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Amrita Pritam's domain: The hopelessness of females in conventional gatherings

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Abstract

Amrita Pritam is an iconic personality whose bold representation in writings, reinvigorates the sufferings and conflict of women in Indian orthodox society. Her writings have a wide range of emotions, passion and experience associated strongly with her own life and as well as the life of other Indian women during partition. Though she was brought up in a spiritual environment yet she owed a revolutionary nature from her childhood that is the exceptional quality of her writings. In her works, she has represented women as silent sufferers in conservative milieu. Women's sufferings, their loneliness, their quest for true love along with their struggle to come out of their pathetic condition are the underlying themes of her works. Her literary art explores the hidden psychic realities of women by presenting them broken souls under psychic traits. In our society, gender is a potent treatise in determining the course of life a human being has to lead and it also regulates the thinking pattern of society too. Men and women are unsurprisingly measured different from each other physically as well as psychologically. The passage of a life of women is unquestionably different from that of a man. Males are always appraised as naturally superior to women, whereas, females are looked upon vicarious, resentful, void of self-esteem and prone to despondent. It is considered the birth right of a male to rule upon a female as a subject. Women are neglected, isolated and abducted by men and are always taught that their goodness lies in obeying men. The present paper has advanced towards females' 'self' as it is defined by conventional society, various relationships, and position which inclines to both hit and bound their empirical 'self' to discover females' quests for societal individuality deserving their worth and dignity as individuals, being talented with monetary liberation and optimistic to assert individuality in their familial and societal status. As a writer, Amrita has projected her own experience of being a woman. She successfully probes the fret and fevers of domestic life of women and their disabled spirits due to the continuous hammering of patriarchal blow on their creative selves and self-respect.

Keywords: liberation, identity, conservative, individuality, patriarchal, environment, probe etc

Introduction

Amrita Pritam is a prominent Punjabi writer who writes in Indian context. She was a leading 20th century Punjabi writer to win Sahitya Akademi Award. She was also the recipient of Padma Shree and the Janpith award for her mythical contribution. She was also the receiver of the Padma Vibhushan, India's second-highest civilian award and was elected a member of the upper house of the Indian Parliament, the Rajya Sabha. Feminism is also an integral part of Amrita's writings. She moved to Delhi after the partition of India and Pakistan. She began to write in Hindi along with Punjabi. She also worked for the All India Radio till 1961. Throughout her entire literary career, she produced over 100 books of poetry, fiction, essays, a collection of Punjabi folk songs and an autobiography that were all translated into several Indian and foreign languages. Her works have been translated widely, replicate a liberal and emotional thinking portraying humanistic approach to various socio-political concerns. Pritam in her writings never feared to display the truth and reality of society. Very boldly, she describes her authentic experience. And in doing, so she never cared for the societal outlook. Her works are the replica of horrors of partition through feministic lens. Being a recluse in her motherless childhood, she was aware about her tendency not to accept her father's wish to produce devotional literature like 'saintly' poet 'Meera' and she also feels remorseful for the fact. In her childhood, she wrote a poem for an imaginary boy 'Rajan' and her father slapped her for writing such type of poem. That did not stop her rebellious instinct rather it inspired her to explore various aspects of a woman's life which was then considered just limited to household chores, bringing up children and serving her husband.

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Her works are actual reflections of her bitter and sweet experiences of her personal life brazenly. As Mukesh Shah, a Hindi teacher from Patna, Bihar, tells Media India Group: "Pritam never concealed her opinions, no matter how offensive or unheard of it were in a traditional society. In fact, she reportedly got divorced in 1960, roughly the time when her writings started becoming more and more feminist, a reflection of her unhappy marriage and a result of her unapologetic stance against patriarchy."

