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## Social and spatial interactions of the Kothas in Ruth Vanita's 'memory of light'

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### Abstract

This research paper proposes to examine the portrayal of homosexual attraction in Vanita's novel, *Memory of Light* (2020). It explores how the social and geographical aspects of the kotha (a type of brothel) contribute to the reconstruction of intimate relationships between women. Additionally, it intends to demonstrate how this portrayal offers a distinct perspective on community and a feeling of belonging within a historical context. The story depicts the connection between two prostitutes and portrays a picture of the earlier Lucknow and its lively kothas, characterized by unique architectural elements. In addition to its primary purpose of providing entertainment for male clientele, the kothas, as exclusively female institutions, also functioned as a safe and private area for women. The study examines the political aspects of placing same-sex desire within the historical context of the pre-colonial era. The study explores how the act of remembering kothas serves two distinct purposes within the realm of lesbian politics, specifically the concept of "memory of places." Firstly, it creates a connection between the historical experiences of women adoring women and the modern consideration of 'lesbians' in neocolonial times. Secondly, it employs meta-fictional elements strategically to tell narratives of same-sex love in a subversive manner, while also addressing the historical neglect of spaces where homosexuality exists.

**Keywords:** Ruth Vanita, homosexuality, kothas, socio-spatial dynamics, lesbians

### Introduction

This research article analyzes the portrayal of the former kothas of Lucknow and the private lives of the prostitutes in Vanita's novel *Memory of Light* (2020) [9]. It aims to explore the connection between memory and location by providing a critical analysis of the portrayal of same-sex attraction. Subsequent sections delve into the politics of re-establishing spaces that were once dedicated to female intimacies. This text explores the socio-spatial patterns of kotha daily existence and its connection to the diverse aspects of female longing. It also asserts that the recollection of kotha space is not simply a nostalgic remembrance of its socioeconomic and semantic mixture. It strengthens the connection between physical space and personal experiences, emphasizing the use of space and memory to depict a unique way of expressing desires, specifically with lesbian feminist implications.

One of the most prominent advocates for the LGBT community is Ruth Vanita. Vanita is one of those writers who, in addition to writing extensively on homosexuality, also writes extensively about the challenges that LGBT individuals might experience. When it comes to aiding these individuals in recognizing their identity and living with dignity, this is one way that may be utilized. Bringing the situation of these individuals to the attention of the public and, as a consequence, raising awareness that can assist these LGBT persons in achieving respect and acceptance in society is the goal of writers like Vanita. They do this by writing about the problems and difficulties that these people encounter.

Vanita has played a crucial role in establishing the historical foundation for the development of the "counter-heteronormative movement" in India, specifically focusing on the experiences of sexual factories (Menon). She has identified and analyzed the changing perspectives on homogeneous love across ancient, medieval, and contemporary eras with these lines "minor homophobic voice that was largely ignored by the mainstream society in precolonial India" became a foremost one (Vanita 30). In her book *Gender, Sex, and the City: Urdu Rekhti Poetry in India, 1780-1870* (2012), the author explores how pre-colonial Urdu Rekhti poetry depicted lesbian sexuality and the marginalised lives of women,

thereby introducing new perspectives on gender and romantic relationships. *Memory of Light* (2020)<sup>[9]</sup> explores the life of prostitutes within a fictitious context, focusing on the issue of same-sex love through a blend of historical and fictional elements. The story is narrated from the perspective of Nafis Bai, a prostitute from Lucknow. It depicts her romantic attraction towards Chapla Bai, another courtesan who visits Awadh from Benaras to celebrate George the 3rd's birthday. The narrative alternates between Nafis Bai's past and present life, as well as her memories of occasions when she met, became close to, and exchanged words with Chapla Bai.

She wants to establish a shared existence, however that aspiration remains unfulfilled. Although the primary focus appears to be on the overt dynamics of the relationship, the story takes place in a setting of the intricate socio-cultural fabric of kotha life. The work may appear to be a direct result of her extensive years of investigation. During one of her chats, when questioned about the motivation for creating the work after doing extensive study on the topic, Ruth responds, "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". It exemplifies the postmodernist method of blurring the lines between 'history' and 'fiction' by creatively reconstructing the kothas and engaging in a dialogue with the current politics of feminine desire (Hutcheon 92).

