



Research Paper

## ***The Revenue Stamp: A Saga of a Woman Writer's Lonely Battle against Censorships***

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**ABSTRACT:** *Amrita Pritam is considered the first prominent woman Punjabi poet, novelist and essayist and is regarded as the most important voice for women in Punjabi literature. She came to prominence in the Indian literary scene in the middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A period marked by the euphoria of independence, the trauma of partition and dislocation, a new world order in the aftermath of the second world war and a grand Nehruvian vision of building a nation. It was an era marked by hopes and aspirations of an emerging nation-state. India saw the coming of age of a number of middle-class women writers in many regional languages, who were influenced by the new progressive ideas and charged with visions of a transformed India. They sought to give voice to the angst of middle-class women feeling stifled in the conservative ethos of their surroundings. These writers ushered in a new wave of feminist literature in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century India and later, even as they braved criticism for their writings from their male colleagues, from the literary establishments, publishing industries and were also targeted by so-called guardians of social morality and religion. My Paper explores Amrita Pritam's autobiography from this often-neglected angle. I feel, The Rasidi Ticket bears testimony to the kind of harassment, vilification and even sometimes ridicule many women writers were subjected to simply for daring to voice their opinions in public. Amrita Pritam was not alone in this. Her account of harassment and vilification at the hands of the Punjabi literary establishment must be placed in the wider context of challenges faced by women writers in regional languages who had to endure constant surveillance of their personal lives and vilification campaigns for daring to raise gender concerns in their writings.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Women's autobiographies in India, cultural misogyny. Writing women, identity, gender politics*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Amrita Pritam (1919-2005), was a prominent Punjabi poet, novelist and essayist and is widely regarded as one of the most important voices for women in Punjabi literature. She was one of the most distinguished literary giants that came to the forefront after independence and flourished in the inspired, idealistic milieu of a newly independent nation. She came to prominence as a feminist writer/ poet (though she denied that label for the longest possible time) in the the1940s, first in Punjabi literature, then in Hindi and Urdu translations and finally internationally. She is still a must-know writer for anyone looking to challenge the patriarchal hegemony in literature. She, along with Rashid Jahan, Ismat Chughtai, and so on was part of the generation of women writers who were shaped by the strong undercurrents of emancipatory ideologies unleashed in India in the wake of freedom struggle and modernity. These writers ushered in a new wave of feminist literature in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century India and later, even as they braved criticism for their writings from their male colleagues, from the literary establishments, publishing industries and were also targeted by so-called guardians of social morality and religion.

Pritam came to the limelight by writing many poems of protest, essentially against the way the world treated women.<sup>1</sup> Throughout her life, she remained committed to the cause of women, "I was far ahead of my

times, though I hardly had much exposure to books and society. So, whatever came from within I put it down on paper. I wouldn't call it a revolt, but there was an awareness that whatever was happening in society was terribly wrong, whether in the name of religion or in the name of women" (*The Fiftieth Milestone*, 241). In her autobiography, Amrita emphasizes the fact that people were infuriated by her writing from the beginning and associates it with "plain intolerance of women, especially in the world of letters; for there the woman expresses herself, projects her views, her feelings. A woman doctor is all right, not a woman writer. Basically, there is a prejudice against women in literature" (JSALvol.5, no3). In the Indian cultural context, and that too when she was in the prime of life (in the middle years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), writing honestly like a woman and reporting on the hitherto unreported areas of life meant inviting marginalization, derision and scrutiny of personal life.

My paper will deal with this theme of a woman writer's life-long battles with various kinds of censorship as depicted in the *Rasidi Ticket*. One of the principal tenets in Pritam's autobiography is the theme of a woman writer's battle against persecution. She felt hounded because the chauvinist society around her could not overcome gender bias and allow her to write with creative freedom. As her autobiography makes evident, she has shown tremendous courage and resilience in coping with this. In her autobiography, Pritam seeks to highlight a woman writer's battle against social prejudice and harassment in a chauvinistic society and a fierce determination to live life on her terms. Self-construction in the autobiography is decisively influenced by the liberal humanist ideas of freedom, equality and justice and they shape their individual identity in the context of the emancipatory ideals unleashed by the nationalist as well as the feminist movement in India.

