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Unveiling Love and Empathy in Amrita Pritam's Poetry

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Abstract:

"...But what matters is not life but the courage you bring to it." (*The Revenue Stamp*
1)

Amrita Pritam was a rebel and a revolutionary in the world of literature, and she broke the silence. She painted the world with her rebellious colours to question patriarchy in literature, where a man was holding a pen, a man was the painter, and a woman was a model. She gave spark to the ashes of the dead silence of tyrannical partition times, where women were abducted and murdered.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Shaktivaad, Empathy.

"There was a grief I smoked in silence, like a cigarette
Only a few poems fell out of the ash I flicked from it."

Amrita was a revolutionary, a feminist, and an emancipator breaking the shackles of time by challenging patriarchy and the ways of love with her undaunted ideas. Her expedition in the world of stories and poetry started in Lahore. She talks to VT Girdhari about her views on feminism in an interview:

It is a fashion nowadays to use this word and discuss it. Feminism as a slogan may be a need of the time, when the world is still living on a physical basis, with the awareness that this world is man's world, but we have to move higher than that. In our mythology, we are told that nothing can be complete without Shakti. Shiva and Shakti, both are incomplete without each other. There are six Chakras, and the Seventh Chakra is the meeting part of the two.... We believe in woman as Shakti, but we don't say 'Shaktivaad'! (Bhagyashree 156)

She wrote her first anthology of poems, *Amrit Lehran* (Immortal Waves), in 1936, when she was sixteen. She was the voice of millions of silenced women molested and tortured during partition; her voice echoed in the sky, and the shrieking cries and sobs of suffering women could be heard in her poetry. As she says to Waris Shah:

Speak from the depths of the grave,
to Waris Shah I say
and add a new page to your saga of love today.
Once wept a daughter of Punjab,
your pen unleashed a million cries,
a million daughters weep today,
to you Waris Shah they turn their eyes.
Awake, decry your Punjab,
O sufferer with those suffering!
Corpses entomb the fields today,
the Chenab is flowing with blood.
Mingled with poison by some
are the waters of five rivers,
and this torrent of pollution,
unceasingly covers our earth.

-Amrita Pritam, *Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu* - Today I invoke Waris Shah

She represents the entire humanity, and the pain of humanity is implicit in her poem. The poem "Virgin" speaks of women's suffering, and "The Scar of Wound" talks about eternal agony.

If there was a revolt in her poetry, at the same time, there was love. Both rebellion and love came from pain, or pain inspired her to dive deep into the realms of silence to shape her poetry. She talks about love, passion, freedom and rising. Not even a single sentiment of a woman is untouched by her empathetic consciousness and revolutionary pen; she very straightforwardly elaborates on the agony of a woman when she loses her virginity:

One married, The other a maiden, both equally pure.

I wasn't alone, but a combination of the two
When I approached your bedstead.
I was to kill, I was to finish
The maiden, the virgin for your endurance.
I did kill
It was a murder which is legal
Only the embarrassment is illegal.
And having drunk the venom of embarrassment
I saw my hands, at dawn, in blood.
...
Whom was I to kill, whom did I kill?
- ("A Virgin", translated by Suresh Kohli)

Litterateur Dr. Attar Singh on Amrita Pritam's poetic works, "Amrita Pritam struck upon the most vivid and meaningful symbol of woman, the worst victim of the clashing times. The curse of womankind assumed in her poems a myriad forms the woman abducted as war booty by the 'holy' crusaders, the woman taken out in nude processions to signify the victory of one religion over another, the woman violated against in the name of the silent God, the woman nursing the fruits of the seeds of sin embedded in her womb, the woman refused recognition by her parents or her husband after her rescue from her abductors". (Qtd. in Bedi 15)

There was passion, obsession, and pain in her poetry; at the same time, there were spiritual connotations of her deeper insights into human longing for love:

My bed is ready for you
But take off your body
Like you did with your shirt and shoes
Keep it on the stool
It doesn't matter
Every land has its own customs.
- ("Meeting The Self", translated by Mahendra Kulashrestha)

She was always searching for love, sometimes smoking the leftover butts of Sahir's cigarette and gathering the ash in her poetry. Amrita met Sahir sometime

around 1944 in Preet Nagar, a village between Lahore and Amritsar. She was then married to Pritam Singh, an editor, but their marriage was not the one a poetic soul aspired for. Amrita, when sensual desires and a rebellious spirit with new passion grew at a young age, came to Preet Nagar to attend a Punjabi and Urdu poets' mushaira. She mentions in her autobiography *Revenue Stamp*, that:

When Sahir would come to meet me in Lahore, it was as if an extension of my silence had occupied the adjacent chair and then gone away . . .

