

Narration of Womanhood in Amrita Pritam's Major Writings

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Abstract. “By God! If women hadde written stories...” (*The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*) The word “Womanhood”, first of all in Europe, appears in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* which defines a woman together transcending individual roles and experiences like mother, wife, sister, widow and so on. “The Wife of Bath” embodies the ideology of sexual economics. She is neither upper class nor lower, strictly a middle class woman living independently off her own profit. Being a widow, she remarries more than once and radically defies medieval conventions. Even in Indian manuscripts, it has inscribed about how some legendary women fought and challenged the conventional attitude of society. In this context, the word “Womanhood” has been relevant in India also from ancient times and there are many legendary women – Shakuntala, Madhavi, Satyawati, Gargi and so on who defied the conventional attitude of society and proved themselves. These historical legendary women were limitless, independent and lived lives on their own terms. Besides, even in modern time, Ahilyabai Holkar, Rukhmabai, Babytai Kamble, Savitribai Phule etc. have been such radical women of Indian history who fought for the women's rights in mainstream society. Later on, the Indian English literature has also been an evident of great women in literary canon. In Indian English literature, many female writers as Kamala Das, Taslima Nasrin and Amrita Pritam, who have been pioneers for the women and always advocated for women's freedom, rights and independent expression in the patriarchal society. These women vocalised through the narrative technique of literature. Basically, narration is nothing but telling the stories of one's own experiences. Thus, the present article highlights the idea of “Womanhood” in a few works of Amrita Pritam through narrative technique of literature. The paper explores how Amrita Pritam narrates the side of woman in gendered and patriarchal society.

Keywords : Womanhood; gendered sensibility; sexual economics; patriarchal society.

Womanhood

Traditionally the core meaning of the “Womanhood” is related to the qualities of a woman but in modern time it has changed because traditionally it was controlled, curtailed and defined by men mentality. Traditionally, women have been denied fundamentally new possibilities like their individual choices on marriage, on giving birth to a child, on career choices and independent decisions. In Prof. Sarbani Banerjee’s lecture, she talks about Dr. Tanika Sarkar’s insights on “Womanhood” very coherently. So, in her essay “Woman, Community and Nation”, Dr. Tanika Sarkar makes a very important observation on “Womanhood”. She notes that in a traditional Indian setup, regardless of the community that a woman belongs to, her class, caste, geographical and even communal belongings are entirely dependent on her male relations. These identities are automatically and by default transferred to her, and she virtually repeats this identity. Going ahead Sarkar emphasized on the factors behind it. She says that a woman is automatically enfolded and made a symbol of the respective patriarchal frontier in which she is born or located by virtue of marriage. In this way, a woman’s body is utilized to represent the class, caste and community of her male kin,

Thus, the changed definition of “Womanhood” is being a woman who is free for her desires, decisions and dare (3Ds). The 3Ds are the qualities of the “Womanhood” in present time. The works of Amrita Pritam provide a profound and progressive portrayal of “Womanhood” that challenges conventional gender norms and encourages independence, empathy, and resilience. Her writings challenge traditional depictions of women and reflect a more liberated and sympathetic perspective on the feminine predicament that appeals to readers of all ages. Amrita Pritam regularly criticises the restrictive social norms that restrict women’s roles to particular stereotypes. Through her characters’ disobedience or quiet rebellion, she challenges patriarchal structures and traditional gender norms while advocating for autonomy and self-determination.

Portrayal of Women

One of the stalwarts of Punjabi literary works, Amrita Pritam, investigated women across multiple of her publications with vivid and audacious storytelling. In her seminal works *Pinjar* (The Skeleton), *Village No. 36, 49 Days*, *Doctor Dev*, *Empty Space* portray the unusual and ugly picture of

patriarchal society as: dislocation of women during Partition, emergence of a "New Woman", unconditional love beyond age, social and religious obstructions, struggle of woman and a woman who marries a widower and searches her true love. The protagonists of the above novels – Pooro, Alka, Shirin, Mukta, Mamata are the epitome of the "Womanhood" in their respective lives. By using these stories, Amrita Pritam challenges conventional gender stereotypes and gives voice to the marginalised, presenting "Womanhood" as a place of strength and vulnerability. Her art contains a feminist ethos that aims to change how society and literature view womanhood in addition to documenting women's experiences. Thus, Pritam's depiction of femininity is both personal and global, questioning established gender norms and highlighting the resilience of the female spirit. She advanced feminist discourse by elevating women's realities in the sociopolitical and emotional contexts of her era through her insightful and frequently rebellious writing.

