

“MY mother never failed in the slightest degree, to honour and obey my father’s male will. But it has always seemed to me that just as Parvati collected all the dust from her body and moulded from it the figure of her son Ganesh, so also my mother collected all the anger from her mind and poured it into my infant being, while she herself remained without a particle of anger...

...When I saw the atrocities committed during the partition, I felt as if the whole of womankind had gathered together its mental anguish and moulded my soul from it...”

(*Kaala Gulab* p. 70)

This is how Amrita Pritam describes the forces that have shaped her work. She has published over 50 books—poetry, novels and short stories, which have a wide readership both in the original Punjabi as well as in Hindi. Today, Amrita is a writer of repute, whose works have been translated into many national and international languages. She was the first woman to win the Sahitya Akademi award—in 1953 — for her long poem *Sunehre*.

But she told us that when she published her first collection of verse in 1936, there were only two known women writers in Punjabi, and they wrote on religious themes. On the other hand, in the work of male writers “woman was a flower, woman was beauty, youth, grace” whereas Amrita’s subject was “woman in search of her identity through struggle.” Her first poems shocked and outraged the Punjabi literary world. Ever since, her life and her career have been one long battle—she has struggled to do and to say all that was not considered suitable for a woman to do and say.

A Girl Like Themselves

In her two autobiographical works *Kaala Gulab* and *Rasidi Tikat*, Amrita traces the development of her identity as a woman. Perhaps this identity began with what she calls “one of nature’s secrets”—a moment before her birth, when two little girl students of her father prayed publicly in the gurudwara: “Oh lord of the two worlds, may a little girl be born in the house of our masterji.”

MADHU, RUTH

Stories Written On The Bodies And Minds Of Women

—Amrita Pritam’s Life and Work

Amrita’s father was annoyed because he thought his wife must have known that the girls were going to pray in this manner. But later, the girls said that the prayer was their own idea. If they had asked Raj Bibi, she might have wished for a son but they wanted a baby girl—a girl like themselves. And so on August 31, 1919, Amrita was born in Gujranwala—a girl desired by two girls—later to give expression to the desires and feelings of many girls and women.

Amrita’s father had been a sadhu in his youth but when he met her mother, then a widowed school teacher, he left his saffron robes, got married to her, and also began to teach. He wrote poems under the pen-name of Piyush, and also edited a Punjabi magazine. So Amrita grew up in a literary as well as deeply religious atmosphere, and was encouraged to read and write. Yet there were areas of her imagination which she had to keep secret.

At the age of ten, she wrote her first poem addressed to her imaginary beloved Rajan. She was taking it to school to show a girlfriend, when her father discovered it, and demanded to know whether she had written it. Trembling, she replied that a friend had written it, but he saw the truth in her eyes, gave her a slap and asked who Rajan was. When she replied: “I don’t know”, he tore the paper to bits and Amrita went crying to school. “Thus”, she says, “I tried to lie and disown my first poem but it refused to be disowned and came back to me, accompanied by a slap.” (*Kaala Gulab*, 20)

A Question Mark Against Everything

Amrita was an only child, and her

mother died when Amrita was eleven years old. The burning anger against injustice and non-freedom that fires her writings originated in the rebellious longings of her solitary girlhood: “Many things had become permanently absent from my life because of the absence of my mother. My father felt that my security and protection would be best ensured if I were to have no acquaintances at all—neither the girls at school nor the boys of the neighbourhood. I had started writing poems. And every poem seemed to me like a forbidden desire. One moment I would write a poem and pour into it my desires, the next moment I would tear it up and once again become my father’s innocent and dutiful little girl... In this, my sixteenth year, a question mark seemed to have erected itself against everything—from parental injunctions to the books which had to be memorized at school, to the moral and social precepts which I had until then respectfully accepted... There were so many refusals, so many restrictions, so many denials in the air I breathed, that a fire seemed to be smouldering in every breath I drew... That sixteenth year is still present somewhere in every year of my life... Its symptoms remain unchanged... Wherever an injustice is committed, in any corner of the world, against anyone, a fire against it smoulders in each breath I draw...” (*Rasidi Tikat*, 18-21)

A Woman’s Pain

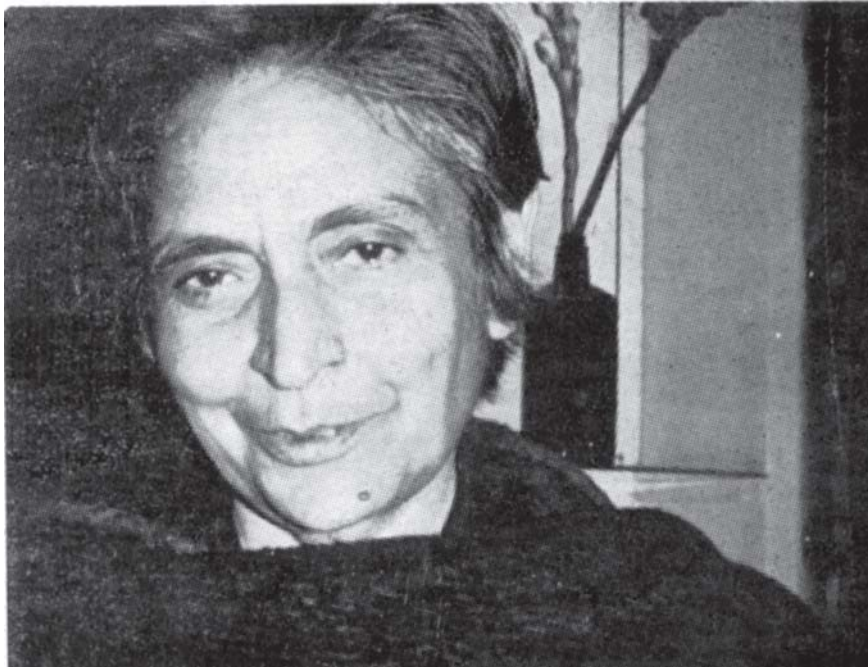
Amrita had been engaged at the age of four and was married at the age of 16. In her own isolation, she could identify with the pain of women in varied circumstances — women relatives, friends, neighbours, domestic servants, whom she often saw being beaten,

