



Reminiscences of *Kothas*: Exploring Spatial Intimacies in Ruth Vanita's *Memory of Light* INTERACTIVE ARTICLE COVER

About the Journal

Journal Home	www.rupkatha.com
Journal DOI	https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha
Indexed in	Web of Science Core Collection™ Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI)
Journal Impact Factor (JIF)™	2022: 0.2 5 Year: 0.2 <small>Source:</small> Journal Citation Reports™ 2023

About the Issue

Issue	Volume 15, Number 2, 2023
Issue DOI	https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v15n2
TOC	https://rupkatha.com/v15n2.php

About the Article

Title	Reminiscences of <i>Kothas</i> : Exploring Spatial Intimacies in Ruth Vanita's <i>Memory of Light</i>	
Author/s	Ankita Chatterjee ¹ & Sutanuka Banerjee ²	
Affiliation	^{1,2} National Institute of Technology, Durgapur	
Author Profile	¹ 0000-0003-2714-7080 , ² 0000-0002-7219-4778	
Review DOI	https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v15n2.26	Pages: 1-15
Abstract	https://rupkatha.com/v15n226	
Full-text PDF	https://rupkatha.com/V15/n2/v15n226.pdf	
Article History	Received May 19 2023, modified 25 July 2023, accepted 28 July 2023, first published 29 July 2023	
Copyright	Author/s	
Licensing	Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0	

Reminiscences of *Kothas*: Exploring Spatial Intimacies in Ruth Vanita's *Memory of Light*

Ankita Chatterjee¹ & Sutanuka Banerjee²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, National Institute of Technology, Durgapur. ORCID: 0000-0003-2714-7080.

Email: ankita.chatterjee70@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, National Institute of Technology, Durgapur. ORCID: 0000-0002-7219-4778.

Email: sutanuka.banerjee@hu.nitdgp.ac.in

Abstract

This paper aims to study the representation of same-sex desire in Ruth Vanita's *Memory of Light* (2020) and analyze how the socio-spatial dynamics of the *kotha* helps to reconstruct female-to-female intimacy and convey a different idea of community and a sense of belonging in history. The novel, which traces the relationship between two courtesans, is also a recreation of the pre-modern Lucknow and its vibrant *kothas* with distinct architectural features. Beyond its overt function of entertaining the male patrons, the *kothas* as all-female establishments also served as a space of security and intimacy for women. The paper outlines the politics of situating same-sex desire in the historical backdrop of pre-colonial era. It uses concepts from Feminist Theory, Cultural Geography and Memory Studies, to examine the importance of *kothas* as a material and an ideological space, in facilitating discourses on gender variance, intimacy, and friendship that entered the cultural production of the time. In particular, the analysis intends to emphasize on the frequent entanglement between the spatial features and women's intimate practices as a distinct way of articulating same-sex desire that dissolves the binary understanding of hetero/homosexuality. Therefore, by insisting on the remembrance of *kothas*, the paper delineates how the 'memory of places' carves out two functions in the context of lesbian politics. On the one hand, it generates a 'symbolic continuum' to the history of women loving women to reframe postcolonial categorical understanding of 'lesbian' in contemporary times, and on the other, by infusing strategic use of metafictional elements, it emerges as a subversive mode of narrating stories of same-sex love while negotiating with the historical erasure of spaces of female-to female desire.

Keywords. *kothas*, space, intimacy, community, same-sex desire, memory.

[\[Sustainable Development Goals: Decent Work and Economic Growth, Gender Equality\]](#)

Introduction

"Memory the most perfidious of hypocrites, holds up not a picture but a mirror"
- *Memory of Light* (2020, p. 194)

The interrelationship between past and present has been one of the key concerns in many feminist texts in producing counter narratives to the historical production of knowledge. Chedzoy's (2007) powerful claim that feminist scholarship is itself "a work of memory" becomes more relatable in

case of lesbianism, which has been shrouded in silence and historical amnesia (p. 216). In the 1990s, when the term 'Indian and Lesbian'ⁱ erupted in the public consciousness, to claim the existence of homoerotic relationship among women in India, it also became an immediate linguistic resort for numerous women to form affective networking, political mobilization, and community spaces. While these spaces challenged the narrative of invisibility of lesbians, they have often suffered the "incommensurability" and unease produced due to the foreignness of the term and evoked an ardent search for a 'history' of women engaging in female-to-female intimacy in India (Sukthankar 1999; Dave, 2010, 2011). In fact, many past traditions and cultural practices, which were not 'self conscious' but had certain degrees of tolerance towards same-sex camaraderie and polyvalent connotations of desire were subjected to the colonial gaze and underwent transformation (Thadani, 1996; Vanita, 2008). A large body of scholarship has held the British colonial rule accountable for the decline of these cultures through the deployment of numerous legal frameworksⁱⁱ to regulate the uncontrolled sexual mores of its subjects in the colonies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Vanita, 2000; Menon, 2005; Singh, 2014; Hinchy, 2019). The legacy of the colonial sexual morality was carried forward by social reformers in the name of setting up the values of respectability, which furthered such transformation of gendered community practices (Singh, 2007), spatial restructuring, and devaluation (Thatra, 2016; Williams 2017). One such all-female establishments were the vibrant *kothas* and its community of courtesans, which became prominent in the early 19th century in the cities of Northern India like Lucknow, Allahabad, Benaras and Delhi.

