

AMRITA PRITAM'S *THE REVENUE STAMP*: A REALISTIC STORY WITH ROMANTIC IDEALISM AND IMAGINARY WORLD

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Abstract

Amrita Pritam is one of the most important Punjabi writers. Her short stories and novels focus on the realistic themes. Her narration is simple and lucid. The works deal with the relationship among human beings and ponder on the problems of girls and women. Her autobiography *The Revenue Stamp* gives her desires, dreams and idealism. It is an extraordinary example of contemplative and tolerant interpretation of her life. The paper deals with romantic idealism and imagination from Amrita Pritam's *The Revenue Stamp*.

Key words: Desires, literature, friendship, love

Amrita Pritam was the first important woman writer in Punjabi literature. She wrote novels, essays and poems. Her writings had been concentrated on the problems of women. She was the most remembered for her emotional poem 'Today I Invoke Warish Shah' an elegy to the eighteenth century Punjabi poet, an expression of her suffering over annihilations during the partition of India. She emphasized women's experience under patriarchy and brought the marginalized to the centre. She was the first woman to receive the Sahitya Academy Award in 1956. Her important work as a novelist was *Pinjar* (the Skelton). She created her memorable character 'Pure' and personification of violence against women. Writing short story is an easy job. Writing a novel is a tough job. Writing an autobiography is very tough work. For a women writer in the male dominated society, writing brings a lot of problems. She gave her desires, dreams and idealism in her autobiography *Rashidi Ticket*. It was written in Punjabi and later on translated into English as *The Revenue Stamp* by Krishna Gorowara. Her works had been translated in English, Albanian, Bulgarian, French, Polish, Russian, Spanish and all the 21 Indian languages. Retrospectively, when she disclosed her plans to write an autobiography to Khushwant Singh, he commented: "what is there to your life? Just an incident or two...you could use the back of a revenue stamp to write it" (Kumar, 2005: 54) Then she decided to write the realistic things happened in her life. In a brief prologue to *The Revenue Stamp*, she shot back, "Whatever happened in my life happened between the layers of thought that found their way into novels and poems. What was left? Still, I thought I might write a few lines—something to complete the account book of my life and at the end, seal it with this revenue stamp as it were. Or am I with this revenue stamp setting a seal to my novels and poems....my entire, literary work....I wonder" (Pritam, 2004: ii). The title of the book symbolizes the writer's own soul. She

recalls her memory and begins her life story thus: “Is it Doomsday? Moments of my life in the womb of time lived a while and after Time’s span, seemingly entombed are today alive again, stalk past me....However all the graves yielded to resurrect those moments? It must indeed be Doomsday...” (Pritam, 2004: 1)

The book was first published in 1976. There were vivid pictures of her memories related meaningfully to the outer events and the inner experiences. The book consists of six chapters entitle as

- (1) Resurrecting time
- (2) Meeting with centuries
- (3) Ordeal by fire
- (4) In silence passion smote
- (5) The phoenix dynasty and
- (6) On one palm Henna

The autobiography introduces a decision theme; the writer’s deep impulse for the inward dimensions of the self, springing from the compulsion to mediate and introspect.” (ii) *The Revenue Stamp* is an extraordinary example of contemplative and tolerant interpretation of her life. An autobiography is frequently expected to start with the details of one’s birth, native place, description of parents, childhood and life incidents. It also begins in the usual way. She recalls her early life. She was born in 1919 in a Sikh family. Her parents are Kartar Singh and Raj Bibi. At the age of eleven, she lost her mother. An emotional girl, she thought that it was very difficult to be alone and happy. She got loneliness and lack of love. Her childhood and youth passed without any great event except the loss of her mother with whom she lost her faith in God. When she wanted to write, her father objected her act of writing poems but advised her to write religion poems. Her father represents the patriarch of discipline and orderliness of life. To satisfy her father, she composed some orthodox poems. “I began writing and it seems to me that I wrote because I wanted to forget those moments of rejection I felt in him...In addition, an every poem I wrote I carried the cross of forbidden desires...My rebellious thoughts pushed me, giving me no peace” (iii). She recalls her: “I questioned parental authority, I questioned the value of doing my work at school by vote; I questioned what had been preached to me and I questioned the entire stratified social scheme... I was thirsty for life... what I got instead was advice and constraint, which only fed my rebellion.” (Pritam, 2004: 184)

Amrita Pritam fights for equality from her childhood days. As a writer, she was disturbed to observe the religious riots at the time of partition and afterwards the 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, 1999:01) At the time of partition she moved to New Delhi. It was her second home. She began to write in Hindi as opposed to Punjabi, her mother tongue. She worked until 1961 for All India Radio. As it was the male dominated society, her father wanted Amrita to be an obedient, submissive daughter. Her sixteenth year questioned the parental authority. She was married to Pritam Singh of Lahore. Thus, the name ‘Pritam’ was suffixed to her name from 1935. She married Pritam Singh. She depicts her sweet sixteenth: “Like a thief came my sixteenth year, stealthily like a prowler in the night, stealing in through the open window of the head of my bed...” (Pritam, 2004: 11). Later on she started working at Lahore and Delhi Radio stations, as an announcer and writing poems, stories, novels, articles on

various themes. She divorced her husband Pritam Sing in 1960 and dedicated her later part of life to writing.