deserted, forced into marriage deprived of love, forbidden self-expression. And she caught glimpses of those other women who were not married yet whose fate was linked in some inexplicable way with the fate of married women. As a young girl, she was invited to a wedding in Lahore. A famous singing girl had been called to sing at the celebration. When this girl entered, Amrita saw the tension on the face of the bridegroom's mother and heard the whispers that this singing girl was mistress of the bridegroom's father. For years she pondered over the significance of this encounter. In her own words: "It was 25 years before I could write this story. It is about the pain of two women who are like two broken pieces, unable to understand each other's pain. Both the broken pieces demand their own identity and demonstration—not from each other but from me, the story teller." (Do Khirkhiyan, 66)

Many of her poems cry out against the buying and selling of women, the reduction of women to playthings and objects of consumption. These poems were violently criticised in the press, as "immoral" and "obscene", because no woman was supposed to mention such topics let alone raise her voice in protest. One poem, which we reproduced below, was banned in Punjab before partition. Since it had been included in a particular textbook, the authorities had a stamp put on each book, forbidding students to read it. "Of course", says Amrita, "Students read it first of all!"

Breadwinner

*My breadwinner,
I have eaten your salt
And I must obey the salt
As my father willed.
I am of his blood
And must obey his blood.
Before I can speak
Your bread speaks.
I am ready to speak
But my words are weighed down
By the weight of bread.
My breadwinner,*



Amrta Pritam

*Working child
Follows working father
And I can refuse
No work.
All other work
My hands can do,
And this too.
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.
As I stand before you
Take me in your arms
Plunge me in the lava of your body,
Kiss me,
Fondle me,
Do with me what you will.
My breadwinner,
Do not ask for my love,*

Only make me yours.

(Black Rose, 20)

Talking to us, Amrita said that she felt woman was rendered powerless because of her economic dependence, that in fact a woman's whole upbringing and education are not geared to prepare her for life, but only to prepare her for one man. If this man, by chance, turns out to be decent, she has a relatively better life; if not, there is no way she can escape misery. Many of her stories and poems describe the woman imprisoned in her marital home, trapped in motherhood, deprived of the means to escape:

Waiting

*Night
Half gone
Half to go :
I don't know under which roof
By glowing lamplight
You are expecting
At each sip of wine
And at the rustle of every note
Some dazzling beauty—
You, yes, you
You the father of my child to be
born.
Night
Half gone*

Half to go :
I sit under the roof
Of your father and your father's
father
By low candlelight
Expecting
Your unsteady feet
The hateful smell of wine
On your breath
Your crushed shirt
And empty pockets
And an empty stare
In your bloodshot eyes
And your naked abuse
Of your loose lips-
I, yes, I
I the mother of your child to be born.

(Black Rose, 23)

Weeping With Thousands Of Women

The partition of the country in 1947 brought a cataclysmic change in Amrita's life and vision. Her family was evacuated from Pakistan and came to Delhi, where she has lived ever since. Her husband had to start his business again, and economic necessity made it possible for her to take up a full-time job with All India Radio, where she worked for 12 years.

But much more than these changes, it was the shared anguish of women, Hindu and Muslim women, which brought a new note into her writing : "When, during partition, the religious tornado struck the country, and made thousands of women weep, my mind too was cut into a thousand pieces and kept weeping with those thousands of women..." (*Kaala Gulab, 74*)

The agony of partition had a profound effect on Amrita's vision, made her more critical of any civilization, any culture in which a hand can be laid on a woman's body against her will. Her novel *Pinjar* (Skeleton) is an account of women's suffering during partition, but is also a revelation of how women in all times and places are victims of relationships forced upon them.

The heroine of this novel is Pooro, a Hindu girl. Much before the partition, she is abducted by Rashida, a Muslim man, whose family has an old score to

settle with her family. Thus Amrita shows how men take revenge on each other by victimizing women—a phenomenon as common in peace time as in times of war or riots. Though Rashida does not rape Pooro, when she manages to escape and go home, she is told that there is now no place for her there. So she has to agree to change her religion and marry Rashida. Her name is changed to Hamida but the novelist says: "In reality she was neither the one nor the other. She was just a skeleton without a shape or a name." (22)

She becomes pregnant and feels repulsed by her body: "She thought of a slimy slug in the peapod. It was nauseating." (23) Later when her child is born: "She felt her son's soft face nuzzling her bare arm. A cold, clammy feeling ran through her body - as if a slimy slug was clambering over her. She clenched her teeth. She wanted to shake the slug off her arm...pluck it out of her flesh like a tick or a leech and cast it away... She wanted to put the child against her cheek and cry to her heart's content... Hamida felt that the boy was drawing the milk from her veins and sucking it out by force just as his father had forced to take her. All said and done, he was his father's son, his father's flesh and blood, and shaped like him. He had been planted inside her by force, nourishing inside her womb against her will, and was now sucking the milk from her breasts whether she liked it or not. The thought went round in her mind with insidious insistence—this boy—this boy's father— all mankind—all men—men who gnaw a woman's body like a dog gnawing a bone, and like a dog eat it up..."(28-29)

