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Address

• Vikram Nagar, Boudhi Chouk, Latur.
• Tq. Latur, Dis. Latur 413512 (MS.)
• (+91) 9922455749, (+91) 9158387437

Email

• aiirjpramod@gmail.com
• aayushijournal@gmail.com

Website

• www.aiirjournal.com

CHIEF EDITOR – PRAMOD PRAKASHRAO TANDALE

The Revenue Stamp: A Tale of an Extraordinary Life

Dr.Aradhana G.Vaidya

Asso. Prof. & Head

Bharatiya Mahavidyalaya, Amravati.

Abstract: *Amrita Pritam is a well known Punjabi writer, whose works have been translated in all major languages in India. Known for her frank candid and rebellious writing, she dared to stand alone against the social and religious norms which she did not find logical. The Punjabi literary circle had critics who opposed her writing and vehemently attacked her in print. This did not deter her from writing nor did she change her life-style for the sake of others. Her famous autobiography, The Revenue Stamp carries some shocking revelations about her personal life. It also deliberates on the Partition and its aftermath. The second autobiographical book, Shadows of Words, defies the logical pattern of autobiography. This book consists of small chapters, all starting with the word 'shadow'. In both the books the writer and the woman stand out on different planes. As a writer she writes fearlessly, notwithstanding the life threats she received in the process. As a woman she defies the stereotype image of Indian women and bravely lives life on her own terms. This research paper will try to understand the writer and the woman behind the pen with reference to her autobiography.*

Key Words: Autobiography, Amrita Pritam, Partition.

“After all, we are nothing more or less than we choose to reveal.” - Sylvia Plath

Expression of the self through penning down, unabashedly, the most intimate and personal details of one's life have proved beneficial therapy since ages. Men has sought an escape from the self since the 'self' cannot be fooled or cheated with sugar-coated words, as he so often does with the world around him. Facing the 'self' in the mirror is the most difficult thing. The issues with the self needs to be sorted out to maintain peace with the self. Time and again men have tried different modes of self-expression. Various forms of art provided relief in various measures. This includes the pictures drawn in the caves, images carved on the barks of the trees, images sculpted on stones, paintings, manuscripts and different dance forms; all were the modes of expression. When men took to writing, he brilliantly used his pen to record his longings and desires, his dreams and his aspirations. He delved deep into his consciousness and confronted the demons that tormented him. Not only did he confront them but also set them as an example for the world to see. This kind of writing was initially called subjective writings. Later it was labeled as confessional writing and also known as autobiographical writing. Though these classifications were based on the intensity with which the writer chose to express himself, it broadly dealt with the writer's expression of the inner self and his relation with the outer world. The autobiographical writing cannot be termed as a very ancient form of writing as it emerged quite late on the literary frame. It was born out of men's urge to narrate his story to the world and in the process enrich the world with his experience.

There have been innumerable autobiographies written by people from diverse fields, some not even remotely related to literature. The women writers, specially, took to this form of writing as it provided them a platform to sing their unsung song. It was a means to reach out to the world with their side of the story. The patriarchal social set-up lent no opportunity to a woman to express her. She had to break her long silence, the silence enforced on her for centuries by her very own people. Her story was told by him. Her dreams were explained by him. Her life was defined by him. She had no say even with matters related to her. Speaking about herself through her writings was a way to

establish her identity and her side of truth. As Amrita Pritam states, "An autobiography is generally taken to be the gospel truth set in glittering words of gold...artifact of self-praise. The basic truth is the writer's own need. This is continuous process that leads from one reality to another.(TRS.p.146)

Generally the autobiography is a tale told by the writer which holds truth and does not make any efforts to shield the truth from fear of judgment or criticism. It is like allowing a stranger into your privacy, least bothered of his reaction to your story. "The writer of the autobiography invites the reader to his house and beyond the threshold of normal constraints. And compromise with the truth is an insult...not to the one invited, but to the one extending the invitation." (TRS p.146)

Amrita Pritam was born in undivided India on 31st August 1919 in a Punjabi family. Her mother died when Amrita was 11 years old. This proved to be the turning point of her life. She had prayed to God for her mother's life and when her prayers went unheard, she lost all faith in God. Her father was a religious man and he forced Amrita to pray every day. She would pretend to pray but her closed eyes dreamt of someone else. Married at a tender age, the relationship with her husband did not work. She divorced after 18 years of marriage and decided to live with her two children. "And so in September 1963 we fixed the date when we would begin to live separately-January 8, 1964, to be precise. We stuck to it."(TRS p.76)