He would quietly smoke his cigarettes, putting out each after having finished only half of it. He would then light a new cigarette. After he would leave, the room would be full of his unfinished cigarettes . . .

I would keep these remaining cigarettes carefully in the cupboard after he left. I would only light them while sitting alone by myself. When I would hold one of these cigarettes between my fingers, I would feel as if I was touching his hands . . .

This is how I took to smoking. Smoking gave me the feeling that he was close to me. He appeared each time, like a genie in the smoke emanating from the cigarette. (*Revenue Stamp* Quoted in Scroll.in)

Whatever she felt she wrote in her poems and novels, and her celebrated love for Sahir Ludhianvi, the famous Urdu poet, speaks loudly through her writings. Once, her son came to her and said, "People say that I am Sahir Uncle's son". Amrita replied, "I wish you were Sahir Uncle's son". (languageinIndia.com)

Amrita fell in love with the poetry of Sahir Ludhianvi and nurtured a passion for years. She wrote his name hundreds of times on a sheet of paper while addressing a press conference. After Sahir's departure, Amrita would smoke the cigarette butts he left. Their love consummates through that passion, even when he was not alive, but he breathed through the love and passion of Amrita; she thought as if the smoke was travelling to another world where Sahir was after his death. Her obsession for Sahir crossed the boundaries of life and time: "Aur mujhe lagta hai Ki shamshan ki aag, aag ka apman hai Kisi sohni, sassi ya Heer mein Jo aag jalti thi Mujhe us aag ki pehchaan

hai" (I feel that the fire of the cremation ghat is an insult to the flame. I recognise the 'flame' that burnt in the hearts of any Sohni, Sassi or Heer).

Longing for love can be seen in her poetry; if Sahir was passion, then Imroz was devotion:

There were two kingdoms only:
the first of them threw out both him and me.
The second we abandoned.
Under a bare sky
I for a long time soaked in the rain of my body,
he for a long time rotted in the rain of his.
Then like a poison he drank the fondness of the years.
He held my hand with a trembling hand.
'Come, let's have a roof over our heads awhile.
Look, further on ahead, there
between truth and falsehood, a little empty space.'

- "Empty Space," Amrita Pritam

All her poems, she adds, are accidents and happenings transmuted into art. "I have," she avers, "never turned away from any experience." Her poetry, then, is a poetry of felt reality and earned insights... When Amrita came of poetic age around the beginning of the Second World War, a silent revolution was already underway in her psyche. The bland, moralistic themes of Amrit Laheran (*The Ambrosial Airs*) as well as the traditional metrics could no longer contain her raging fevers (Maini 108).

Amrita Pritam's poetry depicts the feelings of a woman in love. She has loved dearly and suffered terribly. Her attitude towards love, in her early poems, is devotional mainly because of her religious upbringing. She loves with her whole being and considers her personality incomplete unless the man condescends to transform it into a thing, pure and sublime. In her poem, *Charan Tere suchche*, she says-

Charan tere suchche
Hoth mere juthhe
Aj hon ge

Jan charan tere juthhe
Jan hond mere suchche
Aj hon ge
(To-day
My lips unholy
Shall touch
Thy feet sanctified.
Else,
Thy feet desecrated
and my lips sanctified
Shall be.)