In colonial historiography, these women came to be known as the 'nautch girls' or 'the singing and dancing girls', whose social eminence gradually deteriorated after the revolt of the 1857, and were turned into mere prostitutes (Singh, 2014). On the contrary, the courtesans, locally known as the *tawaifs* or *bajjis* were a class of female performer, who had exceptional talent in dancing, the art of expression, etiquette, discourse, and fashion (Feldman & Gordon, 1991). Revered as cultural bearers of art and music, they had considerable contribution in the development of many traditions of Urdu poetry (Vanita, 2012; Sengupta, 2014) and were forerunners of the Hindi classical music (Maciszewski, 2001). These women formed an elite class, who travelled to different courts and wedding venues for delivering performances. They grew largely under the patronage of the nobility, powerful merchants and court officials and became politically influential for their higher socio-economic position and cultural accomplishments. Equally important to this growth and status of the courtesans, were the household, where they resided, the *kothas*. Unlike the modern day brothels as ill-reputed, ghettoized places of sex-work, the *kothas* were distinct architectural features of urban cities and were sought as a place of refinement and fulfillment by artists and poets (Vanita, 2012). However, despite being open to the entry of various groups of male patrons, the *kothas* also served as a space of security and intimacy for all its female inhabitants. Publicly, though the courtesans performed to provide entertainment and pleasure to its male patrons, the community's strength inside the *kotha*-life owed much to the varying nature and degrees of female-to-female friendship and intimacies.

The present article examines the recreation of the space of pre-colonial *kothas* of Lucknow, and the intimate worlds of the courtesan community in Ruth Vanita's *Memory of Light* (2020). It tries to bring out the relationship between memory and place while critically analyzing the representation of same-sex desire. The following sections probe into the politics of reconstructing

spaces of female-intimacies from the past, and explores kothas using Lefebvre's notion of 'representational space' as a dynamic space of lived experiences in contrast to its colonial construction as a place of prostitution and the common day brothel. While it tends to highlight the socio-spatial dynamics of the *kotha* life and its interrelationship with the variegated contours of female desire, it also argues that the reminiscence of *kotha* space does not serve as a mere purpose of nostalgic remembering of its cultural and linguistic hybridity. Rather it reinforces an interrelationship between the spatial and the intimate foregrounded by the use the space and memory to illustrate a distinct mode of narrating desire, which entails lesbian feminist ramifications.

Situating 'Memory of Light' in the context of Literature on Courtesans

In contrast to Vanita's fictional work *Memory of Light* (2020), earlier works, which document the courtesan community, are of historical nature. Their aim has been to reconstruct the history of an erased cultural community, as well as to delve into the multilayered politics of both the continuing colonial hegemony and nationalist reform movements that led to the transformation of their status from artists and performers to sex workers and prostitutes. Ranging from exploring their social roles of giving sexual services through ritual practices in ancient times (Chandra, 1973) to their socio-cultural eminence as female performers and entertainers of men in the Mughal court (Neville, 1996), these works depict them mainly as public figures. Other works, which trace the aftermath of the Revolt of 1857, also focus on how the lockdown of the *kothas* affected the socio-cultural privileges, economic and sexual independence of the courtesans; brought about professional challenges and their disintegration as a cultural community (Shah, 2016; Vanita, 2018). Among them, Oldenburg's ethnographic account, "The Case of Courtesans of Lucknow: Lifestyle as Resistance" (1990), which is based on the interviews of Lucknow courtesans, has argued that their life choices posed an alternative way of life to the patriarchal ideology of marriage and repression for many women. Of late, historical fictions have intended to expand upon the feminist dimension of their life struggles. Texts such as Neelam Saran Gaur's *Requiem in Raga Janaki* (2018) and Saba Dewan's *Tawaifnama* (2019), foray into the changing lives of courtesans through generations. A recent study explores the fundamental positioning of *kotha* as a space in the lives of the courtesans and how this marginal space enables agency (Das & Tripathi, 2021). However, Vanita's fiction redirects the reader's focus to the dynamic nature of women-to women intimacies with respect to the community of courtesans.

Vanita has been one of the key figures in laying out the necessary historical groundwork to the emergence of "counter-heteronormative movement" in India concerning the lives of the sexual minorities (Menon, 2005). While tracing the transforming attitudes towards the idea of same-sex love through ancient, medieval and modern periods, she has pointed out how the "minor homophobic voice that was largely ignored by the mainstream society in precolonial India" became a dominant one (Vanita, 2008, p. 30). Again, in *Gender, Sex, and the City: Urdu Rekhti Poetry in India, 1780-1870* (2012), she delineates how the precolonial Urdu Rekhti poetry with its references to lesbian sexuality and subordinated "womens' lives" exhumed a kind of newness in its "construction of gender and amorous relations" (n.d). *Memory of Light* (2020) revisits the lives of courtesans in a fictional frame dwelling upon the theme of same-sex love in an admixture of

history and fiction. It is recounted from the viewpoint of a Lucknow courtesan, Nafis Bai and how she falls for another courtesan Chapla Bai, who comes to Awadh from Benaras for the celebration George the 3rd's birthday. The novel oscillates between the past and present life of Nafis Bai and her reminiscences of moments of encounter, intimacy, and exchange of letters with Chapla Bai. She dreams of having a life together, however, that never happens. While this overt dynamics of relationship seems to be the focus, the narration occurs in the backdrop of the complex socio-cultural tapestry of the *kotha* life. The novel may overtly seem to be an outcome of her phenomenal years of research. However, in one of her conversations, when asked about the trigger behind writing the novel after publishing her thorough research on the same, Vanita replies: "Everybody has a story to tell. Historical novel is not only about history but also about the present. I am writing it now. It is about lives now" (Rupatha n.p). In fact, it embodies the postmodern approach to the blurring of disciplinary boundaries between 'history' and 'fiction' through an "imaginative reconstruction" of the kothas and the establishment of a dialogic relationship with contemporary politics of female desire (Hutcheon, 2003, p. 92).