Amrita Pritam's disobedient nature against the set norms of conservative is reflected in her literary legacy. Her works presents her as an advocator who used to put various interrogations on patriarchy deep rooted in the society. No set norms were accepted by her blindly in any field, may it be political, religious or domestic life of women. From her childhood, she used to ask various astounding questions regarding various issues prevailing in the society. Her writings reflected and challenged those things that everyone accepted as the norms. Though she was brought up in restricted religious environment yet she turned almost atheist when she realised the hollowness of prayer as all her prayers to restore her mother's health had turned futile. She is grown up as a young critical thinker and questioning morality and religion. After her mother passed away, she found herself overburdened with responsibilities of running a household. Without her mother, in such depressing and challenging circumstances, Amrita found succour in writing. Her exceptional talent was noticed radiantly in literary field with her first production of anthology of poems '*Amrit Lehran*' (Immortal Waves), published in 1936.

To have solace from the cataclysms of her life, she was married to Pritam Singh and hence carried the name Amrita Pritam. She was not mature enough when she was engaged. By providing examples of her own life, she strives to present that women's lives have always been relies on the mercy of male members of their homes. They are treated as lifeless things in determining their life partner as she writes explicitly against the marriage institution. She explicitly talks against the institution of matrimony. As she writes 'The Breadwinner':

"My breadwinner

I have eaten your salt

And I must obey the salt

As my father will." (1-4)

Next, she reflects the hegemony of males' in possessing a female thus-

'My breadwinner

I am doll of flesh

For you to play with." (20-22)

In Indian patriarch setup, marriage as an institution is also responsible to paralyse women of owning their individuality, she later says how women fail to have ownership of their bodies too. In such societies, it is the men who have everlasting privilege to females' bodies, as she says, "I am a doll of flesh for you to play with." With the growth of time, Amrita also grew up and began to realize the isolated and distressing status and identity of woman. She began to talk about her marriage that was putting limitations on her creative intervention. In her familial relationship, she was guided to be a thing participating in domestic chores only and not to raise her voice against discrimination. She says her husband would try to confine

her in domestic life only, asking her to not recite her poetry on the radio as such type of things can deteriorate and affect their family's name. As these verses display a woman's helplessness in patriarch society. They were not accredited liberty to take any type of decision regarding their lives. Also, in those times, such bold confessional writings supporting females' identity made everyone insecure. Such are disgraceful restrictions on females are responsible to spoil their potential.

Being an enthusiast, Amrita uses the common language to articulate such uncommon things. Such was the sufferings of Amrita Pritam too, as her married life failed to bring any mental satisfaction to her. And she realised her loveless married life was just a cage to imprison her body and soul. Under the turbulence of her emotional state, she composed her most famous piece of art in entire literary canon Ajj Akhaan Waris Shah Nu (Today I Invoke Waris Shah) or Ode to Waris Shah got her limelight that consists her expression of extreme anguish over the massacre and pathetic plight of women sufferer due to their different religious communities. This elegy to the 18th Century Punjabi Poet, Waris Shah, challenges romantic poetry of integrated literary percept where the woman is just accepted as a consort, a beloved and not as a better half. And when the question arises for her identity, the entire society feels helpless to accept her as an individual personality. Her suffering and dilemmas are condoned by the male members of her own family and society too. Also, her vision of love here becomes significantly broadened and delved into the other worldly Sufi realms. She wants to invoke legendary writer Waris Shah to attract the attention of society towards the sufferings of females. Along with it, she describes the exhaustion of love, spiritual relations thus in Ajj Akkhan Waris Shah Nu:

"All the flutes that played the melodies of love, have lost their tunes. The valorous brothers of Ranjha have forgotten the art.

Blood rained on the earth, and graves oozed it too. The amorous princesses today wail at the graveyards.

Everyone is prisoners have become thieves of beauty of love. Where can another Waris Shah be found?

I summon Waris Shah today, speak from thy grave, and find the next page in the Book of Love." (38-57)

These verses depict Amrita's robust desire to bring an essential change in the condition of females. Thus, she tries to invoke the people suppressed under vague beliefs of patriarchy to credit women with their individuality, to give respect to their beings. Through her writings, she conveyed the message to society to understand the silent sufferings of a woman in male-oriented society. And somewhere her personal griefs are also being echoed in her poem. *My Address* is another a poem in contradiction to romantic poetry in which she talks about body to beyond. She lays emphasis on the freedom of soul. In this poem she reflects her keen desire to live a liberal life that appears as a benediction. And such types of poems are like blessings for those who have the same ideology and philosophy as Amrita has.