(Tasneem 36)

She was utterly broken when she learned about the new girlfriend of Sahir, and was depressed to the extent that she was ready to commit suicide. Poetry saved her, and catharsis was possible only through poems breaking all the barriers of truth and reality. Their silent relationship was taking the shape of ash, helping Amrita shape immortal tales and rhymes of love and passion. Her melancholic verses belong to the year 1960, and she gave Sahir the shape of words and poems. Her saddest thoughts are expressed most pleasantly thus: "When you cannot fill the goblet of the night with the nectar of life: When you cannot taste the honey life offers you, You cannot call it tragedy..." (*The Revenue Stamp* 36)

Revenue Stamp is the book that 'confirms' for her, the 'account' of experiences. It is an affirmation of the life she lived as a woman and as a poet. Known as a 'goddess of defiance,' Amrita Pritam is among the early women poets of post-Independence era of India, writing mainly in Punjabi, Hindi and Urdu. Her autobiography *The Revenue Stamp* is her stamp on the cognitive life-vision of a woman who has not only loved poetry but has lived poetry. She has unusual feminine dignity and sensitivity. The Revenue Stamp reflects her rebellious ideas; it is an expression of romantic mind and the sufferings of woman in her. (Bhagyashree 7)

When Imroz entered her life, she was completely broken due to her longing for love, and she could never express her love for Sahir Ludhianvi; though her poetry spoke volumes for her love, she could never express it in front of Sahir. Their love was not one-sided; Sahir wrote nazms for Amrita Pritam, and their pens and poetry had a silent outburst of emotions that tongues could never express. Unexpressed love leads to agony, and pen bleeds that intense emotion in writing. Amrita was so lost in that unrequited love that she used to write the name of Sahir everywhere, on her clothes, heart, paper etc. Her love was her only devotion that surpassed every other emotion. Imroz observed that Amrita writes the name of Sahir everywhere, but his love increases with every dawn. Imroz, the painter and Amrita, his muse and writer, lived together for forty years but never expressed their love for each other by speaking the three words, "I Love You". As Imran Khan asks Imroz, "You lived together for 40 years; why is it that you never confessed your love for each other?" Imroz replied:

There was no need of confession. If you state everything without actually saying it, there is no need of it. In those 40 years, we never even once said 'I love you'. If there is love, there is no need to affirm it. If I find someone beautiful, the other person will know it on his/her own. If we tell someone that I love you, we do it because we want the other person to love us. Love needs no confession-affirmation. Confession of love is a way to forcefully ask for love.

Imroz was a painter, and he used to write poetry too, to express his love for Amrita:

When you
leave
the life
becomes a poem

and when you
arrive
poem
becomes life

Once
a dream
asked life
till when
will you keep writing-
poems?

Life said
till the time
till then
when the life itself
doesn't become
a poem...

–“Jashan Jaari Hai,” Imroz

Amrita Pritam writes for Imroz:

Maybe I will turn into a spring
and rub foaming
drops of water on your body
and rest my coolness on
your burning chest
I know nothing
but that this life
will walk along with me.

When the body perishes
all perishes
but the threads of memory
are woven of enduring atoms
I will pick these particles
weave the threads
and I will meet you yet again.

Her life was dedicated to writing; she started giving shape to her imagination in poetic swings at 16 and dedicated her entire life to writing. She was awarded the Jnanpith award for *Kagaz Te Kanvas* (1970), the first woman recipient of the Sahitya Akademi award for *Sunehere*. In 1969, she received a Padma Shree from the President of India.

With Amrita Pritam we learn to feel the Power of Desire, which has no limitations, no boundaries whatsoever. her Poetic Canvas Swirls Us Into A Vast Horizon Where We Must Exercise Our Fundamental Human Faculties - Hearing, Seeing, Touching, Smelling, Dancing, dreaming, loving. She is indeed the koel who speaks to us in the Primal language shared by our cosmos, and we must train our ears to hear The totality of her sonic energy so that we can save that singular note. (Guninder and Singh 204)

Amrita Pritam's life story, *The Revenue Stamp*, has also been translated into many languages. Krishna Gorowara has translated it so meticulously that one can feel the breath of Amrita Pritam in the expressions. Her autobiography *Rasidi Ticket, The Revenue Stamp*, first published in 1976, is an honest account of her life. Though Suresh Kohli searches the deepest layers of Amrita's life in *Rasidi Ticket* and calls it nothing more than just a 'half-baked onion' (languageinIndia.com). Amrita Pritam's mind has been an ocean with turbulent waves of rebellious ideas, surging with emotional violence and passionate visions of life (Bhagyashree 9).