Negotiating History: Reimagining (Feminine) Spaces of Intimacy

Historically, spatiality is conceived as a product of male imagination. For feminists, the "logic of penetration, colonization and domination" embedded within the spatial, becomes central in exerting patriarchal control both over women's bodies and in appropriating different spaces to either 'contain or obliterate' women (Grosz, 2003, p. 220). History has played a key role in monitoring, censoring and reformulating representations of women's sexuality. In particular, the evasion of stories of same-sex eroticism among women, is suggestive of an "epistemic violence" in normalizing the discourse of conjugal heterosexuality (Gomathy & Fernandes, 2005, p. 159). Sukhthankar (1999) claims that this form of silencing in history has been fundamental in generating "violence from within-a schizoid dismembering" among women, which makes erotic underpinnings of same-sex love "banished" from language itself (p. xvi). Therefore, works like the lesbian-feminist reinterpretation of fables in Namjoshi (2012), or the excavation of India's rich cultural and literary traditions dealing with same-sex intimacy in Vanita (2008), tend to retrieve multiple configurations of intimacy and homoerotic desire and negotiate with the monolithic understanding of modern day terms like 'gay', 'lesbian' or the 'homosexual' by generating historical continuums. However, such forms of evasion in language and history also find parallel in spatial transformations. The construction of gender through places, has been of key importance to feminist geographers to critically understand the various modes of control, subversion and the construction of new meanings underlying the interrelationship between women and space. As Massey (2001) points out:

From the symbolic meaning of spaces/places and the clearly gendered messages which they transmit, to straightforward exclusion by violence, spaces and places are not only themselves gendered but, in their being so, both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood. (p. 179)

Similarly, it also becomes imperative to understand the use of spatiality in the construction of sexuality. For instance, in the Indian context, Thadani (1996) traces a link between the restructuring of architectural spaces and the distortion of cultural iconography. She illustrates how innumerable

ancient temples exhibiting gynefocal traditions or forms of 'independent feminine', were destroyed and appropriated to impose "a form of heterosexuality or censorship upon their interpretation" (p. 3). Therefore, space has often served as an important tool for questioning the different modes of knowledge that shape women's understanding of body, intimacy and desire. In hooks's (2003) words:

[S]paces can be real and imagined. Spaces can unfold histories. Spaces can be interrupted, appropriated, transformed through artistic and literary practices. (p. 209)

It is this feminist approach to spatiality that becomes a focal point of enquiry in this paper to analyze the fictional reimagining of the *kotha* space and the courtesan community in Vanita's *Memory of Light*. The portrayal of *kothas* manifests in the form of an invocation of a lost space with distinct implications for the different dimensions of women's community relationship and female-to-female intimacies. However, the onus on the spatial in reminiscing the courtesans tend to address the politics of "how women are remembered" (emphasis added) while performing the dual task of highlighting the discursive nature of history and also emphasizing on the importance of spatiality in situating female-to-female desire (Chedgzoy, 2007, p. 217).

The *Kotha* as a Community Space

The depiction of *kothas* enmeshes the intimate, the imaginary, and the spatial, which entails a decolonial understanding of the place. It is rendered as a space of lived experiences or what Lefebvre in his *The Production of Space* (1992) defines as 'representational space', which could be used to unravel history of *kotha* space in a "new light". According to Lefebvre, a representational space is 'alive', and speaks through the "loci of passion, of action, and of lived situations" (p. 42) and "it is by means of the body that space is perceived, lived-produced" (p.162). It is dynamic in nature. Therefore, it enables in an alternative reading of the history of space, which needs to take into consideration the "interconnections, distortions, displacements, mutual interactions" and the interrelationship between the spatial practices of a particular society (p. 42). In colonial representations, the *kothas* has predominantly featured as homogenized markers of decadent life of the Indian rulers and the courtesans as prostitutes, thereby distorting and decontextualizing a distinct socio-cultural system of interaction, and sensibilities that characterized the place (Singh, 2014). The representation of the *kotha*-life in Vanita's novel evokes this distinct sensibility of precolonial 'modernity' associated with Lucknow. The specific conventions of camaraderie, every day practices, its interiors, its spatial features, the diverse set of visitors, the nature of interpersonal relationship between the keepers of the place, which animate its essence as a hybrid space of community-living also operates as the defining frame for the narrative of love between two courtesans to play out.