Amrita Pritam's works instruct the feeling in her readers that insurgence does not need to be belligerent, it has to be sincere, steady and should take all the antagonism in its pace while going on the journey of restricted life. During her life, many times, she also confronted a state where she was unaccompanied, devoid of any kind of provision, deeply

hurt and did not know where to go and in such predicaments, she followed the path of patience and never irresolute from her revolutionary thoughts. Such types of mentions can be found in her autobiography '*The Revenue Stamp*'. Nonetheless, in spite of many chaos and uproar, her belief in herself persisted undaunted. With the growth of time, she turned to be more spiritual. Though she, along with her views, was ignored by critics and other literary personalities. It is very arduous in those times to perceive a woman like Amrita Pritam because in that period a woman was not provided any type of liberty in any of the field of life, they would mostly accept their fate. They have to rely on male-dominated system to live their lives.

Amrita Pritam's personal life is also reflection of her feminist ethics. She criticizes the marriage as an institution as it fails to bring the necessary liberty for females in life. Through her poems '*Night*' and '*The Scar*' she questions the norms of our patriarch-based society such as marriage, motherhood, and the essential domestic violence within heteronormative relationships. A woman is always present in a bipolar world. On the one side, she is subjected to the male-oriented society and on the other hand, she is dedicated to the proclamation of her womanhood, her own 'self' or female perspective. A woman's individuality is always perceived in rappings of the individuality of her male counterpart. As Singh in her book *Radical Feminism and Women's Writing*, asserts the view of Butalia, an Indian feminist and author told in the Indian Express.

"Love of these women were sold into prostitution or sold from hand to hand and some just disappeared. The trauma of this violence had impacted at least three generations since 1947. Sunny Hundal, a Sikh columnist, wrote in Britain's bodies become highly coveted and measured symbols of political and familiar power in India and Pakistan. In patriarchal and fended societies, women are almost always seen as the bearers of culture and honour women were not allowed to do anything that compromises those ideals, while men had much free rein without the same burden. These deeply ingrained attitude manifested themselves in the worst forms of violence during partition." (Singh 203)

During her lifetime, she favoured her principles choosing to break off the shackles of unhappy nuptial relationship and begins to believe in the idea to remain unmarried. Considering sexual politics in the publishing world and discrimination in the literary art of females and males, she asserts, enthusiastically:

"As for women, I feel that women in literature are different from women in other fields... Basically, there is a prejudice against women in literature. Men take women's writing lightly; they doubt a woman's sincerity. For example, when I got this Sahitya Akademi Award, and with it fame, the leading English daily in Delhi wrote that I got my popularity in Punjabi literature because of my youth and beauty. I felt very sorry to read that. Why not talent? They can admire a beautiful woman, but not a talented one."

In 1966, to bring forth such kinds of views in front of the nation and the world, she started *Nagmani* (Serpent's Jewel). The very title of the monthly shows the deliberate intention of Amrita Pritam to adopt such a name for her magazine. As the word serpent is contemplated as a dubious

animal in most of the mythologies. And mythologically, this dubious animal, serpent, is the representative of her honest and vigorous desire to challenge hypocritical and double-faced approach of society towards females. As they were subjected to various kinds of ferocity by different representatives during the partition. In her own life too, she fights to get equal status to men. As a writer, she was extremely sad on the religious riots during partition and afterwards political upheavals due to it:

"At the line of partition all social, political and religious values came crashing down lives glass smarted those crushed pieces of glass bruised my soul. I wrote my hymns for the sufferers of those who have abandoned and raped. The passion of those monstrous times has been with me, since like some consuming fire. (Varma 1)

Amrita Pritam's inheritance for females and successive cohorts is to purposefully challenge existing conditions of that time, trying to use art to encounter acknowledged prohibitions and redefine them. Be courageous, brazen and daring in the face of rudimentary suppression and charges of offensiveness, of raising and using females' voice to speak as they see the world ignoring the manner that the world expects them to speak. The last of Amrita's love poems titled *Main Tenu PherMilangi* ('I shall meet you again'), is not less than a legend in poetic form and is dedicated to her long-time companion Imroz and is now considered as her perfect epilogue. It displays her exceptional perception on life, her vision of love and the world and her perpetual hope for a world full of love and peace.