Pinjar (The Skeleton)

In *Pinjar (The Skeleton)*, at the time when Pooro's own family rejects her to accept after abduction because of the honour of patriarchy while she was pure, she admits it in her soul that from that moment, she is indebted to Rashida for the rest of her life. Gradually, she falls in love with him after seeing his care and respect towards her. Hamida not only struggles with the society but also with the inner conscious. During Partition, it was very challenging for Hamida to survive so she tattoos on her wrist also. Her identity becomes deformed. Outside, she becomes Hamida but inside she remains as Pooro. Hamida expresses her intentions to live in Pakistan with Rashida in the last phase of novel while he had abducted Pooro and she became Hamida under the societal pressure and survival. But in the end of the novel, she emerges as enlightened woman who is clear with mind and soul. Hamida says to her brother, When Lajo is welcomed back in her home, then you can take it that Pooro has also returned to you. My home is now in Pakistan (*Pinjar*, 127).

Village No. 36

Village No. 36 is a story of Alka who is a "New Woman". She is an unapologetic and limitless character. It seems that Amrita Pritam sketches her own life in the form of Alka. Alka is educated, beautiful, brave, vocal and ultimate "New Woman" of society. She breaks the shackles of patriarchal society. She accepts challenges and knows very well how to

deal with. She falls in love with Kumar. Kumar is the male protagonist of the novel. He does not want to engulf in love while he has sexual desires to be fulfilled by some strange woman near whom he visits oftentimes. Kumar utters to Alka :

It was just the hunger of the body... for a woman. Yet I wasn't ready to tie up my future with any woman's – I'll never be ready for that. That was why I started visiting one who charged me at the rate of Rs. 20 for a visit and it allowed me to keep my freedom intact (8).

In response to this urge of Kumar Alka says, "If only I'd been the woman you paid Rs. 20 each time to" (8). Moving ahead she satirizes the statement of Kumar in the following words:

Fame doesn't help you to understand yourself; nor, for that matter, does money. But a woman does. To the same extent, perhaps, as your art helps you discover the depths of your inner self...So is love. It is as much a part of one's being as one's eyes or tongue. Perhaps more. It is not merely eyes, but the power of vision; not merely the vision, but the outlook.... (09).

Thus, Alka plays a role of woman of words in the novel. She lives her life on her terms and conditions. In the end of the novel, she denies to marry to Jagdish Chander. She wants to be remain as a widow of Kumar who is on the verge to death because she had loved Kumar by heart. The story of the novel reminds us the personal life story of Amrita Pritam. In a poem, "I will meet you yet again" she expresses her true feelings towards Imroz. The love between Amrita Pritam and Imroz remained silent but this poem explicitly expresses the sensational desires between both. She expresses her feelings in words in the following way of thought :

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.

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

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

*(translated by NirupamaDutt and
published in "The Little Magazine")*

49 Days

Another excellent work of Amrita Pritam is *49 Days*. In Buddhist mythology, it is believed that a deceased body takes *49 days* to reincarnate. The novel *49 Days* discusses this mythological theme in the starting when Meeta dies. Meeta was everything for Sanjay and when she dies, Sanjay's entire life demolishes. The first line of the novel clearly illustrates the condition of Sanjay in the following words, Sanjay's entire life had shrunk

into one line: the line on his forehead of a faint consciousness. His lips too had compressed into a similar line that slightly quivered... (*49 Days*, 5).

Karim Mian is the closest friend of Sanjay and he helps him very much after the demise of Meeta. This novel is excellent work of Amrita Pritam which demolishes all the barriers of caste, creed, class and love. At one place in the novel, Karim introduces Sanjay as his son in the following words, "He is like both friend and son to me. Nurse him back to health and I'll be indebted to you for the rest of my life" (8).

Amrita Pritam was an unorthodox writer. She never accepted social and tradition barriers. She lived her life on her own terms and conditions. She was against casteism and class difference. She has done the classification of the society on the basis of education, patriotic feeling, spiritual enhancement and personality upliftment. In *49 Days*, Sanjay puts forward towards Indian class difference:

An infant naturally has to obey to do as he's told. After this Shudra stage, he learns the 3 R's : reading, writing, and arithmetic. So he becomes a Vaishya. When in adulthood, he fights for his country, how can you not call him a Kshatriya? And finally when he knows all that is to known about life, why must you not rate him as high as a Brahmin?"

