



Book Review

Memory of Light (2020) by Ruth Vanita

Nibedita Kuiry

Publisher: Penguin Random House India, 2020.

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0670093513

ISBN-13: 9780670093519

“To know how powerful something is, one must first lose it”: this line of poet Mir Insha perfectly underlines the relevance of reading this novel about eighteenth century India in the contemporary times (Vanita 124). The lost courtesan culture that thrived once in the courts of nawabs and landlords and filled the courts with melody and sounds of their ankle bells is revisited and revived in the *Memory of Light*. While Ruth’s *Gender, Sex and the City* (2012) studies society and its people by reading the rakhti and rekhta poetry, her *Dancing with the Nation: Courtesans in Bombay Cinema* (2017) deals with the influence that courtesan-culture and some real courtesans had in the Bollywood industry, *Memory of Light* depicts the prevalence and acceptance of same-sex love among women and men in the ambit of courtesan culture.

The cover page of this novel which represents two women sitting on a rooftop in a romantic atmosphere produced by the moonlight, the sky lanterns and the candles gives summarizes the content which chiefly deals with the lives of Nafis and Chapla. The title of the novel *Memory of Light* hints either to the memory of the glorious presence of courtesans in Indian cultural tradition in general or of the pleasant days Nafis’ had spent with Chapla in particular. The entire novel, divided in nine parts, uses flash back and flash forward techniques to tell the story. The story is narrated from a grey zone where “light” or factual data or rationality seems to be absent and “shadows”, “darkness” or “dream” prevail over the novel.

The main plot of the novel reveals the relationship between the narrator, Nafis Bai, a moderate looking introvert courtesan and a beautiful, sprightly courtesan Chapla. The bond between Nafis and Chapla apparently seems homosocial as they share emotional bonding by sharing poetry, letters, and talking more about what they read than about their passion for each other. They have not gone through any of the rituals such as exchanging ornis or bodice, exchanging cardamoms or doganna fruits that used to give consent to same-sex love between two women in courtesan culture. However, the craving of Nafis for physical proximity chiefly in the form of kissing and in the enjoyment, they used to get from their closeness in Nafis’ bed suggest that a physical bond exists between them. Like any amorous relationship, the love-affair of Nafis and Chapla undergoes the stages of desire, frustration, proximity, separation, longing, jealousy and a prospect of future reunion. Chapla’s multiple guiyans Champa and Sufia create insecurity and envy in Nafis. Nafis’ attachment to Maryam and Nadira’s influence in Nafis’ life hurts Chapla equally.

Though the novel apparently seems a love story, mention of darkness, shadow, ailment, depression, alienation, and death recur time and again. Nafis meets all the characters starting from

Chapla, Maryam, Sarad, Ratan in either darkness, semidarkness or in shadow. Nafis says, “In the shadows thrown by lamps, wayward, whimsical, almost anyone seems alluring—at least for a while.” (Vanita 9) This somehow hints at the masking of the real personalities of the characters. Nafis’ love for Chapla as well as her mental turmoil after Chapla stops frequent communication with her remain hidden under her normal behaviour; Sarad’s homosexual advances towards Ratan and Mir Insha’s pathetic condition of life remain veiled from others. The lapse of thirty years since the time Chapla moved to Kashi, the loneliness of long-distance relationship resulted in anxieties, restlessness, depression hampering both the physique and the mental state of Nafis. Death also has ravaged the lives of Nafis’ close circle. Azizan dies of cholera, Ratan of fever, Mir Insha dies in poverty, and Kisen dies suddenly from heat.

