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Amrita Pritam



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MS AMRITA PRITAM, distinguished Punjabi poet and fictionist, refuses to stay out of her books. Often enough she writes of the violated woman, of love, of the Punjab, of mankind at large. But in effect, and through these easily discernible themes, she writes of her own aches and joys, self-divisions and tensions, negations and affirmations. A creative artist to the core, Amrita resolves these discords and contradictions of her life's experiences into a controlled and unified art.

The creative talent of Amrita Pritam, wrought up with her peaking anguish, came of age during the dark days of the partition of Punjab. At the level of conscious thought she squarely blamed the catastrophic turn of events on religious fanaticism and mass hysteria. But at the level of creativity, her poetic sensibility mingled with her sense of social and religious outrage, and produced, among other works, the memorable "To Waris Shah". Composed in a train journey from Delhi to Dehradun in those riot-torn days, the poem invokes the spirit of this celebrated 18th century Punjabi humanistic-

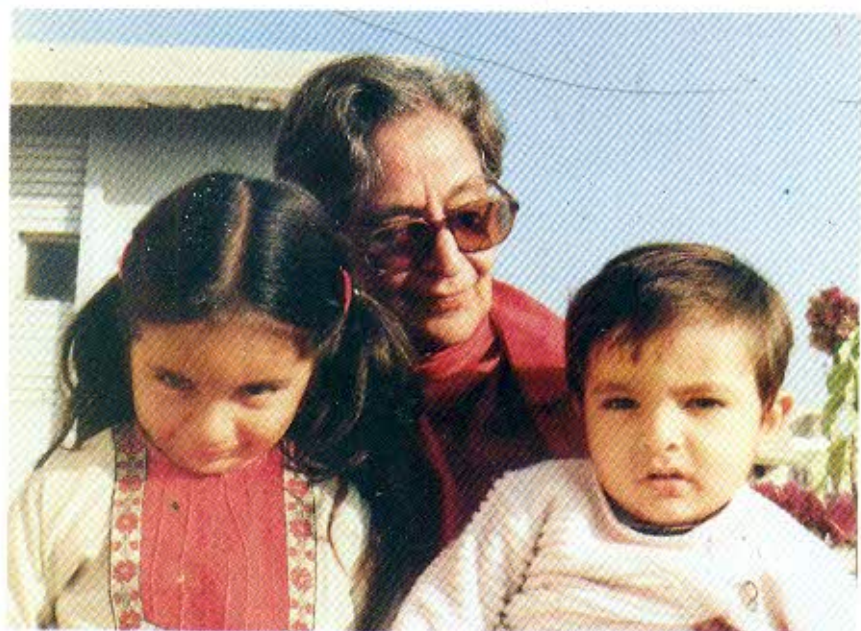
romantic poet (author of the immortal "Heer") to arise and write of the millions of present-day Heers, abducted, raped, forsaken, dying and dead. The raw force of the poem, its sustained parallelism with the tragic fate of Heer, its unavailing agony and intense grief inflict a wound hard to get over.

But Amrita's *Sunehray* (Sahitya Akademi Award 1956), published six years later, suggests not merely the cooling down of the frayed tone and temper of her poetry but the advent of a joyous season in the author's creative experience. Couched in sensuous and spontaneous outpourings on the theme of love these poems radiate with "an unearthly glory without losing contact with the earth". Life blossoms into a full-grown "fruit ready to fall in its own ripeness"; and beauty, unable to bear its own wealth, "aches to be consumed". The mundane and the arid is subsumed in the delicate and tender experience of love. The socio-political significances, whenever implied or integrated, pulsate in creative motifs and metaphors. The volume overflows with some of the finest poems Amrita ever wrote, precisely for which reason they are the least translatable.

Amrita's subsequent books of poems, especially *Kasturi*



At All India Radio, New Delhi, 1948



Amrita with her grand children, Shilpi & Aman, 1988

(1959) and *Nagmani* (1964), posit her strivings for "the higher possibilities of life". The musk deer motif stays central to *Kasturi*; and the poet, stirred by her ceaseless demanding and questioning, remains on the run as it were, secreting, in the process, the fragrance "of the precious substance". In *Nagmani* Amrita's flights of imagination soar still higher, and epitomize the fabled serpent's jewel in her "tasting life's poison as poison" in order to claim "the jewel of her freedom and individuality". Written during and soon after the crisis period in the author's life, both these books, suffused with a heightened sense of existential ecstasies and agonies, capture "grace under pressure" and fortitude in the midst of suffering and loss.

Of the latter poems of Amrita Pritam, *Kagaz Te Kanvas* (Bharatiya Jnanpith Award 1981) compels special attention if only because her poetry now acquires a transcendental world-

view and vision in the face of "a fast dehumanizing epoch". Poems like "Garbh-wati" exquisitely blend mellowed emotions with equally mellowed modes of writing. "For their extremely terse expression, condensed symbolism, evocative imagery and restrained passion, these poems easily pass muster for classical excellence."

The fictions of Amrita Pritam seriously rival her poetry: and at times she stops short of calling herself "primarily a poet". The fictional genre allows her greater elbow-room to portray different or conflicting characters, situations, points of view, structures, and patterns of experience. While more than most novels of Amrita make a delightful and stimulating reading, her *Uninja Din* has been widely acclaimed as a powerful concretization of the crosspulls and counterpoints between the phenomenon of deathwish and the resurrective power of human faith and love. Her own pre-

ference, however, goes for *Jilavatan* (1968) which deftly deals with a youngman who is too mature for his age, finds himself an alien in his own land, and finally and inexorably comes to grief.

Amrita's short stories, as intense as they are prolific, remain a class apart. Many of them, especially "Ik Shehar De Maut", "Teesari Aurat" and "Panj Vareh Lambi Sarak" are characterized by unusual depth, power and artistry. For their precision and pruning, these stories are like those resourceful hostesses who triumphantly succeed in giving a large dance in a small room.

Recipient of the prestigious awards (Sahitya Akademi 1956; Bharatiya Jnanpith 1981), Amrita Pritam has travelled abroad extensively. Several universities (Delhi and Visvabharati included) have conferred the D.Litt degree (Honoris Causa) upon her in recognition of her outstanding contribution in the

field of literature. A large number of her books have been translated into various Indian and foreign languages. She edits *Nagmani*, the widely esteemed Punjabi literary journal; and several of her fictions have been rendered into films.

But oblivious of her books and fame, of her travels and awards, of whether she is a romantic or a realist, of whether she writes of love or of protest or of the Punjab, Amrita Pritam stays first and foremost and in terms of the ultimates simply a writer, face to face with her life's experience and creativity. She transmits precisely this sensibility in a poem on herself.

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



Receiving Sahitya Akademi Award from Dr. S. Radhakrishnan. 1956