*Rasidi Ticket* is not a linear narrative organized in chronological order. It is basically a recollection of important moments, formative influences, and people, who in various ways have enhanced her creativity and were instrumental in making her what she became; her answer to her critics contains a very self-absorbed (bordering on mystical) vindication of her convictions which (in their time) were derided by so many. The autobiography was first published in 1976 when she was about fifty-seven years old. The reworked edition of the same text was published as *Aksharon ke Saye* (Shadows of Words) in 1999. *Kala Gulab* (1968) is another autobiographical text by Amrita Pritam. This paper will refer to *Rasidi Ticket* translated in English as *Life and Times: Amrita Pritam* as her principal autobiographical work. It is the key text and other books are either modified or abridged accounts of her story.<sup>ii</sup> All the textual quotations in this paper are taken from the English translation of *Life and Times: Amrita Pritam*.

The autobiography, as is most of her poetry and fiction, has been interpreted primarily as a symbolical/political challenge to patriarchy or a damning critique of arranged marriages, material conditions of women's existence and psychological damage caused by the sense of dependence and powerlessness perpetuated by those institutions and so on. The critics have largely ignored other nuances, contradictions and ambivalences in the self-presentation. It is true that the autobiography powerfully registers Pritam's open-minded, unorthodox attitude toward love and life and her guiltless description of personal relationships outside the orbit of marriage. However, there's conscious compartmentalization of life's roles as mother or wife and that of an intensely sensitive and idealistic poet and the reader is mainly allowed access only to the creative self. Being the dextrous writer that she was, she consciously chose to reveal only so much information about crucial players as necessary to reveal their influence in shaping her persona, and how various people had supported her and enriched her life. She writes, "In the totality of myself as a writer, the woman in me has had only a secondary role to play... This secondary role as a woman, however, rakes up no quarrels with my main being as a writer. Rather the woman in me has in a disciplined manner learned to accept the secondary role" (23). Despite underplaying gender and projecting herself as a 'creative artist' who chose to highlight the gender discrimination and repression of women around her in an 'objective' manner, gender remains the prominent parameter of self-construction. Her conscious and continuous underplaying of self in intimate relationships has to be understood as the frustration felt by a sensitive and intelligent woman, who was feeling suffocated in various relationships but was bound by conventions and society. That she chose to underplay the individual self and yet symbolically and poetically brought out the sense of suffocation and frustration is both her triumph as a great creative writer as well as a masterful strategy to evade close scrutiny and censorship of a woman writer's personal life.

## II. Writing as Release from Depression

Pritam projects her writing as an extremely self-absorbed activity. It seems to have primarily offered her a release from depression, and given her courage and strength to survive. Fidelity to her own truth is thus supreme for her, "I am not in the least mindful of what others think of me. My only desire is to be at peace with my innermost self..." (4) Though it was satisfying to be recognized and felicitated, she never hankered after awards or recognition, "My only desire is to penetrate deep into the hearts and souls of my readers, to whatever extent that has been possible, I have reached somewhere..." (104). Her self-absorption is evident. The self is projected as completely alienated from traditional cultural ethos as it is seen as the source of entrapment and not

empowerment. It comes as no surprise, then, that the self-identity as projected in Amrita's autobiography is that of a crusader against the ills in society. She is quite self-conscious of the value of her writing as a critique of social norms. Her pride in her work is evident when she recollects a conversation with Ho Chi Minh, the then president of Vietnam, who said, "We are both fighting the wrong values, are we not...? You with your pen, I with my sword." (35)