Childhood days, thus, was not joyous and nor was her 16th birthday of any special significance. It just slipped away unwelcomed, unnoticed. The only change was that she turned more rebellious with time and refused to accept things without questioning them. "It was the beginning of the uneven road of life with all its hairpin bends, its ups and downs. It was also the beginning of curiosity. I questioned parental authority; I questioned the value of doing my work at school by rote. I questioned what had been preached to me and I questioned the entire stratified social scheme."(TRS p.12)

Amrita Pritam's autobiography, *The Revenue Stamp* reveals a very poignant and rebellious woman who stood her ground audaciously, while the world tortured her to subdue her aggressive stance. The name *The Revenue Stamp* has an interesting history. Once Kushwant Singh told Amrita Pritam that the story of her life was so inconsequential and tiny that it could be written at the back of a revenue stamp.¹ though he had said it jokingly, she remembered it and thought it to be apt title for her autobiography. Amrita Pritam lived in an era that was not very encouraging for women writers. She was the voice of women in Punjabi literature. The Punjabi literary circle, for some reason, vehemently opposed her writing. She received life-threats for her comments on the social and religious set-up. At times she felt depressed and confused over the reaction her writing received. As she states, "The one thing that did not let me down during the most depressing times was my pen. 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 pen was the decisive factor of my life."(TRS p.116)

Amrita Pritam defied all the social norms. She has candidly accepted her love-relationship with Sahir Ludhianvi, a poet and a writer. Her relationship with Sahir went on for quite some time. It was so intense that it is reflected in most of her poems and works. It turned into obsession and she would do strange things to express her love. He would visit her and talk about poetry and writing. He was a chain-smoker. As she states, "When he was gone, I would collect the stubs and preserve them secretly in a little cupboard. And then I would salvage them one by one and quietly sit and light them, one after the other... and I would feel the touch of his fingers by holding the stubs he once had held."(TRS p. 110) She never tried to hide her feelings for Sahir. He, never admitted his feelings for her. There was no commitment. His personality overshadowed her and she happily accepted it. She was in awe of his writing. When she received the Akademi Award for *Sunahre* (a collection of

poems) she writes, "Late that evening, came a reporter and a photographer from the press. The photographer wanted me to pose as one engrossed in the act of writing. I put a sheet of paper on the table in front of me and, pen in hand, began writing in a trance, the name of the one for whom I had written Sunehre. "Sahir, Sahir, Sahir..." I had completely filled the sheet with that name." (TRS p.15) She was however, shattered when she saw Sahir's photo with another lady in a magazine. This was a very lonesome period for her. She was depressed and had to take treatment. This crucial period in her life was made bearable because of her relation with Imroz-a writer and an artist. "The curse of my lonesome state has been broken through...By Imroz. But before I met him, I had the privilege of a friendship with a wondrous soul. Sajjad Haider had come into my life before partition."(16) Sajjad Haider was the first real friend she had. He was a friend who stood by her in all her difficult times. "This was the first time in my life I realized I had a friend in the world. For the first time it dawned on me that a poem does not need to be created out of the passion of love, it can waft across the calm seas of friendship." (18) Imroz and Amrita lived together for 40 years. The relation had no name or tag. It was beautiful and felt natural. He knew about her attachment with Sahir and he never questioned it. "What is it that nourishes the appetite one has for certain things of life? The friendships with Sahir and Sajjad blossom at the same time as my relationship with Imroz... and they turn life into an veritable oasis," (116)

The Revenue Stamp and Shadows of Words, both her autobiographies, not just dwell on her relationship with the three important men in her life. It also states the blood churning events during the partition period. Amrita had to move from Lahor to Delhi during the partition. She witnessed human-beings turning into beasts. There was not an ounce of empathy or love for fellow human being. The horrors of partition have been described in her novel Pinjar. She writes, "The most gruesome accounts of marauding invaders in all mythologies and chronicles put together will not, I believe, compare with the blood-curdling horrors of this historic year." (24) The partition left a lasting impact on her mind.

Amrita Pritam's life revolved around her writing. She was taught to write verse by her father when she was a child. He wanted her to write devotional poetry. Her kind of writing was not approved by him. The writer in her would not succumb to any kind of pressure. The woman in her, however, suffered the consequences. She herself admits that she was first a writer. The woman in her always took a back seat. She states, "In the totality of myself as a writer, the woman in me has had only a secondary role to play. So often have I nudged myself into an awareness of the woman in me? The writer's role is obvious. But the existence of that other being have I increasingly discovered through my creative works."(TRS p.26)

Amrita Pritam's work has established her as one of the most prominent name in Punjabi literature. She received acclaim for her writings. She was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1956, Bharatiya Janapith Award in 1982 and Padma Vibhushan Award in 2004.

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In the article TRS stands for The Revenue Stamp.

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