Amrita makes friends with Muslim poets and artists like Sajjad, Imroz, and Sahir. She liked Sajjad Haider very much. Their true friendship made other people surprised. The local people thought whether there can be a friendship between man and woman. In spite of religious and social taboos, she continued her friendly gestures with Sajjad. They usually met in Lahore. He became like a family friend to her. Once he celebrated her daughter's birthday. When she moved from Lahore to Dehradun, they used to send letters regularly. They share their ideas through letters. After so many years, Sajjad translated one of her poems entitled 'Neighbouring Beauty' and got it published in Pakistan Times. There are no disputes between them. They are very closer to each other. In 1971, Sajjad's death took her into deep depression.

Amrita loved a painter, called Imroz who helped her and devoted himself to her care. Her relationship with him was fascinating. He was younger than her. They together lived in the heart of middle class Delhi and her children lived in the same apartment complex but a floor below hers. Finally she accepted him as her man as: "The course my lonesome state has been broken through...by Imroz...in the years that followed I had Imroz he has had only loneliness." (Varma, 2007: 36) She herself says that she had no regrets about the path chosen by her. She continues: "A relationship with him can last any so long as there is nothing to bind it... for hours we submerged in our silences very deep... then the silence gives way to the beauty of words, Imroz breaks it with here we are giving each other the Yogic exercise necessary for our health." (Ranvir, 1998: 145) She went to Nepal, where she was honoured for the same pen with which she had written love songs for Imroz. At this juncture, she wrote to Imroz; "Way farer! Why did you the first time meet me at an evening hour! I am approaching the turning point of my life. If you had to meet me at all why did you not meet me at high noon when you would have felt its heat?" (Pritam, 2004: 139)

One of Amrita's favourite persons is Sahir Ludhianvi. He was a famous Urdu poet. She used many anecdotes in her works. She nurtured a silent intimate relationship with Sahir for many years. She was always truthful and observed: "I never told an untruth to father; I can never lie to myself either" (4) She had romance with Sahir with the classical romance of Laila-Majnu. She recalls her first meeting with Sahir when he presses his thumb full of ink on her palm and admits that she had written *Sinehre* for Sahir and not for a Sahitya Academy Award. Amrita and Sahir behave like lovers outside also. When she saw Sahir's photograph with his new girl friend on Blitz magazine; she was astonished. She turned on the brink of madness. When Muslims and Sikhs opposed their relationship, she did not mind. She wrote that when Sahir would come to see her, he would go on chain smoking and she would intensively long to touch him but "Could not overcome...My own reservation" (2006: 146). She was very confessional and candid in her tone. One day her son came to her and said that "People say that I am Sahir Uncle's son". Since she was a bold lady, she replied; "I wish you were Sahir Uncle's son". She had inner courage and conviction. She wrote his name hundreds of times on a sheet of paper while addressing a press conference. After his death, she said she hoped she would come back. She recalls the purity she got in their relationship, "No words care between our friendships. It was a beautiful relationship in silence. The dignity of a blank paper is even there today." (2007: 25)

Amrita Pritam's autobiography is about her romantic idealism, which is self-imagined. In herself imaginary world, she forgot her creativity and her innovative ideas for her writings. The book cries about her bravery to accept the relation that she had with poets and artists. Like many contemporary writers, marriage was a social bondage forced on all women. Regarding the

treatment to women in the society, she says: “I don’t claim any ideal in womanhood. I do not idealize woman what is important for me is the mental set-up and its evaluation. The only difference between male mind and the female mind is that their drawbacks are different. Economy in man’s control makes him forceful and imposing while the lack of power makes woman reserved jealous and slavish...I think slavery is a part of mind rather than gender. It is equally related to man as to woman...the difference is in face not in the mind.” (Ranvir, 1998: 145)

The Revenue Stamp did not mention about her children, their birth, childhood and growth. It was about her career and personal life with the poets. She did not mention how her children reacted when she had friendship and love with Sahir Ludhianvi. She, indeed, survived in her imaginary world. She never cared about her people and their ideas and gossips. But she was not far away from her contemporary era. She has wonderfully mingled political, social, religious and literary conditions of her times and given a full length portrait of twentieth century.

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