Western Feminist theorists usually emphasize the difference in identity formation in women's autobiographies by noting the importance given to female bonding, relational, self-deprecating projection of identity. However, Amrita's autobiography reveals no attachment to the domestic sphere. After the loss of her mother early in life, there is no close bonding with any female relative or friend with whom she could genuinely communicate, ease out her grievances, and seek guidance or solace in her predicament. There's a terrible sense of loneliness and lack of companionship, camaraderie or bonding in the domestic sphere. Amrita's principal intention in writing her autobiography seems to assert the validity of her convictions and reaffirm that the fidelity to the truth of her heart is supreme to her and whether the rest of the world affirms or rejects it, she has learnt to take it in the spirit of a *Karma yogi*. It seems that she started writing and reading to fill the void of her loneliness. "It was my loneliness that inspired me to write. I did not cherish it as a dream or ambition. It came to me like the breeze of fresh wind in a suffocating room... my father who was also a poet used to sleep during the day and write during the night. In the afternoons when he slept, I found myself alone in the library. I spent my time among the books like an empty book among the books" (Verma, 150). Very few things changed even when she grew up. She narrates one telling incident. Once, she went to Ludhiana Airport to board a plane, she came to know that it was not a passenger plane at all; it was being used to carry products of the local mills. The professor who had come to drop her laughed. "You will have a lot of bundles for the company." She replied, "I have done this all my life ... I have had little human company of any sort." (58)

### **III. Hostility and Derision from the Punjabi Literary Establishment**

Pritam, it seems, had to face the hostility and derision from the Punjabi literary establishment right from the beginning. She writes, "From the day I started to write, these voices of derision have always been with me...I have had to fight a lifelong battle with my contemporaries..." (76) She attributes this hostility and antagonism to the deep-rooted chauvinism of the male literary establishment and its refusal to recognize merit in creative writing by a woman. The act of writing for her seems to have been both, a gesture of protest and a way of self-discovery. Pritam primarily projects herself as an artist who is alienated from society and who is unjustly persecuted by critics. There's a barely-hidden sense of vindication and triumph for proving everybody wrong by sheer grit and determination to stick to her convictions. It cannot be denied that many of the vilification campaigns and public censorship and scrutiny of her personal life she endured throughout her life were due to the fact that she was a woman writer who attempted to highlight the angst and suffocation felt by women in the conservative social milieu around her.

Pritam writes that often the awards and recognition she got as a writer were attributed to her good looks rather than any talent and gift of expression. She feels that was society's usual way of underplaying women's achievements and merits, particularly in the field of literature. On the topic of being constantly at the receiving end of vilification campaigns, she writes, "Society attacks anyone who dares to say its coins are counterfeit, but when it is a woman who says this, society begins to foam at the mouth. It puts aside all its theories and arguments and picks up the weapon of filth to fling at her" (Pritam qtd by Tharu and Lalitha, vol. II, 160). In parts, Pritam's autobiography becomes a virtual defence against a society of enemies in the literary circle who, she believes, have formed a conspiracy to mar her reputation. to the relentless persecution by critics and manipulative newspapers, the politics in the literary world, and so on.

### **IV. Eloquent Testimony to the Problems and Challenges Faced by Women Writers in Indian Languages**

Pritam's autobiography bears eloquent testimony to the problems and challenges faced by women writers in the Indian languages in the first half-century after independence. Writers like Kamala Das and Ismat Chughtai also bore the brunt for fearlessly exposing the ugly underbelly of the conservative patriarchal ethos of a newly independent nation. In doing this, they also highlighted the aspirations of middle-class Indian women to have a measure of control over their lives in the transitional period of our history. These courageous writers have fought social/ familial prejudice against women writers with quiet determination and at times rebelled against social norms to stand for their convictions. This bias against women freely expressing their stand on various issues concerning their lives is still widely prevalent and finds expression in the persistent misogynistic trolling and attacks on opinionated women on social media.

Commenting on the trials and tribulations of women writers in Indian languages, Nabneeta Dev Sen writes:

The public interest in the private life of a woman writer is so great that her every action is morally judged. Particularly for the women who write in their mother tongue, to break the

taboo of language is not easy. The mother tongue reinforces all the taboos imposed by the dominant, conservative ideology, but men get society's support to break the rules, to non-conform, to experiment. A man has the artist's 'poetic license' from society to defy custom and tradition, to shirk social and even immediate family responsibilities. But the woman writer is not given the license to do as she pleases either with the language or with her personal life. She must conform. The male writer may use his mother tongue uninhibitedly to suit his artistic purpose but a woman writer may not. She has to think of the extra-literary disadvantages of her gender, of her social image as a woman rather than as an artist (Sen, 300)