The novel mainly depicts the events from two neighbouring *kothas* headed by two famous courtesans, Gul-rukh Bai and Mattan Apa in the city of Lucknow, to which Nafis Bai, Nadira, Shirin, Azizan, Bakshi, Mahtab Baji and many other courtesans belong. However, more than focusing on the performance or a *mehfil* amidst the patrons, the novel explores the dynamics of bonding between them, which is matrilineal in nature. Oldenburg (1990) gives an insight into their lives and interrelationship among fellow courtesans and shows how many of their practices were not

only women-centric but also challenged the then patriarchal notions of family, domestic bliss and a life of 'respectability' in conjugal heterosexuality. According to her account, many women found their shelter in *kothas* as an escape from the miseries either in conjugal or natal homes, among whom there were widows, wives of abusive husbands, women of Brahmin orthodox household, who had interest in singing and dancing, outcaste women, and many others (p.266). The novel makes similar references to stories, like that of Dadda, a courtesan, who was expelled from her community for eloping and marrying against caste, only to find out that the man already had a wife and children. Again, Nadira, who marries a patron, becomes pregnant but returns to the *kotha*, after being tortured by his first wife. Thus, the *kotha* operated as a space, where they could remain "daughters forever" (Vanita, 2020, p. 192). Despite the inter-*kotha* rivalries, the courtesans were driven by strong values of friendship and love, making them socially cohesive as a community. In this respect, Oldenburg (1990) claims an important aspect of their rebellious 'lifestyle' in terms of their intimate bonding. She points out that the "closest emotional relationships", the courtesans experienced were among themselves with the most "satisfying physical involvements" with other women (p 276). A similar idea is also suggested in Mirza Hadi Ruswa's novel *Umrao Jaan Ada* (1905), which is considered to be one of the oldest books dealing with the life story of a courtesan, when Umrao Jaan reveals:

I am but a courtesan in whose profession, love is a current coin. Whenever we want to ensnare anyone, we pretend to fall in love with him. . . . All these are parts of our game of love. But I tell you truthfully, no man ever really loved me, nor did I love any man. (quoted in Oldenburg, 1990, p.276).

The novel's exploration of the theme of same sex intimacy both converges with and diverges from the above claims. It is neither that most of the courtesans were engaged in same-sex relationships nor that all forms of heterosexual liaisons were intended as a part of their '*nakhra*' or pretensions without any genuine desire or love for men. Many courtesans, who willingly looked for settlement with the patrons outside *kothas* were a cause of stress for the establishments. As one third of the income of the courtesans went to the *chaudhrayin* for maintaining the *kothas* (Oldenburg, 1990), the beautiful and accomplished courtesans played an important role to attract patrons and maintain the popularity of the place. In the novel, Hazrat, a patron, earns the wrath of Mattan Apa for trying to win love of her most prized performer, Bakshi. And as Qureshi (2006) points out, there was also a social hierarchy whereby the courtesans, who got a chance to share the patron's social life were at best accepted as a 'consort'. However, their function was interpreted only in terms of the feudal understanding of "performers as service providers" albeit "a trusted, beloved, admired" one and their "heterosexual liaison as extra-familial" (p. 317). Therefore, the rejection of marriage also finds validation as part of the socio-economic dynamics rather than as an outcome of an ideological assumption of outright acceptance of lesbianism. In fact, in the novel, Nafis Bai's mother, Gul Rukh Bai is equally taunted for partaking in her daughter's 'unusual' indulgence with poetry writing and 'refusing' the conventional role of choosing a patron, travelling and childbirth' (Vanita, 2020, p. 9). Nevertheless, the ability to exercise such choices owed much to the fact that these establishments were owned and fully managed by courtesans. The economic freedom also entailed a worldview of women's solidarity and a space, where same-sex desire could exist and flourish alongside other forms of desire.

Spatial Dynamism and the Multiple Voices of Desire

The story of Nafis Bai and Chapla Bai reveals many facets of the fabric of same-sex intimacy that were intricately tied both to the geopolitics of space and the spatial dynamism of the *kothas* as household structures. Practices among women depicted in the novel tend to reclaim the idea of *Chapti* or *Chipti* or *chapatbazi*, the terms prevalent in precolonial North India to refer to lesbianism among women (Oldengburg 1990, Vanita 2000, 2005, 2012). However, it also unravels subtle strands of politics associated with the poetics of communicating desire through letters, songs, performances, and travel. The two women coming from two different *kothas*, one from Lucknow, and the other from Benaras present two different voices of the lesbian self, anchored in the separate socio-religious beliefs and the cultural history of the two *gharanas* of Awadh and Benaras. Both of them yearn for a city, a place of togetherness and belonging. The fact that two ultimately fail to live a life together indicates the politics of region and poetic traditions. In one instance, Nafis compares a 'young' violence free region of Awadh with the city of Delhi with its history of bloodshed, and realizes how foolishly she longed to settle in Delhi with Chapla. The development of Urdu Rekhti poetic tradition in Lucknow by poets like Sadaat Yaar Khan Rangin and Mir Insha Allah Khan, which issued out of Urdu Rekhta used a feminine voice and largely drew from the quotidian experiences and sexual lives of both household women and courtesans in and around the city. It was an important factor in influencing the attitudes towards desire, but had a distinct approach to desire by the "mingling of piety and play, conventional and unconventional" rather than being subversive (Vanita 2012, p. 3). Therefore, unlike Nafis, Chapla is driven by a sense of anxiety of not being able to express her desire for Nafis openly. In one instance, she compares how cross dressing of men is accepted in society unlike that of women, and confides in Nafis: "I feel like a boy . . . Would you still have liked me if I were a boy" (87). It is not that Nafis openly expresses it. She tries to hide it initially only to realize later that "No one was deceived . . . They went along with our masquerade, perhaps not deeming it important enough to interrupt" (Vanita, 2020, p.133). Rather, at one point, Nafis remarks on the distinct mechanism of "revealing and concealing" through poetry "folded into books, slipped from hand to hand, left under pillows (p. 70). This stance of secrecy and indirect expressions through songs and poems is subsumed within the conventions of expressing desire, which was central to the aesthetics of *rekhti* poetry. For instance, in the performance session at Mir Rangin's house, Nafis Bai expresses her desire for Chapla by singing one of Mir Insha's ghazals, a *sarapa*, originally written by a male but in a form where a woman sings to another woman adoring her beauty (pp. 65-66). The cryptic mode of expression characterized by secrecy, riddles, metaphors, emerged as a productive way of negotiating with multiple forms of female desire.