So, before violence against women assumes a widespread and blatant form in the riots at partition, Pooro sees its manifestation in the routine life of the village—a mad woman is raped and dies in childbirth, a young girl is abandoned by her father and lives neglected and overworked in the house of relatives, a bride finds that her husband is already married. This girl Taro says to Pooro: "What can I tell you ? When a girl is

given away in marriage, God deprives her of her tongue, so that she may not complain... For full two years, I have had to sell my body for a mess of pottage and a few rags. I am like a whore, a prostitute... There is no justice in the world nor any God. He (her husband) can do what he likes. There is no God to stop him. God's fetters were meant only for my feet."(36-38)

When the religious frenzy breaks out, Hamida realizes that the ultimate victims in all clashes are women : "Hamida's ears burned with rage when she heard of the abduction of Hindu girls by Muslims and of Muslim girls by Hindus. It was a sin to be alive in this world full of evil, thought Hamida. It was a crime to be born a woman."(65) Later, she persuades her husband to help her rescue her brother's wife Lajo and send her back to India. For a moment when her brother grabs her arm and says: "Pooro, this is your only chance...", she is tempted to return to the Hindu community, but then realizes that the only place for her is Pakistan. This place has been defined for her, but her heart reaches out to all her homeless sisters who may be rejected by their husbands. She warns her brother to treat Lajo with respect and never to taunt her with the fact of her having been raped: "When Lajo is welcomed back to her home, then you can take it that Pooro also returned to you...Whether a Hindu girl or a Mohammedan, whoever reaches her destination, she carries along my soul with her."

Slander As Weapon

The fact of a woman taking pen in hand was enough to raise eyebrows but when she began to critically analyse marriage, the family and the unequal man-woman relationship, at a time when the dominant trend in Punjabi literature was to glorify woman as wife and mother, the Punjabi literary world stood up as one man to cry sham on her. In Amrita's words: "Society attacks any one who dares to say that its coins are counterfeit. But when it is a woman who dares to say 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. A woman who has suffered an attack can understand it, this attack is not against a particular woman, it is an attack on the whole of the womanhood...So my story is the story of women in every country and many more in number are those stories which are not on paper, but are written in the bodies and minds of women..." (Kaala Gulab, 71)

All her life, Amrita had to contend with various forms of attacks. When her early poems were published and reviewed, her photograph appeared in some newspapers. There was an immediate uproar. She told us that people said: "The pictures of respectable men's daughters have started being put up in paanwalas' shops and men's hostels." The fact of her being a woman was the prime weapon used against her: "My youth, my appearance, my womanhood were always put into the balances and weighed against every poem of mine." (Kaala Gulab, 71) She was accused of trying to get fame on the basis of her looks.

At various times, there have been insistent calls for different poems and novels to be banned. One of these was "Garbhwati" in which she had imagined the feelings of Guru Nanak's mother when she was expecting him. A reviewer called Amrita a "lustful ant" and said she had no right to write about Guru Nanak. There was a call to ban *Rasidi Tikat* on the grounds that Amrita refers to her smoking, whereas as a Sikh she is not supposed to smoke.

Perhaps most painful was the consciousness of being constantly watched and spied on, of every action being distorted and torn to bits by hostile critics, of every poem and story being used as fresh ammunition against her. Each fact of her personal life was triumphantly pounced upon and held up as an instance of her "immorality", and a reason to deny her recognition as a writer. Some of her contemporaries went to absurd lengths to harm her. At the time of her divorce, they vowed not to let her books be published or read. Some, whom she had considered friends, turned

against her and slandered her behind her back. Many of these men at one time or another imagined themselves in love with Amrita. When they met with no response from her, they turned vindictive and circulated false stories, trying to identify themselves as the heroes of her various stories or poems. As Amrita put it humorously: "In our era, people want to become writers by brute force, and also want to become lovers by brute force." (Dastavez, 112)

Amrita's own explanation of this vigorous campaign against her is that any woman writer faces much sharper attack from male writers in her own language, since they are the ones who feel directly threatened. However, Amrita was able to survive this hostility because her writings found a wider readership, particularly in Hindi, and she got a great deal of loving support from readers in many languages besides her own. Though she writes in Punjabi, some of her books were first published in Hindi. She says: "I achieved economic independence through the Hindi language." (Rasidi Tikat, 94)

Amrita realized very early that it was futile to try and outshout her denouncers because they were determined not to let her voice be heard: "I was just a little girl at that time, and I was bewildered to hear so many voices around me, raised in abuse. Then I saw that there were numerous names erected like so many flags and those who had hoisted those flags thought I also wanted to hoist a flag among them. I tried to assure them they were welcome to their flags, I wanted no part or share in them. But I soon realized that it was impossible for me to speak or for anyone to hear me in that din. Even today, after 30 years, it is still impossible." (Rasidi Tikat, 22)

In *Kaala Gulab*, *Rasidi Tikat* and *Aksharon Ki Chhaya Mein*, Amrita makes a very daring attempt to counter falsehood with the truth. With amazing honesty, she points out the autobiographical element in her stories, and gives an account of the relationships about which she had written in a veiled form earlier. Of course,

the hostile sections of the Punjabi press seized on these truths and made the most vulgar comments possible. One article was entitled "Amrita ke yaar" (Amrita's paramours). However, she told us she does not regret having written the truth, since she now feels strong enough to face such slander, and is glad she refuted some of the false stories while those who had invented them were still alive.

One example of the petty prejudices which her denouncers play upon is the widely held misconception that she lives with a "20 year old man." We had heard this rumour from all and sundry—it is the first "fact" sure to be quoted whenever her name is mentioned. Though Imroz is only six years younger than she is, he is likely to remain "20 years old" for the rest of his life, so that the gap between their ages can continue to grow!