Pritam's unhappy marriage was a known fact in her social circle, it seems that all her friendships with men or even occasional interactions with like-minded friends were under surveillance (as it were). In her autobiography, she expresses a great degree of annoyance and bitterness about the unwarranted curiosity and surveillance of people in matters that should have been regarded as trifle and insignificant in the case of fellow male writers. In this too, one can say that her autobiography bears eloquent testimony to Nabneeta Dev Sen's observations regarding the life of women writing in their respective mother tongues in India. "A woman writer is constantly watched like prisoners in a jail who are made to parade before the warden every morning. The woman writer's private life is under the strict surveillance of society. Her name becomes an essential part of the text that she produces, and with that, her whole personal life and her body" (Sen, 299).

As mentioned above, one of the principal tenets in the autobiography is the theme of a woman writer's battle against persecution. She felt hounded because the chauvinist society around her could not overcome gender bias and allow her to write with creative freedom. The rumormongering and societal rebuff on the other hand only strengthened her determination to live life on her terms and write on issues close to her heart. Since the issues close to her heart were inevitably, the suffocation felt by women in the traditional order, their agonized search for love and fulfilment, their willingness to pay the price for their decision and so on, the feminist undertones of her writing have to be acknowledged. When Raka Sinha asked her in an interview, whether she was desperate in setting her image as a great woman, writing of women's struggle, she denied any claim of active interest and conscious effort like a feminist, although she stated that it is in the patriarchal structure of society that she did suffer being a woman. She continued sadly that she achieved freedom but, "What a terrible price one has to pay for it! All the time you are fighting against your surroundings; you are being pressurized by writers, critics, relatives, economic hardships" (Sinha cited by Varma, 49) Pritam also associates unwarranted criticism that she was subjected to with the increased competition in the post-independence years for patronage, awards and advantages such as foreign tours. Apparently, her contemporaries were jealous of the state patronage (in terms of awards and foreign tours as a delegate of friendly cultural exchange programs) bestowed upon her in abundance without really hankering after it.

There is a deep sense of hurt at being misunderstood by her contemporary Punjabi literary establishment. In spite of repeated assertions that she does not care about critical opinion and writes to communicate her inner truth, it is clear that the criticism and rumors did affect her. The petty rivalries, maneuverings and jealousies of fellow writers and critics in their scramble for recognition, awards, fellowships and state patronage deeply sadden her because she was never part of this rat race and wrote purely out of an inner creative compulsion to communicate. She writes, "There were flags of so many denominations and so many flag staffs on which they fluttered. They thought I too wanted to flutter one of my own. I wanted to cry out to them all, "My friends have no illusions. You are welcome to your faiths and flags. I want nothing" (12).

Normally reticent and restrained, Pritam does not hesitate to name the people and expose their narrow-mindedness, pettiness, jealousy and hypocrisy. She narrates several instances when even the so-called pillars of the Punjabi literary establishment let her down and even unknown people indulged in rumormongering. She, on her part, did not compromise with or shied away from confrontation for her convictions. There is no whining about the uncalled-for literary persecution but a strong sense of being wronged and an equally powerful desire to vindicate her point of view. Even as she highlights her sense of hurt at the constant belittlement and derision at the hands of her contemporaries, there is also a strong yet subtle undercurrent of self-vindication as her eventual success and recognition have proved everybody wrong.

## **V. Intolerance of Women Writers in Male Literary Bastions, Politics of the Publishing Industry and Censorship of a Woman Writer**

Pritam writes extensively about the petty politics and manoeuvrings of her male colleagues to get their works listed in the university syllabi. The manipulations for literary awards and foreign tours organised by the Government of India, the politics of elections to various literary bodies and so on. It seems there had been persistent slandering and misconceptions about Pritam's clout in these matters though she never engaged actively in any campaign or hankered after awards, membership of literary bodies and so on. She narrates a classic case of 'mansplaining' from the Vice-chancellor of a prestigious University when there was a demand to ban her story from the University syllabus because of its objectionable content. The Vice Chancellor of that



University called her and tried to advise her as to what she should write and what she should avoid, being a woman from a 'respectable background'. Though he was from a science discipline and confessed not to understanding much about literature, just because he held a powerful post, he had assumed himself superior to the writer. He did not even bother to read her original story (he had read an excerpt) before allowing it to be banned for objectionable content.

