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AMRITA PRITAM'S "THE REVENUE STAMP": AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE
NEGOTIATING THE PRECONCEPTIONS

RAJLAKSHMI DUTTA

Assistant Professor, Department of English, B.H College, Howly, Assam.

(Affiliation: Gauhati University)

rajlakshmi.dutta@gmail.com



RAJLAKSHMI DUTTA

ABSTRACT

Autobiography is a genre through which writers express their lived experience of being in the world. A reconstruction of the past, an autobiography is a critical cum political retrospective journey, where the 'I' encounters and negotiates the difficult memories and preconceived ideas regarding the self in order to (re)assert the 'self'. The autobiography chosen here for study is *The Revenue Stamp* by Amrita Pritam where she depicts the struggles of postcolonial women in India to encounter, negotiate and subvert the preconceptions of 'third world' women's experience as oppressed and un-emancipated lacking in the power of self-assertion and self-determination. Her narrative also shows how as a postcolonial woman writer she has disengaged herself from the nationalist discourse of women as bearers and custodians of culture. Outgrowing the nationalist and colonial discourses; and the preconceptions regarding 'third world' women's experience Pritam has successfully established her identity in postcolonial Indian context, contesting and resisting the homogenizing problematic of the above said. Moreover, the paper would also focus on her emancipation via writing foregrounding the in-between-ness of discursive practice of postcolonial writing, thereby successfully giving voice to her expressions. KEY WORDS: autobiography, resistance, negotiation, identity, semiotic.

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This paper, via the autobiography of Amrita Pritam, would make an attempt to depict the struggle of postcolonial women in India to encounter, negotiate and subvert the preconceptions regarding the Third World women's experience as degraded and oppressed, lacking in self-determination and self-assertion. Amrita Pritam's *The Revenue Stamp*, throws light on how postcolonial women in India have dis-engaged themselves from the nationalistic discourse of women being bearers and custodians of culture. Outgrowing the nationalist and colonialist discourse and the pre-conceptions of Western Feminist thought regarding the Third World Women experience, Amrita Pritam has successfully established her identity in the context of postcolonial, resisting and contesting the problematic of the above mentioned via her mode of writing. A reading of her autobiography would clearly establish this fact.

Writing is a mode of self-assertion, especially when it is autobiographical. Autobiography is a genre through which writers express their lived experience of being in the world; reconstructing their past by taking the trajectory of a retrospective journey via memory to narrate their very process of becoming who or what they are in the present. As an individual history and a narrative, autobiography provides a platform for “meeting of writing and selfhood” (Benstock 2000: 1139). Memory in an autobiography plays an important role in the construction of personal identity, while belief and goals play an important role in recollections of former self. (Re)capturing the inter-personal and the intra-personal memories, the situatedness of the subject ‘I’ of an autobiography in a socio-material context also affects the point of view of ‘I’ as one re-visits past in order to re-collect the episodes of life. The autobiography chosen for study contains a gendered ‘I’ where the ‘I’ of the author foregrounds the historicized perspective of women in postcolonial India. However, it is to be mentioned that authorship is a much contested question in feminism. Taking into consideration the gendered aspects of textual production and liberty of women’s writing from the domain of symbolic language it becomes questionable how it is possible to justify women’s experience in true sense.

Amrita pritam’s *The Revenue Stamp* demonstrates in great detail a rejection of conventional life and thought since the days of her childhood. Her narrative, rather subtly presents an alternative history, be it, the women question in postcolonial India or the issue of partition of India. The autobiography severs itself from a typical misogynist nationalist discourse. Yet the text is not dominated by the waves of western feminism. Herein lies its success to audaciously hold on to its integrity and identity. From its initial pages, the autobiography depicts the writer’s non-conformity to the established conventions. Amrita Pritam’s resistance, rebellious attitude and sceptical sense of approach comes out prominent when she questions her father at the age of ten about the existence of God after the death of her mother Raj Bibi:

[...] I was vehement in my resistance:

“There is no God.”

“You mustn’t say that.”

“Why not?” (*Revenue Stamp*, 9)

Later she questions the validity of religion, when she learns that her grandmother keeps separate tumblers for Hindus and three separate tumblers for Muslims. Amrita Pritam mixes those tumblers and keeps them in one single line in her kitchen. This incident is a very poignant symbol of a communal harmony she longed for. These two anecdotes depict her non-conformity to and interrogation of the hegemonic phallogocentric discourse of religious ideologies:

“I questioned what had been taught to me and I questioned the entire stratified social scheme” (12).