### Research Methodology

This article focuses on analyzing the fictional reinterpretation of the brothel environment and the society of courtesans in Ruth's *Memory of Light* (2020)<sup>[9]</sup>, with a particular emphasis on the feminist perspective on spatiality. The representation of kothas is a way of evoking a forgotten. The primary storyline of the work explores the connection between the narrator, Nafis Bai, a reserved and unassuming prostitute, and Chapla, a stunning and lively courtesan. The tie between Nafis and Chapla appears to be homosocial, characterised by an emotional connection formed via the exchange of poems, letters, and discussions mostly centred upon their shared interest in literature rather than their romantic feelings for one another. They have not performed any of the traditional rites, such as swapping ornments or bodice, exchanging cardamoms or doganna fruits, which historically symbolized the acceptance of same-sex love between two women in courtesan society. Nevertheless, Nafis' strong desire for physical contact, particularly through kissing and the pleasure derived from their intimacy in Nafis' bed, indicates the presence of a physical connection between them. The love affair between Nafis and Chapla follows the typical stages of desire, frustration, closeness, distance, yearning, envy, and the possibility of reuniting in the future. Chapla's numerous accomplishments, including her daughters Champa and Sufia, provoke feelings of fear and jealousy in Nafis. Chapla is similarly affected by Nafis' strong emotional connection to Maryam and the impact that Nadira has on Nafis' life. Although the work may initially appear to be a love tale, it often includes references to darkness, shadow, sickness, despair, estrangement, and death. Nafis encounters all the characters, including Chapla, Maryam, Sarad, and Ratan, under various degrees of low light, dimness, or obscurity throughout the novel *Memory of Light* (2020)<sup>[9]</sup> by Ruth Vanita. Nafis states, "In the

shadows thrown by lamps, wayward, whimsical, almost anyone seems alluring-at least for a while." (Vanita 9)

Vanita's *Memory of Light* (2020)<sup>[9]</sup> not only focuses on women-centred themes but also challenges the male-controlled ideas of family, matrimonial happiness, and a respectable existence inside heterosexual marriages. Based on her testimony, numerous women sought refuge in kothas to escape the hardships they faced in their marital or parental homes. This included widows, wives of rude husbands, women from strict Brahmin households who had a passion for singing and dancing, women from lower castes, and various others (266). The work has allusions to several narratives, including the tale of Dadda, a prostitute who was banished from her society for eloping and defying social hierarchy by marrying someone from a different caste. However, she later discovers that the guy she married was already married and had children. Nadira, once married to a patron, becomes pregnant but is subjected to torture by his previous wife, causing her to return to the kotha. Therefore, the kotha served as a place where they might indefinitely maintain their status as "daughters" (192). Although there were competitions between the many kothas, the prostitutes were united by strong principles of friendship and love, which helped to create a sense of social unity within their group. Oldenburg (1990)<sup>[10]</sup> argues that a crucial element of their rebellious "lifestyle" is their close connection. She highlights that the courtesans primarily formed their strongest emotional bonds with one other, while their most fulfilling physical interactions were with other women (276). Mirza Hadi Ruswa's novel *Umrao Jaan Ada* (1905) also presents a similar concept. This novel is recognised as one of the earliest works that explores the life of a prostitute. In the plot, *Umrao Jaan* discloses:

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. (qtd. in Oldenburg 276)

The novel's examination of same-sex intimacy both aligns with and deviates from the aforementioned assertions. The majority of courtesans were not involved in same-sex relationships, and not all heterosexual partnerships were only acts of pretence without true desire or love for men. The presence of courtesans who actively sought relationships with customers outside of the kothas caused significant strain on the institutions. According to Oldenburg, the courtesans had to give one-third of their revenue to the *chaudhrayin* to maintain the kothas. These skilled and attractive courtesans played a crucial role in attracting customers and keeping the area popular. In the story, *Hazrat*, a patron, angers *Mattan Apa* by trying to win the favour of her highly regarded artist, *Bakshi*. *Qureshi* asserts that a social hierarchy existed, wherein the courtesans, who were granted the chance to engage in the patron's social events, were just tolerated as a 'consort'. However, their mission was only comprehended within the context of the feudal understanding of "performers as service providers," while they were seen to be trustworthy, liked, and revered. Additionally, their heterosexual relationship was seen as outside of the family unit. Hence, the decision to not enter into matrimony is rationalized by socio-economic considerations rather than only relying on the premise that lesbianism is generally embraced. Within the narrative, Nafis Bai's mother, *Gul Rukh Bai*, faces

mockery due to her support of her daughter's 'unconventional' pursuit of poetry writing and her refusal to adhere to customary duties such as finding a patron, travelling, and delivering (Vanita 9). Nevertheless, the ability to make these choices was mostly attributed to the straightforward reality that these businesses were possessed and entirely governed by courtesans. The notion of economic autonomy also included a notion of solidarity among women and a space where same-sex desire could coexist and flourish alongside other forms of attraction.

### **Dynamism in Space and the Diverse Voices of Desires**

The narrative of Nafis Bai and Chapla Bai sheds light on several aspects of homosexual intimacy that were closely connected to the geopolitical nature of space and the dynamic structure of kothas as households. The novel portrays women engaging in practices that try to recover the concept of *chapatbazi*, the terminology used in precolonial North India to describe lesbian relationships among women (Oldenburg). Moreover, it reveals intricate connections between politics and the art of expressing longing through written correspondence, musical compositions, live presentations, and journeys. The two ladies, hailing from different kothas, one from Lucknow and the other from Benaras, represent distinct perspectives on lesbian identity. These perspectives are shaped by the divergent socio-religious views and cultural histories of the Awadh and Benaras gharanas. Both individuals have a strong need for a city, a location that fosters unity and a sense of belonging. The failure of two individuals to sustain a shared existence can be attributed to regional politics and differences in literary traditions. In a particular case, Nafis draws a comparison between a region in Awadh that is devoid of violence and the city of Delhi, which has a history of carnage.