"I will meet you yet again
how and where
I do not know
perhaps I will become a
figment of your imagination
or may be splaying myself
as a mysterious line
on your canvas
I will keep gazing at you." (1-12)

Rashidi Ticket (Revenue Stamp) autobiography by Amrita Pritam is the reflection of numerous thought-provoking scraps from her life. She writes about her friable adolescence and her becoming a woman in her autobiography. She highlighted how in a strictly stringent society that is tightly packed up with the ideas of male-chauvinism, discrimination and voracity, women struggle to raise their voices and seem yonder their marginal gender roles. Moi (1986) ^[5] believes that "the patriarchal traditions imposed certain social ideals and standards on women" (209). In Indian patriarch-based society, a woman is not considered even as a human being owing her 'self' in her own right. She is considered a possession or aspiration for a man for self-affirmation and self-realization. Unfortunately, the tradition or culture that created Sita, and Savitri and that worship a girl child in the form of 'Kanjak' has denied the civil rights of survival to female save as daughter, sister, mother and wife. Daughter, etc. Through her entire life circle, a woman has to struggle at every step to get equal rights to man, to achieve individuality and a dependable self-identity. In the words of Bedjaoui:

"The very word Woman... emphasized a passive anonymous position. It derives from the Anglo-Saxon wife man literally 'wife-man', and the implication seems to be

that there is no such thing as woman separate from wifehood. As individuals, with few exceptions, women did not count. They were mothers, wives, daughters, sisters. (43)

In 1950, her novella 'Pinjar' (Skeleton/Cage) appeared in literary arena and, in 2002, it was made into a Bollywood film and remains till date one of the few Punjabi works on the partition of India from a woman's perspective. With the appearance of this novella, the feminist vein in Amrita's writings became more predominant and enthusiastic. Pinjar, is an illustration of the immense and massive human tragedy through the lives of young women of Muslim, Sikh and Hindu community. During partition, a huge number of the women were permanently separated from their families and were kidnapped, raped and killed too. At that time, it became a great sin to be a female as when they were acquiescent were not recognized or accepted by their own communities and sometimes by their own family too. All this was not limited to such an extent for their endless sufferings, they were labelled 'tainted'. The novel highlights the large scale of molestation faced by women during partition. Refugee camps were considered the safest place to have shelter but the reality was thoroughly different. To expose the hypocrisy of refugee camps, Pritam narrates in her novel:

"There was a refugee camp in adjoining village set up for the Hindu and Sikhs. The camp was guarded by the military. But daily the Muslim hooligans would come and take away young girls from the camp at night and bring them back in the morning." (Pritam 37)

The protagonist of the novel is Puro who is a memorable character and an epitome of violence against women during partition. And through Puro, Amrita Pritam depicts the harsh reality of society. Reena Mitra gives comment on Pinjar:

"Pinjar depicts a world of social reality which draws its meaning from an interpretation of experienced reality, a reality which engendered not by a system or a doctrine that prevails but by a sense or sensitivity which helps organize that raw data of experiences into takes stock of that which asserts itself in experimental past, however much we try to banish it from our consciousness. (Mitra 100)

Puro is an exemplary character solely represents the loss of humanity and ultimate surrender to existential fate by a female. When Puro managed to escape from the clutches of Rashida after fifteen days of captivity and being raped, her parents refused to accept her back,

"Daughter, this fate was ordained to you, we are helpless. The Sheikhs will descend on us and destroy everything we have... It would have been better if you have died at birth! Who will marry you now? You have lost your religion and birth right. If the Sheikhs find you here, they will kill all of us. (Pritam 22)

As a consequence, mere desperateness engrossed Puro. She feels dejected and depressed too. As Tong says: "When our lives get too difficult to handle, we consciously work ourselves into a rage or go down into depression." (200-201). Being rejected by her own parents, Puro remained helpless and a toy in the hands of Rashida. According to Priyadarshani Dasgupta,