Again, this ambiguity of voices also restricts any generalized equation between the precolonial *kothas* and the prevalence of same-sex relationships. Rather it mediates between the politics of what Rich (1980) defined as "lesbian continuum" and the distinction of lesbian bodies, where the space of the *kothas* plays an important role. The concept of lesbian continuum espouses that all women have the potential of lesbian orientation or a kind of women to women intimacy, which is not necessarily sexual in nature to overturn patriarchal values. The *kothas* dwell on this idea of lesbian continuum where, the courtesans as a community provided emotional and economic support systems and purported a womanist cultural milieu. However, as Sukthakar (1999) has argued that there is also a paradoxical evasion of lesbian bodies implicit within such postionality:

"It means being able to live together and spend time with each other, as long as the sexual root of the relationship is never discussed" (p. xiii). The visibility of 'the lesbian body' has often been a source of anxiety and a potential threat to tarnish the female-to-female bonding and its dominant connotation of sisterhood (Biswas, 2007). But here, the *kotha* space operates in negotiating between these two positionalities. It ensures agency to women like Nafis Bai by providing a 'physical space' and a language of desire. References to practices that give voice to both types of love are significant. Practices like the exchange of *ornihis* or dupatta were the marker of lifelong friendship and sisterhood for women as it happens in case of Mattan Apa, Ketaki Bai and Gul Rukh Bai, who become sworn friends. Again, it also refers to the practice of *dogaana*, which marked a form of public avowal of same-sex partnership among women and were perceived in terms of heterosexual wedding (Vanita, 2005). It is interesting to note that Nafis Bai becomes a part of this ritual with both Chapla, with whom, she was engaged erotically and Nadira, with whom she spends her whole life without any reference to erotic aspect, which further complicates this dualism. Therefore, these varied forms of practices not only defy any single interpretative ideal for the community space that the *kotha* entailed but also insists on spatial dynamism as an effective measure to locate configurations of desire in postcolonial India beyond the Western theoretical paradigms of terms like 'closet', 'lesbian' and invisibility. In fact, it triggers a form of female homoeroticism in conjunction with the spatial, which needs to be understood more through the "structures set up by the story itself" and not simply as 'representative' narrative of lesbian desire (Gopinath, 2005, p. 145).

Vanita's portrayal, insists on the aesthetics of spatial dynamism, which was facilitated by the polyvalence of meaning for activities in *kothas*. It is interesting to note how Nafis and Chapla's expression of longing and love, is frequently rendered in terms of their responses to different spaces. References to 'triangular corner room', stairways, window niches, rooftops, dressing rooms, the mazes of Imambara not only chart out the zones of intimacy but also illustrate their importance as spatial markers of desire. The loss of beloved compared to the stripping bare of a room or the image of an empty city attest to the enmeshing of the spatial and the intimate. The blurring between the two separate sensibilities of women to women intimacy also becomes spatially viable with the multiple ways in which these structures functioned. The use of roof in daytime portrays the courtesans engaging in different types of activities such as oiling the hair, painting nails, gossiping, spending leisure time, teasing one another, which tend to construct a feminine interconnection. The fact that Nafis is warned about Chapla's fickle nature by her Ammi, Azizan, Nadira, Mahtab Baji shows a sense of maternal caring, concern, and sisterhood, which is associated with the space. Simultaneously, it is the roof connecting all the three *kothas*, which Nafis uses as a secret passage at night to deliver her letters to Chapla. A similar hybridity of meanings is evident in the use of the 'dressing room', where gathering of other courtesans, interactions and conversations on dress and fashion entail a sense of bonding. But it is also contrasted by the reclamation of the same room by Nafis and Chapla for both spending physically intimate moments and a secret space of confession and grief. Therefore, at many times the description of the *kotha* space in terms of its features like galleries, windows, courtyards, glass curtains, archways, balcony and others achieves a different set of meanings for the inhabitants based on their nature of interactions during the day time, in contrast to the night, when the place is visited by the general public.