Though she faces these attacks with great courage, the pain of being isolated and misunderstood informs much of her writing. In the story "Paanch Behnen" (five sisters) she writes about five women who are unable to experience life to the full. One is a labouring, poverty-stricken woman, another the wife of a politician whose soul is destroyed by the role of drawing room decoration she is forced to play, the third is a prostitute, the fourth a woman kept within the four walls of the house, hedged round by restrictions, and the fifth is the woman artist, Amrita herself, who says she can experience life only at night in her dreams, and express the experience through her writings, because in the daytime there are too many eyes spying on her through holes in the wall, too many hands ready to tear her to pieces.

This torture is also described in some of her poems:

Happiness
Somewhere I heard a voice
Far away
A voice exactly like yours.
My ears sighed deeply.
Happiness
Innocent as a child
Ran towards the voice
Bare-footed.

*The first thorn was convention,
 The second thorn was reputation,
 The third thorn was security,
 Risks like many splinters.
 Pulling out the thorns
 Rubbing her feet
 Wiping off the blood
 She limped every step of the way.
 Puzzled then, she stood
 Hesitating.
 The voice was certainly yours
 The eyes were certainly those of a
 stranger.
 A sharp thorn of conflict
 Pricked her soul so deeply
 That with all the nails of her
 wisdom
 She does not know how to pull it out.
 Her whole foot is swollen,
 The poison is spreading.
 Puzzled she sits there—
 Innocent happiness weeping.*

(Black Rose, 15)

To Live The Life She Desired

But in fact both Amrita and the women characters in her stories insist upon experiencing life, and looking for happiness. When we asked Amrita in what way her depiction of women's lives was different from that in the writings of her contemporaries, she said: "Women's sufferings are often depicted in literature. People have no objection to a woman continuing to suffer, or being depicted as a sufferer. It is only when she wants to emerge from that suffering, when she tries to live the life she desires, that people oppose her. The women characters in my novels dare to live the life they have imagined. They may or may not succeed, but they make the effort. And it is that effort I write about."

She told us that all her stories are based on the lives of women she has actually met or known. Often, women come to her or write to her, asking that she write about them. She tries, whenever possible, to read the story to the woman concerned, before it is published, to ensure that the woman does not feel misrepresented. Amrita does, of course, change the story or the characters so that the final product is an imaginatively seen reality. When she

wrote *Aerial*, the woman on whose life it was based, had tears of joy in her eyes. Hundreds of women readers write to Amrita to tell her how completely they identify with or are inspired by certain of her heroines.

Of course, Amrita's own struggles as a woman are the life and breath of many of her works. As she says: "When I could not call Amrita Amrita, I called her Nirmala or Achla, Malika or Karmawali, Ratni, Canny, Meenu or some other name..." (preface to *Aksharon Ki Chhaya Mein*).

"Wife—The Name Given To A Broken Woman"

Amrita was engaged at the age of four, and married at the age of 16, to Sardar Gurbaksh Singh, a businessman and editor of the Punjabi magazine *Preetlari*. She says she did not resist the marriage, because she was too young at that time to understand her own needs.

But in *Rasidi Tikat*, she describes her state of mind when she realized that the marriage could mean humiliation for her and her father: "This is the story of that night 40 years ago—the night of my wedding, when I went up to the rooftop in the darkness, and there cried as if my heart would break. There was only one thought in my mind: 'It would be better for me to die.' My father knew my feelings so he came to look for me, and I pleaded with him: 'I don't want to get married.' My father and I had both been content with this marriage. But after the wedding feast my father had got a message from my in-laws, telling him that if any relatives made enquiries, he should say he had paid several thousand rupees in dowry. He thought this message must be a disguised dowry demand. Since he didn't have so much money, he became very worried, and that was why I felt it would be better for me to die. Later, we came to know that they did not really want any money. They only wanted to say they had taken it so as to satisfy some of their relatives..."

She told us that her in-laws did not like the kind of adverse publicity she got through her writings. Her father, being a

writer, had realized that the slanderous attacks were inevitable and must be faced, but her husband and in-laws wanted her to stop publishing her work. She says: "My husband even told me that I should stop reading my poetry over the radio, and he would give me as much money as I was earning. But though I did want to be economically independent, I was not writing for money. After all, how much did they pay me—a paltry sum. I wrote because I wanted to write." She also told us that over a period of time, with her own mental growth, she realized that this marriage was not the companionship she had imagined and wanted. Her father died when she was 21 and she felt absolutely alone in the world. It was only her writing which sustained her through this isolation. In her writing she established a relationship with the world.

Many of her novels and stories portray the married woman's loneliness. In the preface to her collection *Aksharon Ki Chhaya Mein*, she points out the autobiographical element in each of them. She says that she was Karmawali who can not bear to live with her husband when she discovers his relation with her woman friend. She was also Achla in "*Freud se lekar frigidaire tak*" who feels herself withering in her 'happy marriage.' Achla, like Amrita, has a husband, a son and a daughter, and all the material comforts of a middle class home, but she feels her soul is thirsty and unsatisfied. She feels sorry for both her husband and herself, since by entering into a marriage of convenience, they have forever been denied the intoxication of love. Amrita says she is also Canny in "*Canny ka safar*", who separated from her husband when she found he was more interested in another woman than in her. She is Ekta in "*Eskimo Smile*" who endures her husband's infidelities for ten years, but leaves him because she does not want to be an obstacle in the way of his search for love, yet refuses to blame him for her pain because she wishes to take the responsibility for her own choice, to be the agent of her own life.