"Puro, thus, makes the known normative choice to refuse the offer of inclusion and interpolation into family, community, nation that was once denied to her. In doing so she recreates her own identity, 'Hamida' which had been once thrust upon her. (Dasgupta 5)

Puro was reflection of thousands of women who were the victims of communal discern. Amrita's works were depiction of many women who were abducted, raped, forced into marriage, forced to convert and killed, on both sides of the border. Women were also hurt, their breasts cut off, exposed naked and strutted down the streets and their bodies engraved with religious symbols of the other community. The novelist censoriously discovers the various customs in which the destiny of its protagonist Puro who is being relocated from her land and thrown into an alien land. This was the destiny of thousands of women during partition. The novel represents a critical description of the society where women are just regarded a thing to be possessed and as an asset to be assumed and used according to the wish of male chauvinistic society. In the words of Menon and Bhasin, it can be stated:

"[the] material, symbolic and political significance of abduction of women was not lost... on the women themselves...their communion or on... governments. As a retaliatory measure, it was simultaneously as assertion of the identity and humiliation of the rival community through the appropriation of its women." (Menon, 3).

Amrita is mostly known for her passionate and unabashed love poems, hitherto unknown in the whole canon of Indian literature by women. She talks about the woman's body as an independent entity as well as a contested space by a man's love and the tradition's pressure to procreate. As Kalpana Raithatha, Lakshmi Chand Jain, the director of Bhartiya Gyanpeeth expresses their perception about Amrita's supremacy of writing:

"The one who has the knowledge and experience of the females physical, mental and emotional structure, the one who has heated herself to old ornament into the force of tension, conflict and pure love even in the difficult situations, such as Amrita's creation can be appreciated only with the warmth of the blood flowing in the veins and the throbs of the beating heart." (Translated from Hindi). (Raithatha 63)

Such world-shattering ideas and lexis made some contemporary critics designate her as a campaigner much before feminism. She was an agitator poet who would not shred any words just because of outlooks from her gender. D R More praise the novel lavish for its "poetic presentation of the theme of exploitation of the weaker sex on the background of the partition tragedy." (235)

Many of Amrita's distressing poems during this period also encapsulate the silent suffering of women in such a conservative milieu where behind their disgusting and suffocating veils, they were remained everlastingly condemned and belonged nowhere. She produced some valuable works for the upliftment of females in India Patriarch society. Amrita's later works like 'Kaal Chetna' ('Consciousness of Time'), 'Kala Gulab' ('Black Rose'), and 'Aksharon Kay Saye' ('Shadows of Words') all consisted her strong and determined strong recalcitrant tinge. This fiery woman bore with courage the agony of being uprooted from her homeland during partition and went on to lead an exemplary life.

Amrita is mostly known for her passionate and unabashed love poems. Her legacy for women and subsequent generations is to intentionally challenge status quo, trying to use art to challenge accepted taboos and redefine them. Be fearless, unabashed and courageous in the face of crude censorship and charges of obscenity, of raising and using

your voice to speak as you see the world – not in the manner that the world expects you to speak. Her literary legacy has a huge number of volumes, entailing of more than a hundred books of poetry, fiction, biographies, essays, and even a collection of Punjabi folk songs. As Amrita wrote, “My initial reaction at an early stage of my writing career was to stop writing in the language if I couldn’t reach through it to my people. I said myself: “no more Punjabi for me.” But as I thought calmly about it, the writer in me decided, whatever the consequence, I couldn’t write in any other but my mother tongue. That relates to my soil, my milieu. And I gave myself wholly to Punjabi.” (Jha and Pritam 194)

Her choice to write in Punjabi thus imbedded the question of dialect practice and provincial ethos onto the intersecting themes of women’s liberation, dogmatic concern, religious conviction, caste, class and citizenship that framed the liberal discussion on nation- wide values in the years leading up to, and succeeding, conventionality. Many of her works were translated into several Indian and foreign languages including Tamil, English and Spanish languages as her recognition and status grew in literary arena.

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