In her literary career, Pritam has tasted both immense success and recognition as well as defamation and slander, but it is her sense of defiance against all of these that comes across most prominently in the autobiography. As mentioned above, there's a shared but differently articulated commitment to emancipatory politics among many Indian women writers of the mid-twentieth century. Some of them like Ismat Chughtai and Pritam herself have paid a critical price for being ahead of their times. Cases were slapped against them for producing 'obscene' literature. Pritam founded the Punjabi literary journal, *Nāgmanī* in 1964. She showcased the work of emerging and established Punjabi poets and writers as well as translations of writers from abroad. In this journal, she sought to create a platform for writers to challenge traditional notions of gender, sexuality, psychology, and political mores in their work. She faced censorship accusations of obscenity and risked estrangement from conventional audiences for doing this.

It was alleged that *Nagmani*, the monthly Journal Pritam published was vulgar and sex-oriented and plain pornography (80). She writes that when her heart is heavy with such filth and calumny against her, she simply writes a poem because she cannot fight wilful folly and prejudice. In 1969, her poem on the nine dreams of Guru Nanak's mother, Tripta was soundly criticized; there was vilification and demands to ban the poem. One writer even went to the extent of branding her "love's worm" and questioned her right to handle so lofty a theme. No respected voice in Punjabi literature came forward to support her (53). In 1983, fourteen years after the poem was actually written, when her collection of poems that included this poem won the coveted Jnanpith award, she received a lawyer's notice for the objectionable content of this poem. However, this time around, many writers and newspapers raised their voices in the defence of the poem; even one of the most respected authorities on the Sikh religion Sant Longowal backed her. He said, "Some people who were jealous of Amrita Pritam, used the name of the religious institution to further their own goals" (137). This fact surely points to the changing intellectual and cultural trends in India, the ever-increasing influence of the writer as she became well-known and a name to reckon with and also the acceptance and increasing space provided to a woman's voice in India.

## VI. Concluding Remarks

Pritam, in her autobiography, projects herself as an artist who is alienated from society, as one, who is unjustly persecuted by critics and one, who aspires to change oppressive social norms by the power of her pen. The pen has given her an identity, a purpose and meaning in her life. Through all the trials and tribulations of life, the pen has been her most loyal companion, The act of writing, thus, seems to have been both, a gesture of protest and a way of self-discovery. Though there is pervasive bitterness and a sense of hurt, she never gave up. She felt isolated but it was her commitment and self-belief that kept her going. She writes quite bravely, "I did not feel lost... while they were attacking me, I bore the cross I had made for myself until, through my suffering, and I came to recover my usual calmness." (53). Such an idealistic and lofty notion of commitment on the part of a creative writer seems very rare these days but it is hardly surprising for writers of her generation like Ismat Chughtai among others because they grew into adulthood into what was an earlier and distinctly different phase in the long-running project of nation-building. For a majority of writers of their generation, writing was not an entertaining pursuit of and for the leisurely classes; it was an important program of national reconstruction through character-building. Charged by the power of her convictions, she continued to raise her voice against the suffocating restraints on women in the conservative patriarchal ethos despite public strictures and censorship of her subject matter and a lazy juxtaposition of her creative writing with her personal life.

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<sup>i</sup> . See for example, her poem *Annadata* (Breadgiver):

My breadwinner  
I am a doll of flesh  
For you to play with.  
I am a cup of young blood  
For you to drink.  
I stand before you  
Ready for use.  
According to your will  
I grew  
And was ground  
And kneaded  
And rolled out  
You may bake me  
In your oven  
And eat me like bread;  
I am only a scrap of bread  
And you are only lava  
To cool or grow hot as you will.

(Quoted in *The Fiftieth Milestone: A Feminine Critique*,239-40)

<sup>ii</sup> Aksharon Ke Saye is a collection of excerpts from her fiction, poetry, short stories, letters and autobiography. Rasidi Ticket is referred as the standard autobiography by critics.