One of the most searing portraits of the husband-wife relationship is that of Annie and Anwar in “*Aerial*.” In this novelette, Annie, a 16 year old girl, falls in love with Anwar, a fellow student, but her parents disapprove of the relationship, because they are much richer than Anwar’s parents. Anwar teasingly challenges her: “You will never dare to quietly leave your parents and come to me.” One night, Annie comes to his hostel and says: “Here I am. You said I would never dare do this.” Anwar is so taken aback and so unable to accept the responsibility that he does not open the door for some time. But a friend of his intervenes, reconciles the parents, and the two get married. Afterwards, Anwar laughingly asks her: “Why did you run away like that? What if I had been a scoundrel, had left you after a few days?” At this, Annie cuddles in his arms like a kitten, saying: “Then I would have died.” And though Anwar had been frightened by the courageous Annie who had risked everything for her love, he loves this Annie who cuddles in his arms: “Sometimes he thought to himself how strange it is that a man fears a woman’s strength but loves a woman’s weakness.”

After ten years of marriage, Anwar starts having an affair with his secretary Liz. And one day he laughingly asks Annie: “What will you do if I leave you?” He expects her to cuddle into his arms, saying: “I’ll die”, but instead she looks at him steadily and says: “Whatever I do, I won’t die.” This answer startles and shocks Anwar. He tries in different ways to make Annie crumble and weep so that he can comfort her, confess his infidelity and love her once more. But she remains strong and self-possessed. That night, he finds himself unable to feel any desire for her. When he recalls the Annie who used to shrink and cuddle against his chest if he neglected or scolded her, he feels the stirrings of desire, but when he looks at the woman before him, who looks neither disturbed nor shrinking, his desire immediately dies down. When he suggests to her that he might be in love with another woman, she answers: “I can

be a companion to you, but not an obstacle.” He tries to upset her by saying he will keep the child if they get divorced, but all she says is: “I will be content if the child gets his father’s care.” Her face shows neither reproach nor tearfulness, only an increasing weariness. Anwar’s fear and hatred of this new Annie overwhelm him and he rushes off to Liz. When he returns, he finds that Annie has left. He hears rumours that she is being kept by another man, but when he questions a woman friend of hers, he learns that she has opened a garment emporium and is living independently. He hates the idea of this and wishes he had not learnt the truth so that he could have continued to believe the lies he had been hearing.

Finally, he falls ill and sends a message to Annie that he cannot recover till she gives him medicine with her own hands. But when she does come, it is as a friend, not as a wife. He asks her if she can never be his wife again, and Annie answers: “Anwar, I can stay with you but not as a broken woman. In our country ‘wife’ is the name given to a broken woman.” Anwar tells her she has changed completely and is no longer the old Annie. Annie replies: “I hated her. She was not the real Annie. She was a broken Annie.” Without thinking, Anwar answers: “I want the broken one” and Annie says: “I am sorry, Anwar, you will never find her.” He feels that he can never accept medicine or anything else from the hands of this new Annie so she leaves. She leads her own independent life, she travels and works. But Anwar keeps breaking one woman after another, longing to bury Annie under the heap of broken women. He feels jealous of his son and of all others who can love and be loved by Annie “as she is”, but he himself is unable to do so.

In 1960, Amrita took the decision to separate from her husband. It was also around this time that she left her job. The break-up of the marriage was painful for both but she describes it as “a solemn friendly decision in which we did not deny what we had got from each other nor did we complain of what we had not got...We still meet as friends...” (*Rasidi Tikat*, 43)

Many Walls But No Home

In 1944, Amrita met the poet Sahir Ludhianvi. She has described this meeting in “*Aakhri Khat*.” They met in a strange village but she felt that he was not a stranger, she had always known him. That was the beginning of an enduring friendship and of a 14 year long undeclared passion in Amrita’s mind. The relationship was both ecstatic and agonizing because there were, as she put it in “*Aakhri Khat*”, many walls between them - “the walls of society, of religion, of conditioning, of false values.” She felt as if there was “a layer of frost” on their lips, and as if the poems they wrote were letters to each other. Her award-winning poem *Sunehre* (message) and many other poems in *Chaitra* and *Aag ki baat* were inspired by her feelings for Sahir. In the story “*Yeh Kahani Nahin* (This is no story) she describes their simple, spontaneous friendship—how they used to meet accidentally in strange cities, in trains, in restaurants, and feel as if in these brief encounters the home they had never been able to build was momentarily constructed for them. But they never expressed this longing that was in their minds. In “*Aakhri Khat*,” Amrita describes her feeling of helplessness because of her married status: “Economic slavery enslaves woman mentally too. This mental slavery is a sore, a wound, which people dress in the colourful garments of purity—purity born not of one’s will but of one’s helplessness...”

Amrita says that “*Aakhri Khat*” was written in the form of a story because it could not be posted as a letter to Sahir. It ends on a note of rebellion against the walls which had kept them apart: “My beloved, this is the last letter I shall write to you. I will not let more letters be destroyed at the foot of those walls which never allowed my letters to reach you or your letters to reach me...Now with these hands kissed by you I will write songs not of silk, but of iron...When you read these battle songs, remember that I am writing them with the hands you have kissed...writing them so that this cruel system which creates walls, hunters, robbers, may be changed...and

if that day dawns in my lifetime, I will write you a golden love letter in the light of its first rays..."

Children

Amrita often refers to her writings as her children, albeit those not recognized by the world: "I know that my writings—poems, stories, novels—are all like illegitimate children." (*Rasidi Tikat*, 175) She also calls *Nagmani*, the magazine she edits, the daughter of her and Imroz.