As a child, Amrita Pritam was taught poetry by her father. He also taught her to meditate on God. But, she found herself unable to adhere to the strict rhythm and rhyme of poetry. Her father expected her to write ‘religious verses, orthodox and conventional in style’ (12). ‘Rebellious thoughts’ found expression in her poetry but scared of her ‘Father’, she tore her writings into bits of paper and appeared as an innocent child in front of him. She gradually grew much aware of her body and the pen became her weapon while language her mode of resistance. This instant of Amrita Pritam’s life reminds us of Helene Cixous’s words on women writing:

I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs. Time and again I, too have felt so full of luminous torrents that I burst—burst with forms which are much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames and sold for a stinking fortune. (*The Laugh of the Medusa*, 348)

Thus, an appeal from Cixous to free the self from those structured homogeneous codes is apparent, and Pritam too displays such an awareness in her autobiography. She audaciously reports that ‘forbidden desires’ and rebellious thoughts’ pursued her, and it was not easy for her to stick to the norm and write poetry in orthodox and conventional style as expected by her father, Kartar Singh, who was a school teacher cum a Sikh preacher. Instead, she started to write in an unconventional and subversive style right from her teens. As far as meditation is concerned she refused to meditate on God. When she failed to resist her father any longer she understood that she could control her thoughts. And she started to meditate on ‘Rajan’, someone who existed in her dreams as a teen.

In fact, various dreams invaded her time and often enabling her to write a language which denies to conform itself to the conventional manner of writing—governed by the established patriarchal ideologies. This was her “beginning of even roads of life with all its hair pin bends, its ups and downs”. (12). Hence begins her resistance through her mode of writing. Virginia Woolf in her notable essay ‘Women and Fiction’ has said that women writing is unable to express itself in the very form of man’s language. To express the self and the very essence of women experience in the language of man or in the ‘symbolic’ language is difficult for a feminist writer like Amrita Pritam, and hence the fluid kind of writing celebrating the multiplicities of her body, that bears much allusion to *Écriture féminine*—which is often perceived as a deviation from the established tradition. It is her dreams which gives vent to her unconscious—a realm free from the bondages of a misogynist society. So she created an unconventional, resistive and subversive kind of ‘semiotic’ writing which was often a matter of shock for her contemporaries. They complained of her writings being too sensuous.

Amrita Pritam had a platonic love for Sahir Ludhianvi which she has expressed in *Sunehadey*, and she was awarded Sahitya Academy Award for it in the year 1956. Later she moved into a live-in relationship with Imroz in Delhi and spent the rest of her forty years of life with him. For this, she had to face a lot of criticism. During her stay with Imroz, she was awarded Padmashree in 1969, Bharatiya Jnanpith, one of the highest literary awards in 1982 for *Kagaz Te Canvas (The Paper and the Canvas)* and Padma Vibhushan in 2004. Amrita Pritam possessed ‘a room of her own’. Negating all the conventions and norms she lived on in her own terms producing a plethora of powerfully significant and rebellious works.

Moreover, Pritam’s autobiographical narrative gives an alternative picture of the history of partition from a perspective much beyond the nationalist enterprise and jingoistic ideology. She contemplates deeply on the idea of possession and sense of belongingness via the image of her grandfather who refused to leave his birth place and home in Pakistan after partition. Her writings depict the trauma and turmoil endured by the ordinary citizen on either side of the border at the collapse of British Raj. The dislocation of people and their consequent sufferings, specially women, made Pritam lament for them. This is very well reflected in the hymns she wrote during partition for the victimised on both the sides of the border. Her ‘Ajj Aakhaan Waris Shah nu’, an elegy to eighteenth century Punjabi poet is a poignant poem expressing her grief and anguish over massacres during partition of India, 1947. There are other such instances from her autobiography which establish and validate her as a woman of dignity and substance in the realm of postcolonial context. For example, when she asks the Indian soldiers not to treat women with disrespect on the either sides of the border it justifies her postcolonial position where she does not follow blindly the nationalist discourse. Neither is she swept blindly by the tide of western feminist thought. Her one particular dream mentioned in *The Revenue Stamp* best explains her position and acceptance of her identity as a postcolonial woman:

A statue of huge alabaster lies flat at my feet. Looking at it with dismay, I finally accost it with the words: “What do I do with you? You have not the breath of life in you; you cannot speak! I’ll break you to bits! I’ll pack you off right away. You have wasted my life...

A damsel of twenty years or so, stood by my side. She was the very picture of perfection. But she was ebony black, carved out of marble...

“Who is she now?” someone asked me.

“My daughter” ... (37)

She rejects the white piece of marble in her dreams only to embrace the ebony dark damsel, confirming it as her muse, thus synthesizing her nurturing nature and her creative impulse—the maternal and the erotic—a feature justifying the postcolonial women position/question.

Another aspect which is worth mentioning is the sense of sisterhood in Amrita Pritam. She travelled abroad on various occasions and in one such occasion met a poet named Zulfia. She developed a strong bond with Zulfia in Tashkent. Language was not a barrier for these two women and they shared a common chord of connection showing the affinities of sisterhood irrespective of race and colour.