Again, this world is different from the characteristically gendered nature of secluded spaces like *zenana* or *andarmahal* for women in respectable households, which have featured in the classic cultural representations of lesbianism in India. Texts like Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaf* (1942) or Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996) show the rupture of sexually repressive connotations of the "paradigm of separate spheres" by turning the private *zenana* or the household as spaces of female homoerotic desire (Rendell, 2003, p. 103). Nevertheless, the formation of desire operates only within the "socially available homosocial arrangements" secured by private quarters, where silence, camouflage and invisibility become the modes of exercising female sexual agency (Choudhury, 2009, p.144). On the contrary, intimate relationships in *kothas*, hinges upon a diametrically opposite tradition of female desire through multiple networks of expression, inter-community interactions, and artistic exchanges, which is facilitated through the mediation between private life and public spheres. The novel's reference to different groups of people like homoerotically inclined men, eunuchs and cross-dressers, not only juxtapose the validation of different degrees of female friendships with the social acceptability of various forms of male-to-male bonding but also indicate how the *kothas* contributed in the holistic production of a culturally diverse outlook that defined the community living in and around these quarters in Lucknow. Instances like that of Banka Begam, a cross-dresser, who was both a "dandy and warrior" (Vanita, 2012, p.176), or the intoxicating beauty of the male performer Ratan with whom a poet, Sharad fell in love also attest to the varying degrees of homoeroticism and fluid connotation of gender. But more than a conflation of the cultural acceptance of homoeroticism, it is the polyvalent understanding of desire that drew from the circulating ideals of friendship, love or *ishq*, male beauty, female beauty and their relationship with pleasure, aesthetics, and spiritual ecstasy in Urdu poetic tradition. *Rekhti* poetry, which explored the 'non-mystical' and 'material' figurations of these ideals through its focus on "on the practices, spaces, and rituals of every-day life" of subordinated men and women, also had the *kothas* as spatial base for such discourses to flourish. As Vanita shows, the poet and the courtesans formed a collaborative network, where the "poets praise the courtesans. The courtesans sing the work of the poets" (2012, p. 189). And one of the results was how the performances and songs shaped the aesthetics of enactment of desire, which also insisted upon the 'playfulness' of language and the 'excess' of meanings (2012, p. 233). Similarly, the genre of *thumri* and *kathak*, which evolved in *kothas* through the courtesans' community also featured this 'excess' through the comingling of the erotic overtures of the performing body, sensuality of the musical space or 'jagah' and poetics of singing to express amorous feeling and yearning (Rao 1990). By citing these interlinkages with linguistic traditions, Vanita's portrayal of the *kotha* space re-contextualizes a worldview of tolerance, a celebration of variance in desire and values of community living. Rather than establishing an exclusive association with homoerotic desire, the memory of *kothas* serves as a spatial repository of stories of intimacy, women's community and same-sex desiring women and therefore triggers a lesbian feminist mode of negotiating with history as a heteronormative category.

Remembering Places and Spaces: Memory as Mode of Lesbian History

hooks in her book *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (2014), claims that memory is not "a passive reflection, a nostalgic longing for things as they once were" but a way of "knowing and learning from the past" in order to "illuminate and transform the present" (p. 147). The importance

of Vanita's use of memory in narrating the tale of Nafis Bai dwells upon the politics of evoking a 'symbolic continuum' of spaces of same-sex intimacy and community relationship among women rather than a nostalgic glorification of *kothas*. Thadani (1996) explicates this mode of "association and identification with an older history" to negotiate the divisive politics of compulsory heterosexuality, which frames female desire within the ambits of conjugality and as heterosexual. By drawing upon 'Sappho's erotic desire and love for women she has shown how "an inter-feminine eros and desire" could be explored at multiple planes, breaking the limited understanding of female sexuality (p. 9). Similarly, here the *kotha* relates to the realm of places and reinforces an interrelationship of space and female desire. Its remembrance functions much in the sense of what Nora (1989) has conceptualized as "places of memory", which challenge the positioning of *kotha* in the colonial and patriarchal history. In contrast to history, Nora conceptualizes memory as:

. . . life, borne by living societies founded in its name . . . [it] remains in evolution, open to the dialectics of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived . . . [and therefore] a bond tying us to the eternal present. (p. 8).

It is this malleable quality of memory through which places of memory become poly semantic in nature for evoking multiple readings by being differently remembered. *Kothas* have long history of stigma as places of sex work. They were gradually transformed into 'ghetto' like structures stripped off their artistic tradition and its socio-cultural ethos of 'inter-feminine eros' (Sengupta 2014, p. 134). Thus, instead of serving as a signifier of women's sexual denigration, it is reconstructed as a validating space of female sexual autonomy. Vanita's portrayal explicates a political act of 'remembering' to locate the hetero-patriarchal intervention into the spaces of feminine intimacy, the erasure of a distinct language of same-sex desire, and its bearing upon the history of women-to-women relationship.

Nafis's dreams and its underlying anxiety of losing the *kotha* space underscore its importance both as a material and as an ideological space. Interestingly, images of spatial displacement dominate her visions. It is manifested both, in terms of an ardent search for a city or a place for herself and Chalpa as well as a fear of eviction from the *kotha*, her space of belonging, and how it is gradually transformed into an "unfamiliar" place and is ultimately locked away. Subsequently, the notion of spatial displacement then relates to a loss of the history of women:

A fugitive girl looking for somewhere to put down her things, somewhere to sleep, stows her bags under one bed, and lies motionless under another. She is afraid to move but a spreading pool betrays her. They drag her out, berate her, say she must pay. She has no money so they say they will sell her things and they start going through her bags. They lift out my books, and she says, "Don't sell those, they were my grandmother's. (Vanita, 2020, p. 165)

While this dream vision could be interpreted as a literal reference to the violence meted out to the courtesans and their displacement from *kothas* because of the strengthening of the colonial power, it also resonates with the process of making lesbian history off the records. By being self-referential to the process of eviction, it establishes a dialogic connection between the parallel histories of erasure of both courtesans and lesbians as female subjects in patriarchal traditions.

Similarly, the very pursuit undertaken by poet Mir Insha of writing a grammar book, '*Darya-e-Latafat*' to document the use of different words, terms for groups of men and women and map the changes underscores the politics of language. It is driven by both an attempt to preserve the cultural discourses sensitive to gender fluidity as well as to mark the gradual loss of a rich linguistic repertoire through colonial historiography (p. 169).