Her two children Navraj and Kandla have played an important role in shaping her imaginative and creative life. Several of her stories are built around her experiences with them. We asked her if there was any difference between her life and that of her daughter. She replied: "The difference is that she did not prepare herself for struggle. I wanted her to complete her education, build a career, be economically independent, and think of marriage only after that. But she resented this and said she was not a career woman. So she got married to a man of her choice, immediately after doing her BA. Now she regrets this decision. Her marriage is not happy and she has realized the importance of being economically independent. She is now trying to complete her studies."

Yet the relationship has been one of mutual support. In her autobiography, Amrita writes about the choices her children made, how she supported them, and also how they came to appreciate her unconventional life and disregard the slander they heard. For instance, she remembers how her son, hearing rumours, asked her whether Sahir was his father. Amrita told him Sahir was not his father but she had thought of Sahir when she was expecting him, and had hoped that he would resemble Sahir. To this Navraj replied that he liked Sahir and would not mind if Sahir was his father.

So also, it was Kandla who supported Amrita in the lonely and tense years when she had just broken from her marriage: "During that long period, my daughter never lost sympathy with me, but my son did lose sympathy for a while, when he was an adolescent. Perhaps this was due to the fact that one was a girl

and the other a boy. Even today, I can hear the voice of my tiny daughter Kandla saying, whenever she saw me depressed because of Navraj's coldness: 'Mama, don't worry about Sally. He will be all right when he grows up.' " (*Rasidi Tikat*, 131)

Woman In Relation To Woman

"It was strange to think that all the great women of fiction had been not only seen by the other sex but seen only in relation to the other sex. And how small a part of a woman's life is that, and now little can a man know even of that when he observes it through the black or rosy spectacles which sex puts upon his nose." (Virginia Woolf).

Amrita Pritam begins to explore that vast unexplored territory of women's lives—our relationship to ourselves, to our work, and to other women. Almost all the heroines of her stories have women friends who are as important to them as men friends are, whom they depend on and trust, for whom they feel great tenderness and attraction. Sometimes the one who has been forced into a conventional life feels that her aspirations are being fulfilled by her more daring friend as does Priya, friend of Ekta in "*Eskimo Smile*". Others come together after a separation of many years, to share their experiences and struggles, like Ekta and Veera, the writer who chose to remain single.

In her series of six stories all entitled "Two Women", Amrita studies the distorted relationships that women are forced into because of their dependent situation—as wife and mistress of the same man, as mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, as married woman and prostitute. Sometimes the two women are unable to understand each other but at other times, they are able to forge a solidarity out of their common pain. For instance, in the sixth story, Vidya, a poor, illiterate woman is deserted by her husband who is an educated man and considers himself too good for her. Vidya, who is pregnant, wants him back, not because of any romantic attachment to him, but because she needs food and shelter. Meanwhile, he has got involved

with an unmarried woman doctor Dr Roy. After some time, he leaves her too and goes off abroad. Dr Roy gives shelter and support to Vidya, and delivers her child. Sometime later, Dr Roy finds that she too is pregnant. She is miserable and alone, but Vidya helps her, nurses her and takes charge of the new baby. Dr Roy wonders whether Vidya hates her as the woman who "took away" her man, but Vidya replies that on the contrary, Dr Roy has "restored her man" by providing what he had refused to provide—food and shelter. She comforts Dr Roy, telling her not to think of him anymore, since both of them can live together quite comfortably and bring up the two children. Dr Roy can provide food and shelter which, Vidya thinks, is more than many husbands do, and Vidya can look after the children. They can also give each other love and support.

Amrita explores the woman-woman friendship with as much attention and intensity as she does the man-woman relationship. She herself has many tender, loving relationships with women, but one particular experience of being betrayed by a close woman friend left a deep impression on her. She describes it in *Rasidi Tikat*: "It was a terrible moment—I had loved that girl for many years...After that, every story I wrote about her was the plucking out of a memory as one plucks out the needles from one's body...In 1959, when I saw her for the last time, I saw a star falling from heaven—the star of trust." (45-46)

In the preface to *Aksharon Ki Chhaya Mein*, she reveals that her experience with this girl is related in the brilliant fifth story of the "Two Women" series. This story is told from the point of view of the other girl who calls herself Miss V. She weaves a string of lies so that she can attain the confidence of an older woman (Amrita) for whom she feels a mixture of fascination, hatred and passionate love. She calls this woman "Miss D" or Miss Dream. Gradually, she makes a place for herself in the life of Miss D, and becomes almost indispensable to her. She becomes the confidante of all Miss D's friends, and

even sleeps with the men who try to reach Miss D and fail. She does this, not because she is interested in these men, but because she wants to erase the distance between Miss D and herself, she wants to “become her.” When there is no longer any distance between them, the element of resentment in her feelings for Miss D vanishes: “There was nothing of hers which I did not know—from the thoughts in her mind to the clothes in her cupboard.” But when Miss D gets attracted to a man, Miss V cannot bear the gap which seems to develop between herself and Miss D, so she weaves another string of lies to separate Miss D

themselves as ‘We.’ Negroes too speak of themselves as ‘We.’ But women have not spoken as ‘We.’” (*Aurat*, 109)

Unstamped Envelope

Women’s relationships with women are not considered important in our society, because they do not fit into a male-defined framework. Similarly, friendships between men and women are frowned upon by society. People want to read a sexual meaning into these friendships or to force the man and woman into a defined relationship — either an “affair” or marriage. But many of the relationships Amrita experiences and writes about cannot be fitted into

integrity as a writer, she consciously accepts the risk of being misunderstood and outcast: “Friendship is an envelope which cannot be franked in the post office of society because it does not have on it the stamp of a recognized relationship. So what destination was I reserved for—unstamped letter that I was?” (*Aurat*, 34)

Continuing The Quest

1960 was a very critical year for Amrita—she came out of her marriage, had to arrange for her children’s education, and face the hostility of all her critics who saw the separation as fresh evidence of her “immorality.” This was also the time when her relationship with the artist Imroz was taking shape. She records the miracle of her meeting with him in “*In search of...*” and the tensions and conflicts inherent in the relationship in “*Canny ka safar.*” She told us : “After that, Imroz and I started our quest together, a quest which still continues, but not bound by any legal fetters.” When we asked why she decided not to get married a second time, she replied: “I didn’t feel the need. I don’t want to tie or hold anyone to me with the help of the law. We are both free to stay with each other, as long as we want to. Isn’t it better to abide by our own agreement than to seek the permission of the law?” She has recorded the fulfilment and joy of this relationship in many of her poems and stories.

