



**Six of Cups. Neha Bansal. Hawakal Publishers
Private Limited, 2024.**

Dr Geeta Rani

Its title is drawn from the Minor Arcana of the tarot, a card associated with childhood, innocence, and the pull of the past. Where most poets invoke nostalgia as a mood or register, Bansal treats it as architecture. The Six of Cups card does not simply evoke the past. It establishes a relationship with it, orienting the self in a cyclical rather than a chronological manner. Memory here functions as a form of continuity, actively recreated through daily practice, domestic rituals, and embodied experiences. This is what gives the collection its critical coherence.

The poems move across familiar terrain. Childhood homes, festival cycles, family meals, siblings, grandparents, and pets. But the handling of this material resists the decorative. The opening poem, "My GrandPa (Baba)," establishes the affective register early. Tenderness is presented as a form of permission. Care becomes a site where the child's sense of self is released rather than contained. There is a recurring image of flight, figured through a bird, and it condenses something important: the idea that freedom can be experienced through intimacy rather than from it. This sets up the collection's broader argument. The domestic is not a constraint on experience. It is the primary medium through which experience becomes meaningful.

This emphasis on the domestic as a site of meaning finds its most sustained articulation in the food poems. "Black Carrot Kanji," "My First Dosa," "Moong Dal Halwa," "Naan Khatai," and "Mint Chutney" form a loosely connected sequence. Culinary practice is used across these poems as a vehicle for cultural transmission. Food acts as a delightful sensory journey, capturing the essence of ritual times, festive seasons, and

cherished family traditions across generations. In "Black Carrot Kanji," the imagery does this with quiet efficiency:

and the savoury rock salt and
the sharpness of red chili
combined curiously
to add colours to the
toasty winter afternoons. ("The Black Carrot Kanji")

The synaesthetic move is worth pausing over. Taste is being used to add colour. Senses are meant to overlap with one another. It is how genuine mnemonic experience tends to work. The poem reimagines the act of drinking kanji, engaging the body with the past rather than just the mind. These food poems are the collection's archival heart. Cultural continuity is sustained here not through a grand narrative but through the repetition of small acts: the stirring of a pot, the grinding of spices, the smell of a winter afternoon carried across decades.

"Crochet Lace Hankies!" most clearly demonstrates how memory is anchored in material objects, as the discovery of the hankies activates recollections of maternal labour and care. Their textures and colours are treated as encoded gestures, forms of intimacy that have been held in storage. What distinguishes this poem from simple nostalgia is its direction of movement. The poem does not end in longing. It ends in reciprocity, as the speaker purchases similar hankies for the ageing mother. Memory is enacted rather than merely recalled. The object is not a relic. It is a medium through which the relationship between past and present is continually renegotiated.

This logic of memory as practice extends most clearly to "The Parrot Called Harial," where childhood recollection is organised around acts of care, naming, and improvised responsibility. The name "Harial" is chosen deliberately, in resistance to more conventional alternatives. It signals an early

assertion of selfhood. The children's attempts to care for the injured bird are foregrounded not for their competence but for their sincerity. Innocence, in Bansal's handling, is not naïveté. It is a formative space in which empathy and agency begin to emerge together.

Temporal reflection surfaces most explicitly in "Rock Garden." A physical site endures. The body that once moved through it no longer does. Nostalgia here is not a return to the past but an encounter with disjunction, a recognition that the self who remembers and the self who experienced are not continuous. This is a more complex emotional gesture than the collection often attempts. It earns its place because it resists resolution. A related sensory logic underpins "Paper Boat," where memory is activated through sound, smell, and tactile imagery that evoke sensations such as the rhythm of rain, the warmth of spiced tea, and the heaviness of a childhood afternoon. These details re-create the past as a lived experience.

"Sibling Squabbles" is perhaps the collection's most emotionally precise poem. It complicates any reading of Bansal as straightforwardly sentimental. The poem captures sibling love not through warmth but through ambivalence, arriving at a moment of bewilderment:

In short, convinced fully
that she was indeed the
very bane of my life
how I prayed that she
gets married soon.
Why then, did I cry
like a baby, clutching
her left-over clothes,
the day after her wedding. ("Sibling Squabbles")

What is being rendered here is the gap between what we believe we feel and what is discovered when we are tested. Contradiction is allowed to stand without resolution. The poem becomes even more compelling because of it.

This capacity for emotional complexity is unevenly distributed across the collection. "A Love Song" situates its devotion within a cultural framework that privileges endurance and fidelity, invoking figures such as Sita and Savitri. The invocation is not without meaning. But emotional certainty is affirmed rather than subjected to pressure. The absence of ambivalence ultimately limits the poem's interpretive range. This tension recurs across the collection. Its commitment to emotional clarity makes it accessible and culturally resonant. The same commitment periodically forecloses the kind of productive ambiguity that would deepen its engagement. Bansal is strongest when contradiction is allowed to remain in the poem, as it is in "Sibling Squabbles," "Rock Garden," and the best of the food poems. She is most constrained when affirmation displaces inquiry.

Stylistically, syntactic simplicity and minimal punctuation are used throughout to produce an effect of immediacy. Thought and articulation appear closely aligned. This formal restraint is purposeful. It creates conditions for a lyric mode in which the reader is drawn into the experience rather than kept at a distance. The risk is that plainness can set in when the emotional material does not carry sufficient weight on its own. The collection navigates this tension with varying success. At its best, in the food poems, in "Crochet Lace Hankies!," in "Paper Boat," the simplicity is exactly right.

The poems in *Six of Cups* ultimately locate memory within the textures of the ordinary. The domestic and the quotidian are treated not as peripheral or marginal spaces but as constitutive ones. This aligns the collection with a broader tendency in

contemporary Indian English poetry, where everyday life is increasingly recognised as a primary site of cultural and historical meaning. The tarot frame is not merely an aesthetic gesture. It is an argument. The collection does not look backwards in mourning. It holds the past as something still moving through the present, kept alive in the small repeated acts of living. Bansal's simplicity is not a limitation of ambition but the very method through which the past remains active in the present. The tarot frame with which the collection opens thus returns not as ornament but as structure, marking memory as cyclical and continually renewed. Bansal's simplicity is not a limitation of ambition but the very method through which the past remains active in the present.