Vanita's choice of fictional mode makes the narrative self-reflexive of this exercise of remembering and forgetting and the dialectics of voicing and erasure. Astrid (2005) argues that the "different ways of speaking [or narrating] about the past and memory" also aids in foregrounding the multiple interlinkages between memory and different narrative discourses and the corresponding ideological positions. The mimetic staging of the memory processes in literary representations becomes useful in generating polyvalence, interdiscursivity and dialogism (pp. 150-51). In the context of feminist fictions, Green (1991) has argued that metafictional elements not only produces a subversive "unsettling" quality but also aids in relating "memory and liberation" to the question of narrative as a means of change (p. 293). The narrative of Nafis and Chapla transcends beyond the historical frame of the 19th century *kothas* to evoke the politics of distortion of stories of same-sex desire and the epistemic erasure of literary predecessors like them: "Am I betraying us by writing down our story? But no one will read it, and if they do, years hence, they won't know who we were." (Vanita, 2020, p. 184). Therefore, a feeling of forgetfulness continually troubles Nafis. She fails to recall Chapla, the way she knew, the tales that they had exchanged, the touch of each other. Years later, when she shows the painting of two women on the roof to Chapla, she exclaims:

Remember this? . . . She looked at it, her face blank, and said nothing. So I was not the only one who had forgotten the details? . . . Was it possible she was pretending not to remember? Because it was unimportant? Or too important? Or embarrassing? Was the girl I once adored gone for ever? (p. 203)

Chapla's inability to answer is significant. It suggests a mechanism of silencing that occurs through the loss of meaning and the erstwhile markers of same-sex desire. Although memory bears the potential to 'hold mirror' and make "them rise beneath" like "words written in milk when the paper heats up", it is also self-reflexive of a gradual process of the displacement of meaning (p. 185). When Nafis holding a worn out picture of Chapla in her hand and calls it "shadow of shadows", it is suggestive of both an ambiguous interplay of different versions of truth as well as a sense of distancing and loss of language (p. 194). This sense of loss reinstates the "erasure of [lesbian] bodies", the language of intimacy and the hybrid space of the *kotha* that ensured "the right to define and utilize a spatiality" for representations of community and belonging (Grosz, 2003, p. 218). And at the same time, this engagement with the *kotha* space of the bygone-era results in an excavation of the "layers of erotic memories" and a recreation of "historical continuums from the location of the present context of lesbian invisibility" (Thadani, 1996, p. 10). This exemplifies a way of looking back to look forward though a "mine of memories, names, languages" and explore the "different desiring selves" to rupture 'lesbian' as a sexual identity and render its self-generating potential of plurality in the postcolonial Indian context of female desire (ibid.).

Conclusion

The trajectory of lesbianism in contemporary India has been largely fragmented by the violence of colonial history and the understanding of sexuality in postcolonial times. While it complicates the deployment of a foreign term 'lesbian' as a term to forge community space for women loving other women in a diverse country like India, one way of negotiating with the politics of present has been to excavate past histories. The analysis of Vanita's novel, insists on the depiction of *kothas* of precolonial Lucknow in the light of generating 'symbolic continuum' of spaces of female desire. Its engagement with the intimate world of the courtesans foregrounds a women-centric space, which not only negotiates with the colonial denigration of a distinct culture of women as artists and poets, but also forays into the politics of space and same-sex desire as explored through the story of the two courtesans in the novel. The dynamism of the *kotha* space is projected through the multiple strands of intimacies between women ranging from female friendship, notions of sisterhood, same-sex partnership to same-sex eroticism. But this dynamism is also intricately tied to the spatial structures, the poetic traditions, and the larger community's polyvalent understanding of desire, friendship, beauty, and bonding, which make the *kotha* a hybrid space of lived experiences. By situating the existence of same-sex intimacy within the diverse configurations of desire, which was largely influenced by *kotha's* socio-cultural ethos, it negotiates both with erasure of erotic aspect of all-female establishments and retrieves the plurality of lesbian selves from the recesses of heteropatriarchal history.

Furthermore, the analysis brings out the centrality of memory as a dominant trope in the politics of 'remembering' such spaces of same-sex intimacy. Memory serves as a conduit in retrieving the conjunction of spaces and stories of desire while building historical continuums to negotiate the hegemonic narrative of lesbian invisibility in India. At the same time, the use of metafictional elements strengthens the subversive potential of the act of narrating tales of homoerotic desire while negotiating the structural practices of silencing by exceeding the idea of nostalgic remembering. The frequent references to the erasure of stories, the transformation of spatial structures, and the enactment of memory as an unreliable mode of reestablishing connection with a lost history rest upon the politics of dislocating the authenticity of heteropatriarchal history and using ambivalence as a means of situating 'lesbian' narratives in contemporary India.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interests

The authors declared no conflict of interests to disclose.

Funding Disclosure/Acknowledgement

No funding was received for this research from any agency.

Notes:

ⁱ Many women came out with placards of 'Indian and Lesbian' in demonstrations as a mark of protest against the banning of Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* and the claim by radical groups that lesbianism did not exist in India (See Dave, 2011).

ii There were a number of legal frameworks introduced by the colonial rule to regulate sexuality and criminalize certain groups of people based on profiling and segregation, such as Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (1860), The Contagious Disease Act (1864), and The Criminal Tribes Act (1871)