(85)

Love beyond age is also a beautiful aspect in works of Amrita Pritam. Love can happen twice in life also. The novel *49 Days* is an exceptional example of this. Karim's own daughter Shirin falls in love with Sanjay. Even Sanjay, who was not able to come out of the trauma of her wife, Meeta, feels for Shirin. He expresses his heart before Karim in philosophical tone. He says :

All's on this good earth: heaven and hell.
So often does man who is born here, die here;
so often does he who dies here, get reborn here itself.
Your daughter's given me the breath of life all over again today.

(143)

The Empty Space

The Empty Space is another saga of "Womanhood" in which Mukta gets married to a widower. Mukta is the heroine of the novel. She is well-educated and charming woman. She has many dreams like other woman have in her youth. But all those dreams get shatter when her father fixes her marriage with Dalip Rai. Dalip Rai was very rich and respectable person. Mukta's father worked as clerk there in Dalip Rai's house. Due to this reason, having a middle class status, Mukta's father agrees for this marriage because he had seen a better future of her daughter in this rich and respectable family. Dalip Rai had a child with his first wife but the child had died because of diarrhea. When Mukta came into life of Dalip Rai, she thought that this child was like as wall between Mukta and Dalip Rai. Due to this reason, there was a silence between their relations. Due to this reason, Mukta also lost her own child in her womb. This tension was sucking their relations. Dalip Rai had felt this in the end of the novel. He says, "No Mukta! There is nothing in between us. Probably my past was, but not anymore..."(50).

Mukta was feeling relaxed to listen those words. Sometimes, expression is the best thing to be happened in a relationship. Mukta has now accepted Dalip Rai with all his past. A relationship is all about complementing each with love. Exactly, this thing happens in the relation of Mukta and Dalip Rai. She says, "He is now mine too, all your past, all of it has mixed with my past. Has become mine, my own..." (50).

Doctor Dev

Doctor Dev is the emotional and devotionalllove story of Mamta and Dr. Dev. Having many intricacies, their love was eternal and inexplicable. Mamta was married to Jagdish. Dr. Dev falls in love with Mamta. Dr. Dev sacrifices his own life for the sake of love and he takes care of his beloved without her knowledge. An emotional scene during Mamta's illness from the end of the novel makes cry to the readers when Mamta put farward her hands and Dr. Dev takes her both hands in his hand. Dr. Dev takes Mamta's head in his lap. Mamta becomes full of emotions. Mamta closes her eyes and closes forever. At this moment, it seems that Mamta has gotten everything in the form of Dr. Dev. Nothing is left to be achieved for Mamta. For Amrita Pritam, love had no boundaries, no age limit, no class difference, and nocasteism. In her works, women live their unconditional lives on their own. This way of narrating stories of Amrita

Pritam establishes the unmatched quality of her that is none other than but “Womanhood”.

Thus, in the works of Amrita Pritam, the women are portrayed on two bases either on “grand narrative” or on “personal narrative”. This can be understood like this that they pick up “personal narrative” after passing the journey of “grand narrative”. Each individual in society shapes his/her own narrative either it emerges from outside forces or within. “Grand narrative” is that is imposed on us familial values through community values and individual one is required to repeat it. In such case, women become border living within walls, doing domestic chores, who unknowingly repeat the customs of grand narrative. In this process, Amrita Pritam tries to incorporate the idea to explode the bubble of patriarchy through presenting the focus on personal narrative in her majority of works. She emphasizes that it is the only solution to reestablish the idea of “Womanhood”. The protagonists: Pooro, Alka, Shirin, Mukta, Mamata all try to pave the way of their self identity and own existence to demolish the cellar of patriarchy.

Woman is the second wheel of society and if she weakens, society automatically gets weakened. From centuries, women are maltreated on the basis of rights, freedom, decisions etc. Men have always led the society on their terms and conditions. Women have been always under control of men. Amrita Pritam is the radical feminist who not only discussed the issues of women in society but also showed the factors and issues. Apart from this, the novels of Amrita Pritam portray the solution also. She does not target men for all the issues of women but she shows the reason how unknowingly, men are the reason behind the entire social scenario where women are treated as underprivileged and maltreated. Thus, Amrita Pritam shows the new path to walk on and tries to solve the issues related to the gender so that everyone could live in society freely and independently. A well known Indian critic Suresh Kohli told to define Amrita Pritam, “It is the name of a yatra, a journey, a travelogue of evolution, an odyssey of inner growth...”

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