

Redefining the Self and Reconstructing Life: A Study of Amrita Pritam's The Revenue Stamp

Amrita Pritam (1919-2005) is the first important woman writer in Punjabi literature who has written novels, essays, poems and autobiography and has explored and concentrated on women's world in her writings. In Punjabi body of main stream literature Amrita Pritam has accentuated women's experience under patriarchy and has brought the marginalized to the centre. She is the first woman to receive the Sahitya Academy Award (1956), she received also Bharatiya Jnanpith Award (1982), Padma Shri (1969) and Padma Vibhushan (2004). Among the foreign awards to mention, she received International Vaptsrov Award from the Republic of Bulgaria (1979).

It is difficult to write; it is even more difficult to write a literary piece; it is probably the most difficult task to write an autobiography. Autobiography invites special problems especially for a female autobiographer living in a male-dominated society. As the "I" of the autobiographer enjoys the centre stage in autobiography, it becomes challenging for a female autobiographer to externalize what Gyno-critics would call 'the feminine mode of experience' in thinking, feeling and perceiving the outer world. This externalization of the inner world in autobiography demands truth, sincerity and honesty on the part of the female autobiographer. Besides, for a female autobiographer it becomes very difficult to be heard in a patriarchal social structure. Amrita Pritam for whom an autobiography is "the Gospel of truth" has succeeded in penning down her inner world

and in voicing her desires, dreams and idealism in her autobiography *The Revenue Stamp* (1976).

In *The Revenue Stamp* Amrita Pritam embraces and enfolds her interior landscape and reconstructs and redefines relations and incidents which have left a permanent mark on her. The title *The Revenue Stamp* symbolizes the writer's own soul ; for the size of other stamps keep on changing, but that of the revenue stamp remains the same. *The Revenue Stamp* then appears to be a tale of unchanging soul which survives all storms like a steady flame of a lamp. Besides, the special quality of the revenue stamp lies in its use; it is used for the verification of documents. By writing the revenue *Stamp* Amrita Pritam authenticates the truth of her journey both as a writer and as a human-being. Amrita Pritam recalls her early life in which her nurture fosters her nature and often poses a contrast with her nature. Born in 1919 in a Sikh family, she describes the inheritance of the spiritual wealth of her parents—Kartar Singh and Raj Bibi. She recalls how she was named “Amrita”, the Punjabi equivalent for the Sanskrit *Peeyookh*, following the tradition of India spiritual thought. Nurtured in a family of spiritual worth and literary aptitude she describes her learning of prayers and Kirtans and her first lessons in poetry from her father. She reflects the Puritanism of her family in which to sit or sleep with feet stretched out in the direction of Guru Dayalji's portrait was forbidden. She describes the roots of her reverence for the “written word” lying in her family. What ails little Amrita in her childhood is the loss of mother and so she complains: “God heeds no one, not even children”. At the age of eleven, her prayer to God to save her mother went unheard and her mother died. Amrita describes how this caused bitterness in her and

when she could not resist her father's authority who insisted on prayer before going to bed, Amrita describes how instead of God she concentrated on a boy named Rajan.

Amrita's longings for equality and harmony are reflected in her *The Revenue Stamp*; in fact these are the principles for which Amrita fights throughout her life. In her childhood she put up a fight against her grandmother who separately kept three "Muslim" tumblers from other "Hindu" tumblers. Amrita describes the triumph of her Catholicism over the Grandmother's fanaticism. She writes in *The Revenue Stamp*: "Thereafter, not a single utensil was labeled "Hindu" or "Muslim"". Amrita describes how she creates a room of her own in a patriarchal social structure. Amrita makes friends with Muslim poets and artists like Imroz, Sajjad and Sahir. Amrita describes her love for Sahir in her surroundings full of antagonism between Sikhs and Muslims. She names her son "Navraj" and criticizes bloodshed by the name of religion. The riots of 1947 torture her and shake to the very foundations the ideal world of her imagination. While the male writers of Punjabi literature were either keeping deliberate silence over the massacre by the name of religion or were involved in literary writings which had nothing to do with the communal riots, Amrita writes about the sufferings of those who are abducted, raped and tortured by the name of religion. Amrita describes the surroundings of 1947 from where came her "Pinjar". Amrita recalls her attempts at establishing harmony by writing a poem on Waris Shah:

Once when a daughter of Punjab wept
Your pen unleashed a million cries,
A million daughters weep today, their eyes turned
To you, Waris Shah.

Feminine sensibility appears to be an integral part of Amrita Pritam's emotive life. She aware of the woman in her and she confesses her child-longing at the age of twenty five, eroticism caused by rubbing Vicks on Sahir's throat and chest and sensuousness created by a mere touch of Imroz's brush. Dreams of Amrita Pritam reflect the inner self in her. She dreams of flying away from a big, large castle; she dreams of Guru Gobindsingh with his horse, hawk and sword. She even dreams of talking to her pen. She strangely draws similarities between her and the historical personages as well as mythological figures. She achieves oneness with the lonely Queen Elizabeth-I since she knows that Sahir has gone far off. She compares her romance with Sahir with the classical romance of Laila-Majnu. The warm-heartedness to Sahir finds its expression in The Revenue Stamp. She recalls her first meeting with Sahir when he presses his thumb full of ink on her palm. She admits that she had written *Sinehre* for Sahir and not for a Sahitya Academy Award. She frankly confesses that she had developed smoking habit by smoking the cigarette butts Sahir had left:

And I would, after he was gone, light those cigarette butts. Our
smoke mingled in the air as did our breath, the words of our poems
too.

(“The Revenue Stamp”)

Although The Revenue Stamp is a translated autobiography from Punjabi into English, the stylistic devices of the text deserve our special attention. Like every great autobiography, The Revenue Stamp too searches for the truth and this search for the truth

takes Amrita pritam to the “medium” called language. She concentrates on the given language, selects the most appropriate words and phrases and makes the maximum use of the stylistic devices. Symbolism makes The Revenue Stamp more artistic; for many characters, objects, incidents and even dreams appear to be symbolic. Rajan, for instance, appears less of a symbol of human being and more of a symbol of attraction, of ‘libido’. The tumblers in the kitchen placed in one line operate as symbols of communal harmony that Amrita Pritam long for. Waris Shah himself appears to be a symbol of communal harmony. The colour symbolism is also used. The red, black and white roses respectively symbolize love, despair and death. The dreams of fleeing from a castle or being followed by a crowd are symbolic of the suppression of the self of the writer. Besides, many of Amrita Pritam’s moods are evidently expressed in her autobiography. She often gets nostalgic, often criticizes, too often philosophizes, sometimes satirizes, sometimes thanks and frequently writes with a tragic note. Confessions, complaints, cries, dreams—all these things create her own credo as a literary artist, as one who has lived life very truly. The Revenue Stamp then appears to be an externalization or verbalization of the internal rainbow of its writer. Similes, metaphors, personifications, ironies and many other figures of speech embellish the pages of The Revenue Stamp. For instance,

It was like leaping into the flames everyday. (Simile)

Like a comb in touseled hair, my thoughts too would often get tangled. (Simile)

In a way each country is a poem in itself. (Metaphor)

Fantasy is born from the fear of confusing realities. (Personification)

Often poems make her autobiography more poetic:

Buy me a pair of wings, Stranger---

Or come and live with me.

Amrita Pritam's autobiography, on the whole, reveals a woman's worldview.