Amrita Pritam's writing retorts to the male-dominated society where a woman can neither hold the pen nor write a story nor be the hero of her book nor the painter to capture the rainbow. She named *Revenue Stamp* to her book to respond to Khushwant Singh. When Amrita Pritam unveiled her plans to write an autobiography to him, he remarked: "What is there to your life? Just an incident or two...you could use the back of a *Revenue Stamp* to write it" (languageinIndia.com).

In her autobiography, Amrita Pritam mentions her innermost feelings as a self-introspecting poet when she recalls: When I had not really begun writing this autobiography, I often deliberated on whether I would ever get down to anything more than the ten lines I had written and set aside. . . . And I believe till today, these ten lines are my complete autobiography ... Her quests as a writer are deep, as she exclaims:

I am fully aware... that my writings. . . are all . . . like an illegitimate child. The crude realities of my world fell in love with my dreams, and out of such an illicit union was born all that I wrote. . . It is not necessary to explain what the dream was. It should indeed have been an extraordinary one to transcribe both my personal life as well as the progress of mankind, for then only could reality have risen above the human predicament. The net result, nonetheless, is that my writings have been rudely tossed about in the wind as hybrid creations. (Pritam *The Revenue Stamp* 141-42)

Amrita writes that her awards and recognition as a writer were often attributed to her good looks rather than any talent and gift of expression. She writes: Society attacks anyone who dares to say its coins are counterfeit, but when a woman 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 quoted by Tharu and Lalitha, vol. II, 160).

Most of the poems in Amrita Pritam's life come out of rebellion or pain. She says, "There have been so many days when I have held my pen close to my breast and wept and wept...." Her poetry is the outburst of her emotions for her dead mother. She lost her mother at the tender age of 10, and she turned to poetry, as told by Wordsworth, "Spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings". She collected emotions in tranquility, and her heart lit the fire of rebellion to defy everything that silenced her. She gives voice to the ash and the silent smoke of mortal existence. She maintains that her poems are the "needles to prick man's consciousness, for liberating his mind enslaved in regional, religious and intellectual powers around" (Qtd in Varma 48).

She was rebellious at sixteen, and she wanted to break all the gender barriers laid by her father; her grandmother kept separate utensils for Muslims; at the same time, Amrita, a rebel, never knew that she would fall in love with the man, who belonged to that same religion. Nevertheless, the smell of Sahir's smoke entered Amrita's poetic self, and she breathed poetry of romance and passion. Later on, she lived half of her life with Imroz.

With artist Imroz, Amrita chose to make a home in Delhi. It was a relationship of rare understanding, and the companionship lasted over four decades. Amrita's relationship with Imroz was fascinating. A man, so much younger than her, with

whom she lived in the heart of middle-class Delhi and her children lived in the same apartment complex but a floor below hers: Yeh mein hoon yeh tu hai, aur beech mein hai sapana" (languageinIndia.com) (This is me, and that's you and in the chasm is the dream).

Amrita Pritam broke the patriarchal barriers of caste, class, gender, religion and age to rebel against the system. She divorced her husband, loved Sahir, expressed her deep passion and obsession for Sahir and lived with Imroz for forty years. However, Amrita says that a writer is never free from the eyes and judgements of society. As 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, non-conform, and experiment. (Sen 300)

Amrita comments that whatever life offered her, her pen did not disappoint her during the most depressing times. She observes: "Whether I wrote my own thoughts down or wrote about partition, my pen was as much a part of me as the limbs of my body..." (*The Revenue Stamp* 116)

"Main Tanu Phir Milangi" poem of Amrita Pritam is dedicated to Imroz:

I will meet you yet again
How and where
I know not
Perhaps I will become a
figment of your imagination
and maybe spreading myself
in a mysterious line
on your canvas
I will keep gazing at you.

Perhaps I will become a ray

of sunshine to be
embraced by your colours
I will paint myself on your canvas.
I know not how and where —
but I will meet you for sure.

When Amrita was asked about the inspiration behind her writings, she told Bhagyashree in an interview:

My loneliness! (pat came the reply!) It was my loneliness that inspired me to write. I did not cherish it as a dream or an ambition. It came to me like the breeze of fresh air in a suffocating room. When I was just a little girl, my mother passed away. 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! I started trying to fill this emptiness by the act of writing. (150)

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