References

- Biswas, R. (2007). The lesbian standpoint. In B. Bose & S. Bhattacharyya (Eds), *The phobic and the erotic: The politics of sexualities in contemporary India* (pp. 263-290). Seagull Books.
- Chandra, M. (1973). *The World of Courtesans: Sensuous Women Who Practiced Love as an Art and Profession*. Vikas Publishing House.
- Choudhury, S. M. (2009). Transgressive territories: queer space in Indian fiction and film [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Iowa]. <https://doi.org/10.17077/etd.bqn8b430>
- Das, C & Tripathi, P. (2021). Exploring the margins of kotha culture: Reconstructing a courtesan's life in neelum saran gour's Requiem in Raga Janki. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 23(4), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3669>
- Dave, N. (2010). To render real the imagined: An ethnographic history of lesbian community in India. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 35(3), 595-619. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/648514>
- , N.. (2011). Indian and lesbian and what came next: Affect, commensuration, and queer emergences. *American Ethnologist*, 38(4), 650-665. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1425.2011.01328.x>
- Erll, A. (2005). *Memory in culture* (S. B. Young, Trans.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Feldman, M., & Gordon, B. (2006). *The courtesan's arts: Cross-cultural perspectives*. Oxford University Press.
- Fernandes, B., & Gomathy, N.B. (2005). Voicing the invisible: Violence faced by lesbian women in India. In A. Narrain & G. Bhan (Eds), *Because I have a voice: Queer politics in India* (pp 155-165). Yoda Press
- Gopinath, G. (2005) *Impossible desires: Queer diasporas and south asian public cultures*. Duke University Press.
- Green, G. (1991). Feminist fiction and the use of memory. *Signs*, 16(2), 290-321. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/3174512>
- Grosz, E. (2002). Women, chora, dwelling. In J. Rendell, B. Penner, & I. Borden (Eds), *Gender space architecture: An interdisciplinary introduction* (pp. 210-221). Routledge.
- Hinchy, J. (2019). *Governing gender and sexuality in colonial India: The hijra, c. 1850-1900*. Cambridge University Press.
- hooks, b. (2003). Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness. In J. Rendell, B. Penner, & I. Borden (Eds), *Gender space architecture: An interdisciplinary introduction* (pp. 203-209). Routledge.
- , b. (2014). *Yearning: Race, gender, and cultural politics*. Routledge.
- Hutcheon, L. (2003) *A poetics of postmodernism: History, theory, fiction*. Routledge.
- Lefebvre, H. (1992). *The production of space*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- MacIszowski, A. (2001). Multiple voices, multiple selves: Song style and north Indian women's identity. *Asian Music*, 32(2), 1. <https://doi.org/10.2307/834248>

- Massey, D. (1994). *Space, place, and gender*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Namjoshi, S. (2012). *The fabulous feminist: A suniti namjoshi reader*. Zubaan Books
- Nevile, P. (1996). *Nautch girls of India: Dancers, singers, playmates*. Ravi Kumar Publications.
- Nora, P. (1989). Between memory and history: Les Lieux de memoire. *Representations*, 26(1), 7-24. <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.1989.26.1.99p0274v>
- Oldenburg, V. T. (1990). Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India. *Feminist Studies*, 16(2), 259-287. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177850>
- Qureshi, R. B. (2006). "Female agency and patrilineal constraints: Situating courtesans in Twentieth-Century India." In M Feldman & B Gordon, *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (pp. 312-331). Oxford University Press.
- Rendell, J. (2003). Introduction: gender and space. In J. Rendell, B. Penner, & I. Borden (Eds), *Gender space architecture: An interdisciplinary introduction* (pp. 101-111). Routledge.
- Rao, V. (1990). 'Thumri' as a feminine voice. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 25(17), WS31-WS39. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4396223>
- Rich, A. (2003). Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence (1980). *Journal of Women's History*, 15(3), 11-43.
- Rupkatha. (2020, August 28). *1st RIOC: Ruth Vanita on "Courtesans, Women's Love and Friendship"* [video]. Youtube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUwdk_40tPg
- Ruswa, M. H. (1996). *Umrao Jan Ada*. By D Mathews (trans.). Rupa Publications.
- Shah, V. (2016). *Jalsa - indian women and their journeys from the salon to the studio*. Tulika Books.
- Sengupta, M. (2014). Courtesan culture in India: The transition from the devdasi to the tawaif or boijee. *India International Centre Quarterly*, 14(1), 124-140.
- Singh, L. (2007). Retrieving voices from the margins. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 14(1), Jan, 93-116. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097152150601400106>
- Singh, V. P. (2014). From Tawaif to nautch girl: The transition of the Lucknow courtesan. *South Asian Review*, 35(2), 177-194. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2014.11932977>
- Sukthankar, A. (1999). *Facing the mirror: Lesbian writing from India*. Penguin Books India.
- Thadani, G. (1996). *Sakhiyani: Lesbian desire in ancient and modern India*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Thatra, G. (2016). Contentious (socio-spatial) relations: tawaifs and congress house in contemporary bombay/mumbai. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 23(2), 191-217. doi: 10.1177/0971521516635307.
- Vanita, R. (2005). *Love's rite: Same-sex marriages in modern India*. Penguin Books India.
- , R., & Kidwai, S. (2008). *Same-Sex Love in India: A Literary History*. Gurgaon: Penguin Random House India.
- , R. (2012). *Gender, Sex, and the City: Urdu Rekhti Poetry in India, 1780-1870*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- , R. (2018). *Dancing with the nation: Courtesans in Bombay cinema*. Bloomsbury Publishing, USA.
- , R. (2020). *Memory of light*. Penguin Random House India Private"

Ankita Chatterjee is a PhD research scholar. Her research areas focus on Gender Studies, Queer Studies and Indian Literature.

Sutanuka Banerjee is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, National Institute of Technology, Durgapur. She obtained her PhD from the Department of Culture and Global Studies, Aalborg University, Denmark. Her research areas focus on Popular Culture, Gender Studies and Literature.