Memory of Light (2020) <sup>[9]</sup> is a narrative account of a courtesan, a type of character that is uncommon in Indian literature. Nafis' account provides a comprehensive depiction of life in a Kotha, including its matriarchal society, the courtesans' preference for female children, and their daily routines such as beautifying their bodies, taking afternoon naps, and regularly practising their skills. The account also explores the relationships between the prostitutes and their suitors. In addition to attending to the potential suitors, the courtesans would establish meaningful connections with poets such as Mir Insha, Mia Rangin, and others, whose literary works they would perform and celebrate in cultural events. Quarrelling over trivial matters or using vulgar language was forbidden in the Kothas, which were esteemed as havens of culture and manners. Each Kotha possessed a distinct style of poetry, which bestowed upon it a singular identity among art enthusiasts. Consequently, the act of appropriating poetry was regarded as a moral fault. However, Kothas served as sanctuaries for orphaned and impoverished boys and girls, such as the Kashmirian maiden Azizan, the orphan Mangu, and Sundar in this tale. The story depicts the comprehensive portrayal of how a Kotha functioned as a significant enterprise that provided support to numerous other professions, such as milkmen, chefs, tailors, cloth merchants, and poets, among others.

During the 19th century, the connection between courtesans and the English was strained due to a variety of socio-cultural and political factors. However, in the eighteenth

century, there was a period of cultural blending in India. Englishmen do not limit themselves to becoming just spectators of the courtesans. Sufia, a woman of British colonial society, attempts to mimic the songs and fashion choices of the courtesans. Nafis and Chapla likewise attempt to do a comedic skit that mimics the everyday actions of the English during the wedding of Dulhan Jaan. There are also cases where English individuals have marriage relationships with courtesans. Gulbadan, the niece of Mattan Apa, ran away with an English soldier. The process of acculturation between Indians and English people is demonstrated in the depiction of the Virgin Mary donning a blue saree at the residence of Maryam.

The author has included historical events and personalities, legendary narratives, folk legends, and common beliefs in her imaginative work, intertwining them together. The guides of the Immambara, Baoli, or Bhulbhulaiya of Lucknow still recount well-known stories, often attributed to Nafis. The story incorporates several elements such as the folk tale of Chakva-Chakvi, the legendary reference of Markandeya Purana, and the traditional belief around the act of planting a Shefali plant. These elements provide a personal and real touch to the fiction. In this novel, Vanita not only challenges the negative portrayal of courtesans as mere "prostitutes" and their exclusion from the artistic discourse during colonial times but also sheds light on the acceptance of same-sex love, which continues to face resistance in Indian academia even in the twenty-first century.

### **Conclusion**

Vanita's representation emphasizes the visual aspect of movement inside a space, which was made possible by the multiple interpretations of activities in kothas. The expression of desire and love by Nafis and Chapla is often depicted via their reactions to various environments. The mentions of the 'triangular corner chamber', staircases, window recesses, roofs, dressing rooms, and the intricate layout of the Imambara not only delineate the areas of closeness but also exemplify their significance as spatial indicators of longing. The loss of a cherished individual might be likened to the act of completely emptying a room or the sight of a deserted city, highlighting the interconnectedness of physical space and personal relationships. The merging of the distinct emotional connections among women is also made possible via the various ways in which these institutions operate. The daylight scenes depicted on the roof show courtesans participating in various hobbies, including oiling their hair, painting their nails, talking, spending leisure time, and playfully tormenting each other. These activities contribute to the creation of a feminine bond between them. The warning given to Nafis by her mother, Azizan, Nadira, and Mahtab Baji about Chapla's unpredictable temperament demonstrates a strong feeling of maternal care, concern, and sisterhood, all of which are closely linked to the environment. Concurrently, the roof serves as a connecting link between the three kothas, which Nafis use as a clandestine pathway throughout the night to transport her letters to Chapla. The use of the 'dressing room' demonstrates a similar combination of connotations, as it serves as a space where courtesans assemble, converse, and engage in talks about clothing and fashion, fostering a sense of connection. However, the reclaiming of a similar room by

Nafis and Chapla serves as a contrasting element. They utilize the space for both engaging in physically intimate moments and as a private area for sharing confessions and expressing sadness. Hence, the portrayal of the kotha space concerning its attributes such as galleries, windows, courtyards, glass curtains, archways, balconies, and others holds distinct interpretations for the residents depending on their interactions during the day versus the night, when it is frequented by the public.

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