When tears are understood, relationship deepens, does it not? Zulfia carried on in the imaginative strain. “For me Amrita and Zulfia are the names of the same women”. She reads out some verses by

nineteenth century poetesses Nadira and Mahajuna...and for a good while we sit under the spell of silence they cast over us. (42)

That writing is the path to emancipation and liberation from the constraints of the conventions is something that Amrita Pritam not only believed in but also inspired eminent litterateur – Indira Goswami— winner of Sahitya Academic Award in 1982, for *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, Jnanpith award in 2000, Principal Prince Claus Laureate in 2008 and Ahom Ratna in 2011. That women should write (herself) to emancipate the self from pain and agony is something that Indira Goswami learnt from Amrita Pritam and Goswami mentions the latter's quote in her autobiography *Adhalikha Dastabez*. (*The Unfinished Autobiography*):

The one thing that did not let me down during the most depressing times was my pen. Whether I wrote my own thoughts down or wrote about partition, my pen was much a poet of me as the limbs of my body. The pen was the decisive factor of my life.

Page 133 (quoted in *Adhalikha Dastabez*, 65)

Life is not a bed of roses and Amrita Pritam was not an exception. She had to face harsh criticism by her contemporaries. Her works were labelled as being too sensuous and pornographic. However, it can also be inferred that hers was a semiotic way of writing, rupturing the phallogocentric discourse and hence much a threat to the established conventions. Her writings were often inspired by dreams which in turn influenced her life. Amrita Pritam's non-conforming style which often contests the dominating ideologies is analogous to the concept of Helene Cixous' *Ecriture feminine*. At times she also had to face financial crisis. But during her difficult times she mentions in her autobiography that it was her 'pen' which was her true support and even dreamt of talking to her pen. So writing became her path to liberation and emancipation:

There have been so many days when I have held my pen close to my breast and wept and wept.

It is impossible to say who comes to support you and when.

My pen has always been the perceptible... I can hold it to my heart. (115)

Something similar was said by Helene Cixous around the same time in her famous essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*.

Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been so driven away as violently as from their bodies... women must put herself into the text— as into the world and into history—by her own movement. (347).

From the reading of her autobiography, we see that Amrita Pritam always tried to negate the conventions of social order to establish and assert her autonomy via her writings. Neither traditional nor western, her writings disrupt the logocentric discourse upon which we comfortably rely to access the (supposed) truths of life. Her writings reveal that postcolonial women cannot be perceived 'as a singular monolithic subject...one that has been labelled as powerless, exploited, sexually harassed and so on' in the words of Chandra Talpade Mohanty. (23) Western feminism has relegated postcolonial women experience to its own homogenizing gaze ignoring the individual history and experience. This reductive approach is shattered by Amrita Pritam and she has successfully negotiated the pre-conceived notions regarding postcolonial women of India. But the common experiences of women are emphasized and celebrated and the 'odd affinities' in the words of Woolf resonate throughout the autobiography.

If we take a retrospective look and reflect on our national movement, we would see that its members were mostly male and they were made to assert themselves as agents of their own history and as self-fashioning. Women were not much encouraged to be a part of this public sphere and were not addressed by nationalist political activity. Texts like *Anandamath*, *Kanthapura* etc cast them as icons of national values and custodians of culture—thereby throwing light on a very male centric vision of nationality. Amrita Pritam has defined a position which does not align itself with this image of women. Rather, instances from the autobiography show that they part identify with, and in part also disengage itself from such stereotypes of images. For example, Amrita Pritam tries to dissolve the religious differences and social conventions and yet unifies motherhood and the creative spark into a whole. Thus there is a sense of plurality in her as reflected in

her writing which can be located as an in-between position—a position that keeps on oscillating between nationalist discourse and western feminism, not belonging to any one position. Thus, she writes, unconditioning herself from the constraints of the society and family in an in-between position celebrating the pluralities and synthesizing the binaries of the maternal and the erotic, the terrible and the benign, the hungry and the nourishing, the norm and the deviation, the public and the private, the authority and the obedience—thereby confusing all the tight divisions between the phallogocentric order of the masculine and the feminine. With a dislocated subject position Amrita Pritam has also equally disrupted (de-centred) her readers by her linguistic force, which goes close to semiotic way of writing.

In her book *La Revolution du langage Poetique* (1974), Kristeva refers to semiotic as a pattern or play of force which we can detect inside language, and which represents a sort of residue of pre-oedipal phase. The rhythmic pattern of this phase, though meaningless and unorganised can be perceived in language. For a language to happen the heterogeneous flow must be severed and articulated to stable terms—which is actually our entry to the Law of the Father, or the symbolic repressing the semiotic. This repression is however not total. As semiotic stems from the pre-oedipal phase and is tied to the mother's body, it is very closely connected to femininity; but by no means confined only to women.

Semiotic is a concern for Kristeva and other avant garde and feminist writers as it can serve as a means to undermine the symbolic. This heterogeneous flow which is very much bisexual, with the play of its pluralities and unconscious drives threatens to split apart received social meaning. "It is opposed to all fixed, transcendental, significations and since ideologies of male dominated class society rely on such fixed sign for their power (God, father, state, order) such literature becomes equivalent in the realm of language to revolution in the sphere of politics" (Eagleton, 163-4)—thus disrupting the phallogocentric discourses.

Now, is this not what we find in *The Revenue Stamp*? Amrita Pritam has been successful enough to dis-engage herself from fixed signification with the very play with her language, incorporating dreams and visions; and at the same time has countered the hegemonic ideologies by audacious expressions of her thoughts and perspectives.

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