bakhsh (Bakhshi), the star performer of a rival *kotha* in Nafis's neighbourhood. The much more stringent social hindrances faced by this male–female romance for its economically threatening alliance and how it contrasts with Nafis and Chapla's seemingly accepted yet silent relationship lends a fascinating element to the novel.

The immediate reception of the book has largely been concerned with the representation of same-sex love. While it definitely is about the love that transgresses gender boundaries, it is as much, as its title suggests, about memory, passage of time and recollection. Narrated in Nafis's voice, *Memory of Light* is a story about stories that pour out of her memories—memories of lightning (Chapla), of poets Insha and Rangin, and of weddings and festivals that keep her preoccupied in both dreams and wakefulness. Right from the opening chapter, Nafis longs to remain in the world of her dreams to stay close to Chapla, making it clear to the reader that the love story that is being recounted did not take the desired turn:

> Past and present stone walls, future a window of air. Between us now, Chapla, is the fourth wall, a wall of light, without windows. Dreaming, I pass through it. I close my eyes, hoping to return to the place where I was a moment ago, but the wall refuses to melt . . . (Location no. 30–35)

What makes the story intriguing is Nafis's self-awareness as the author of her narrative. She pens it down knowing well that memory can be the 'most perfidious of hypocrites', and presents only a selective perspective of events (Location no. 2522). This is why the otherwise engaging storytelling of Nafis is accompanied with a constant curiosity to know Chapla's side of the narrative.

Along with Nafis and Chapla, the fictional world of the novel is inhabited by historical figures ranging from poets like Insha, Rangin and Jur'at, to rulers like Asaf-ud Daula and Europeans such as King George III, amongst others. However, much of the cultural and social terrain of this fictional world arises from the descriptions and references found in poetry of the time, both *rekhti* and *rekhta*. As Vanita herself wrote, finding 'one-to-one equivalence' between *rekhti* poetry and the lived reality of 18th century Awadh might be misplaced, yet it definitely did draw upon the everyday lives of women of that time (2012: 5). This is precisely why *Memory of Light*, rooted in *rekhti*, resists any kind of genre categorisation. The difficulty of defining the novel through labels of historical fiction or lesbian fiction speaks of the merit of its conception.

Throughout the course of the novel, Vanita introduces several characters from different rungs of society who either form an integral part of Nafis and Chapla's lives or appear only in the incidents they tell each other. The women in the novel appear equally if not more active than the men in the public life of the city. The story's tapestry gets enriched through characters like Dadda, the nursemaid, and Mughalani, the old seamstress, who represent those women who both received financial sustenance through employment at the *kothas* and, in turn, sustained them through their indispensable services. Revolving around the lives of these reasonably empowered occupants of the kothas, the plot progresses through the delights of female banter, shopping and dressing up. The lightness of the scenes of elaborate preparations for court performances and weddings accompanied with the drama that unfurls over copied designs of dresses, undercuts the melancholia of Nafis and Chapla's troubled romance.

What is bound to keep the reader engaged is the excitement of a budding chemistry between Nafis and Chapla and the very domestic nature of their adventures to steal some alone time away from the hustle bustle of the city's popular *kothas*. From writing couplets with their names joined together to sending secret messages written in milk that could only be seen when held against the lamp, Nafis and Chapla's story offers all the thrills of carrying out a hidden courtship. This same-sex amour appears normalised in the novel not just through the way Vanita describes its heart-warming details, but also through the fact that their love is not entirely a secret, after all. The ghazals dedicated to them by Mir Insha, the subtle teasing directed at them by Nafis's friend Sharad, and the excursions arranged for them by Nafis's admirer Madan, provide a sympathetic view of the pleasures and pains of their courtship. Vanita also does not shy away from letting the reader witness the erotic aspects of the passion between Nafis and Chapla. The carefully placed scenes of physical intimacy keep in tandem with the aesthetics of the novel which neither offer a desexualised picture of the relationship nor use it for the purpose of titillation.

Although Nafis's narrative is primarily about Chapla, her friendship with Sharad holds an equally important place in her dreams and storytelling. Sharad's interest in men and his general closeness to Nafis allows him to be her confidant and support system in times of distress.

The fairly simple yet elegant use of language seamlessly incorporates 18th century local words, expressions and even rituals of exchanging cardamom, or a doubled fruit like *supari*, to officially mark sexual relationships between women. The inclusion of poems in Urdu and their translations in English manages to retain cultural gravity while making the book available for a wider readership. The occasional moments where the narrative tends to meander is when its latter half gets crowded with conversations of historical characters that are not fully developed.

The novel, otherwise, successfully leaves a taste of Awadh's *nankhatai* and *lauki ka halwa*, and of a time when same-sex love flourished but birds had greater freedom to travel than female lovers. The richness of this fictional world is so powerful that its influence is visible on the book cover designed by Devangana Dash. The illustration of two dressed-up women sitting on a lamp-lit rooftop against the backdrop of domed architecture, does justice to Nafis and Chapla's story. The paper and the quill, the rooftop and the rising moon, all of which have catalytic roles in the novel, find their suitable place on the cover of the book. Readers interested in a historical take on the idea of a long distance relationship and the cosmopolitan pre-colonial culture will find the novel exceeding their expectations.

References

Vanita, Ruth. 2012. *Gender Sex and the City: Urdu Rekhti Poetry in India, 1780-1870*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.