Amrita and Imroz live and work together. It is now 16 years since they have been bringing out a Punjabi literary magazine called *Nagmani*, which is an unusual attempt by an established writer to discover and encourage younger, less known writers. Amrita makes an effort to publish the work of aspiring writers. She interviews them and introduces their work through the magazine. She also interviews women writers and activists, women who are trying to lead independent lives.

She keeps live contact with the milieu in which she grew up—west Punjab which is now in Pakistan. She corresponds with many writers there, interviews them when they come to India.



from this man. When her plot is discovered, she is thrown out of the house, but she feels that even in the moment of discovering the factual truth, Miss D has failed to see the whole truth: “She had heard only that from me which was not to be heard. That which she should have heard, she did not hear.”

The story is a remarkable attempt to transcend her own personal experience and see everything that happened from the other woman’s point of view, instead of simply condemning her outright. It is often through such painful struggle that Amrita’s stories aspire from the isolated “I” to the “We” of womanhood. In her words: “A people always think of

neat categories. Of her friendship with the Pakistani poet Sajjad Haider, she writes: “For the first time I realized that poetry does not spring only out of the turbulent storms of passion; it can also arise from the calm waters of friendship.” (*Rasidi Tikat*, 26)

Amrita’s honesty in writing about her personal life and the lives of others is evidence of her immense courage. In her autobiographical works, she addresses herself not to her hostile critics and reviewers, but to her many sympathetic readers. She takes on herself the fate of the poet as Wilde defined it—that of living more lives than one and dying more deaths than one. To preserve her

She makes a special effort to translate and print the writings of Pakistani women poets who cannot publish in their own country because the censor considers them “pornographic.”

She told us that there are many younger women writers in Punjabi whose career she views with feelings of enthusiastic support. She is glad that it is now easier for women to write freely of their experiences and ideas, though she thinks she has been able to live and write as freely because she is in Delhi. It would have been impossible in a smaller town or village. Of the new generation of Punjabi women writers she says: “The first was Dilip Kaur Tiwana. I liked one of her novels very much—*Ay hamara jivana* (This life of ours) which is about the life of women. There are also many others, like Ajit Kaur, Sukhwant Kaur Mann, Gagan Gill, Manjit Kaur Tiwana, who explore the intricacies of personal and familiar relationships, and are conducting very interesting experiments in stylistic technique.”

Amrita is doing important work in the area of tracing the history of women’s writing and bringing it out from the invisibility into which it has often been pushed. Her book *Aurat* is perhaps the first of its kind in Punjabi. It is a collection of interviews with women activists and writers, translations of feminist writings from other languages, and her own essays on such topics as bride-burning, the marriage system, masculinity, prostitution, women’s liberation and women’s rights. She told us about her latest book *Kari dhup ka safar* which is soon to be published: “It is a survey of women writers throughout history and the difficulties they have encountered—from the 14 women who participated in the writing of the Rigveda, and Sappho the Greek poet who was exiled from her country, to the Japanese woman who wrote the first novel in that language but could not publish it under her own name, and the many Russian women poets who were imprisoned, exiled, even murdered or driven to suicide...”

“As A Woman, My Country Is The Whole World”

“I said : ‘Zulfiya, there seems to be

an enduring bond between tears and a woman’s eyes. In every country, this bond remains unchanged.’ Zulfiya answered: ‘And when two minds understand this relationship, that understanding forges an unbreakable bond between them too. I feel as if Amrita and Zulfiya are the two names of one woman.’” (account of her meeting with Uzbek woman poet Zulfiya Khanoum, *Rasidi Tikat*, 57).

Amrita could face the pain of being isolated and attacked by many contemporaries in her own language, when she remembered that her vision of truth was shared by many others in other times and places. She says: “Sometimes I am surprised how the magic tree of words did not wither from its roots even though it faced such hostility from my contemporary writers. But then I think: ‘Are only those my contemporaries whom I met and knew?’ There are many others distant in time and space, many Kazantzakises who watered this tree. So why should I be surprised if the tree remained green?” (*Rasidi Tikat*, 15).

Amrita has travelled very widely, has read her poetry in many countries and has an appreciative readership in many socialist countries too. She has also translated many poems from foreign languages into Punjabi. The diaries she kept when travelling in the west, in east European countries and in Russia, express her joy in communicating with people from other cultures. But perhaps it is her story “*Guliyana ka ek khat*” (A letter from Guliyana) which shows us the source of her internationalism—her sense of the commonness of women’s predicament, and of our struggle to reclaim the world which has been forcibly robbed from us.