Memory of Light is a subjective narrative of a courtesan rarely found in Indian literature. Through Nafis’ account captures life in a Kotha—its matriarchal society, courtesan’s preference for female children, daily routines of courtesans including beautification of their bodies, afternoon naps, regular practice of their skills, relationship between the courtesans and their suitors etc. Apart from taking care of the suitors, the courtesans used to form healthy relationship with poets like Mir Insha, Mia Rangin and others whose writings they sang in cultural gatherings. The Kothas of famous courtesans being regarded as abode of culture and etiquette, quarrelling over petty issues or using foul words were strictly prohibited. Each Kotha had its own style of poetry which gave it a unique identity among the connoisseurs or art. Therefore, stealing poetry was perceived as vice. Nonetheless, Kothas became sanctuaries for orphan and/or poor boys and girls like the Kashmirian maiden, Azizan, the orphan Mangu and Sundar in this novel. The novel presents a holistic picture how a Kotha acted as a big industry which supported various other professions e.g., milkmen, cooks, tailors, cloth-merchants, poets to name a few.

Though various socio-cultural and political reasons created a breach in the relationship of the courtesans and the English during the nineteenth century, eighteenth century was a time of cultural amalgamation in India. The English do not restrict themselves by being an audience of the courtesans only. Sufia, a memsahib, tries to imitate the songs, the dressing-style of the courtesans. Nafis and Chapla also try to enact a comical piece imitating the daily activities of the English in the marriage of Dulhan Jaan. Instances of marital bond between the English and courtesans are also found. Gulbadan, the niece of Mattan Apa, eloped with an English soldier. Acculturation process between Indians and the English is more evident in the image of Virgin Mary wearing a blue saree in the house of Maryam.

The novelist has alluded to historical events and characters, mythical narratives, folk stories, and popular beliefs etc., interlocking them in the fabric of her imagination. Popular accounts that one will hear from the guides of the Immambara, Baoli or Bhulbhulaiya of Lucknow, even today, are put in the mouth of Nafis. The folk tale of Chakva-Chakvi, the mythical reference of Markandeya Purana, popular belief regarding the process of planting a Shefali plant etc., are used in the plot of the novel that make the fiction more personal and authentic.

The language of the novel has lyrical quality with an abundance of poetry. The poems, the songs or the ghazals that the novelist has alluded to varied from erotic description of a woman’s beauty, bantering of a beloved to her lover, glorification of one’s beloved, etc. The novelist has paid tribute to Urdu poets such as Insha Alla Khan ‘Insha’, Sadad Yar Khan ‘Rangin’, Wali Mohammad ‘Nazir Akbarabadi’ in her text. Mir Insha’ grammar book of Hindustani language entitled *Darya-e-Latafat* found a mention. The lexicon of the novel contains words such as “amir khaani”, “kouwa guhaar” for men who dress and behave like women, “bazaar ki mithai” for a woman of the marketplace, “dandaan misri” for a delicate man, “khaasi pyaari” and “vaari” for men and women both the words definitely hint at persons with alternate sexuality. The novelist has put colloquial words such as ha’i Dayya, baadla, maghrib, Dhoti in the mouth of her characters to make them life-like. Apart from using a large number of poems, ghazals and songs, the novelist has incorporated the technique of dream. Sigmund Freud in *Interpretations of Dreams* (1900) claims that a dream is “the (disguised) fulfilment of a (suppressed, repressed) wish” (Freud & Strachey, 1996). The eight dreams that the novelist has used in the novel hint at the unfulfilled, suppressed or curbed desires of Nafis. The use of poems and dreams in the structure of the novel makes the structure more flexible, inclusive and rich.

Memory of Light does not come without its share of flaws moreover. Errors such as “I stepped out out into the gallery” (Vanita, 2020, 172), “in the shape of a crescent moon” (Vanita, 2020, 151) persists. Apart from these two minor syntactical errors, I find the novel very enjoyable, well-studied piece of literature which makes the reader aware of our Indian culture in the past when courtesans were given freedom of speech, freedom of movement, right to education, and permission to follow one’s sexual orientation without social inhibition and stigma. In this novel not only Vanita has not only re-read the image of courtesans who were maligned as mere “prostitutes” and displaced from their positions of artists in colonial discourse, but also thrown light on the acceptability of same-sex love which even in twenty-first century Indian academia is struggling to get itself established as normative phenomenon.

Bio-note

Nibedita Kuiry is a PhD Scholar in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences of National Institute of Technology, Rourkela, Odisha.

Email Id: nibnitrkl@gmail.com