This story is based on her meeting with a young Yugoslav woman named Guliyana. She came to meet Amrita and told her the story of her life. Guliyana had participated in her country’s freedom struggle in 1941 but could not find fulfilment in political groups because she realized that learning to walk alone is the real test of a woman’s strength. She had also got married but, as she puts it in the story: “Love cannot grow in the

narrow limits of a garden pot. That marriage confined my life. My heart ceased to bloom in a narrow pot. I need the wideness of the earth...” So she set out on her travels. In the story, the narrator compares Guliyana to a champa flower and wonders: “Could it be that life had created this marvellous creature, but having made her, forgot to enquire after her?” She asks Guliyana if she never feels afraid to travel alone. Guliyana replies that she is often threatened by violent men but “‘I will not let fear keep me from blooming on the earth. I challenge all those who would deny me a place on the open earth. Woman was put here to fulfil herself.’ Her voice broke on a sob of pain. ‘Why should a woman always endure the brutal attacks of men?’” And Amrita thinks: “I knew her pain. I had suffered in the same way.”

Then Guliyana goes on to sing a song: “Today who rent the sky, today who fetched down a bouquet of stars, and tied it round my waist, as a bunch of keys is tied.” Amrita reflects : “My heart was stirred. She had refused the common silver key ring, the restraints and rules of common keys. But I wondered where and when a house would be built that called for a chatelaine of stars.”

Then Guliyana leaves to continue her journey. Amrita waits for a letter from her but receives none. Five months later, she reads an item in the newspaper about a foreign woman who was attacked by some men in the mountains, and died on the way to hospital. She recognizes Guliyana from the description : “Sadly I re-read the item. I shall not tell them who she is, for in a way I feel this is her letter, not just to me but to life that let her go unguarded through the world. And it is a letter full of questions which life did not answer. Why must a woman’s bloom always be confined in a narrow pot of domesticity? Why can she not be like the champa sending strong roots into the wide earth ? If this were possible, she need never fear the outstretched hands of men.”

Amrita told us that she had invented this ending to the story, but later, when she went to Yugoslavia, the woman on whose life the character of Guliyana was based, met her and embraced her with

the cry: "I am still alive. See, I have dared to remain alive."

In Search Of Joy

When we asked Amrita how she thinks women can move towards freedom, she stressed the necessity of economic independence as a precondition. She has also stressed this in many of her stories like "*Muskrahat ka panchi*", which is about a woman who prefers the humiliation of prostitution which at least brings her an independent income and enables her to educate her child, to the humiliation of dependence on a brutal husband. Amrita says she thinks women and men can be free only in a society which does not measure human worth in money and so would be called "socialist." But the socialism of her vision would allow a perfect, joyful, self-expressive individualism to flower. It would not be an authoritarian socialism which crushes the individual's freedom.

Much of Amrita's writing is inspired by her vision of woman in search of this joy—through self-expression, through sexuality, through sensuous closeness to nature. Her poetry is rich with metaphors and images drawn from the daily life of women. It abounds in images of cookery, the fire, the sun which gives life and warmth, the veil which catches fire, the experience of childbirth, and the relationship between all these. Her verse often links childbirth and creativity as women's experience :

"...*The east is preparing its cradle
Its eternal cradle.*

Night is pregnant with the sun.

Lips are preparing their cradle

Their eternal cradle.

Pain is pregnant with song.

Sky the ancient sage

Is taking the pulse of night.

The pulse of pain.

Midwife earth is praying

That night may never be barren,

And pain never be barren."

(from **Prayer**)

or

"Every day

I give birth to a Sun

In the innermost chamber

Of my being.

But your culture

That borrows light from outside

Makes fun of my Sun

Whenever it sees it.

I give birth to a Sun

Every day

And every day

It is orphaned."

(from **Two Selves**)

She often uses the images of eating, drinking, smoking, the pleasures of the senses. She has a gift for capturing the essence of a person or a mood in a visual, tactile or aural image: "At times only a solitary poem howls, Like a dog tied to a chain." (from **Conspiracy of Silence**). Similarly arresting is her portrait of a tension and passion filled relationship :

Imroz

A canvas is spread

On the easel before me.

It seems

As if the patch of colour

On the canvas

Swings like red cloth.

And the beast in the man

Raises its horn,

Aims it to strike

And every street, alley, lane

Forms the ring.

Spanish passion rages

In my Punjabi veins—

The myth of Goya,

Bullfighting

Till death.

(**Existence** 29)

or her self-portrait :

Amrita Pritam

There was a pain

I inhaled it

Silently,

Like a cigarette.

There are a few songs

I've flicked off

Like ashes

From the cigarette.

(**Existence**, 31)

The Rebel

Amrita says that her own rebellion against unjust restrictions as a 16 year old girl later entered into her sympathy with all the oppressed peoples of the world, whether in Nazi Germany or in occupied Czechoslovakia. Similarly, from her understanding of the primary inequality between male power and female powerlessness springs her criticism of all kinds of tyranny, whether at the domestic or the national level:

"Maleness is that spirit which always desires to put others in fear of itself...It is in essence the same whether demonstrated by a man who has only one woman under his control or by a ruler who can command thousands. After all, this is only a difference in degree, a difference in circumstances and ability." (*Aurat*, 123).

Her revolt against false religious values also began as a personal refusal. In her grandmother's kitchen, separate utensils used to be kept for Muslim guests. Amrita insisted on eating from those utensils. When her mother fell ill, eleven year old Amrita prayed fervently for her recovery. But God seemed indifferent to human suffering and her mother died. After this, Amrita refused to pray any more. Her father insisted that she close her eyes and sit for prayer, so she obeyed but stubbornly refused to recite the prayer in her mind— which, after all, could not be controlled. It is this freedom of thought in the face of all external pressures which is perhaps the essential characteristic of her life and work. □

*All quotations except the poems, and the extracts from *Pinjar* and *Guliyana ka ek khat*, have been translated from Hindi by us. References to Amrita Pritam's works are from the following editions :

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