

The Life and Times of Amrita Pritam

Paramjeet Singh*

* Addl. Commissioner of Income Tax, Mumbai. Email: sing_param@rediffmail.com

Amrita was born on 31st Aug. 1919 at Gujaranwala, (Pakistan) to Mother Rajbibi, and Father Nand Sandhu alias Kartar Singh. He used to write poetry and also had a Pseudonym: 'Peeyookh', the Sanskrit for nectar. Ten years later when she was born, he named her 'Amrita', the Punjabi equivalent for 'Peeyookh', while he himself changed his *nom-de-plume* to 'Hitkari'. Her mother expired on July 31, 1930 when she was hardly 11 years of age. Her father was a man of religion and she says in her autobiography - '*The Revenue Stamp*', that her house was full of books. Most of them were on religion, rishis and meditation. Her father and his readings goaded her to literature. In fact he himself gave Amrita the first lesson in metrical composition. He was a master of penning and recounting the history of sages of ancient times and the new events and happenings in Sikh history. He even made slides of various episodes in Sikh history and used to screen them through a projector, spending all from his pocket to make people aware of the Sikh history.

Before Partition, it was a comparatively better life at Lahore. Amrita had many hobbies. First it was photography. Then dancing, which she learnt from no less a person than Tara Choudhary. This was followed by sitar, where her gurus were Master Ram Rakha, Siraj Ahmed and Dina Sitariya. She also learned tennis. But all hobbies came to end with Partition. After initially settling down at Dehradun, she finally got a job at All India Radio, Delhi. She worked there for full 12 yrs, the 1st few of which were on a daily contract of Rs.5/-. As she writes "*I could not therefore afford to lie on sick bed even for a day! It was agony to go on working when I had a cold or a fever.*"

But during all this, the one thing that she never left was writing. "*The pen was the decisive factor in my life. Other interests only served as manure to germinate the seeds that bore fruits in due course.*"

Her first child, a daughter was born on April 23-1946. Her son, Navraj (Sally) was born in July 1947 at Dehradun.

She was divorced in the year 1964 though the process had begun in 1960. She does not mention the name of her husband anywhere in her books and writings- just mentioning him as "*The fellow traveller*" and how they gracefully parted as "*we could not workout a living together*". Neither had a grievance against the other, no humiliation, no unpleasantness. There was no need to conceal the pain of parting and years later when she wrote "*Revenue Stamp*", her autobiography, in 1994, she was candid to admit "*I have been treated better by fate than the 'fellow traveller' I had parted with. In the years that followed, I had Imroz; he has had only loneliness. Fate has also been all too frugal in giving him anything that gives life a meaning*". Still both of them decided that separation did not mean that "*we are not to extend common courtesies to each other. On the contrary, at an hour of a child's need or over a problem concerning.....We would call each other on telephone*".

Though the separation came amicably, yet the year 1960 came to be Amrita's saddest year. As she herself wrote "*Having taken decision, my mind had leapt over the threshold, yet tremblingly I did not know which way to go*". By the time she decided to put that call to Sahir, it was too late. The newspaper blared the news about him and his newly found friend. She was flabbergasted and in deep pain and anguish. As she says, "*My saddest verse belongs to this year.*"

She was already introduced to Imroz (6 years her junior) but was still vacillating in her friendship for him. But Imroz was to be, from then, her life long companion till her death on 31/10/05. He gave up his career in Mumbai to be with her. With Imroz came a certain

amount of stability and maturity. Imroz was aware of Amrita's love for Sahir and Amrita could openly discuss all her problems with him. And that is why nothing (no human made word) can define her relationship with Imroz. She herself wrote:-

No relationship with man,
Not one word- father, brother, friend, husband
Could have described you

Each of these words now gains in depth....."

At other time, she also wrote to Imroz *"I would say you are the 15th of August for me, since with you came the emancipation of the being that is me....."*

Finally, she found peace of serenity with Imroz. Once commenting on Amrita's habit of salvaging something or the other from somewhere, Imroz commented *"You must have shoved in something of me somewhere for your future life, I bet."*

Then Amrita wrote *"Considering everything, I must surely have saved something in my previous birth for this one....when I have been able to drink my fill even when desert sands stretched far out to the distant horizon....I wish what he said in jest turns out to be true so I do save something of him for my next life as well."*

The year 1960 stabilized her also. She was invited to Russia and it is they who pulled her out of the quagmire of her mental condition. She blossomed as the writer. The honour that she was accorded made her withdraw the complaint that she used to make *"life had invited me to its house, but had forgotten to entertain me"*. In her initial year of writing, because of her forthrightness and an open way of living, she was ceaselessly attacked by her contemporary writers, especially of the Punjabi press. She writes *"In my case, those who for years have risen up in arms against me are ironically the ones who have had nothing to do with the tenor of my life"*. She writes:-*"They could not have even recognized me, had they passed me by in the street. To a certain extent, Punjabi journalists fall in this category"*.

When in 1947, touched and effected by the Partition, she wrote her legendary poem:- **"Aaj me ankha Waris Shah nu..."**

"From the depths of your grave, Waris Shah,
Add a new page to your saga of love
Once when a daughter of Punjab wept
Your pen unleashed a million cries,
A million daughters weep today, their eyes turned
To you, Waris Shah."

About Partition she believed that, *"the most gruesome accounts of marauding invaders in all mythologies and chronicles put together will not, I believe, compare with the blood-curdling horrors of this historic year. Tale after tale, each more hair raising than the last, would take a lifetime to retell."* And lamenting on that, she said she could think of no one greater than Waris Shah to chant her invocation to. And though the poem touched a chord with everybody, including those in Pakistan, yet at that time it evoked so much censure and disapprobation, with the Sikhs holding her guilty of not having addressed her invocation to Guru Nanak, and the communists, to Lenin or Stalin. Today, however, sensibly the same poem has been accepted as a masterpiece, even by the acerbic Khushwant Singh. Nobody in India today describes the story of Partition without mentioning that poem. In fact, recently when the noted director, Mr.Chandrakant Dwivedy made a movie on her novel *'Pinjar'*(again on Partition), he wrote to her asking her permission to use that poem and his willingness to pay for it. Amrita gracefully gave her permission, refusing to charge anything for its use. She wrote that this poem now belongs to humanity at large and to the people of this subcontinent.

Years later, again, her poem *Nau- Sapne* (nine dreams -of Mata Tripta, during Nanak's birth) evoked similar virulent protests from the Sikh community.

In her autobiography she wrote: "My only wish is that those who have had nothing to do with me in life, should have nothing to do with me after my death...This I say because there are people who have nothing in common with one but who will form part of the crowds gathering around one at such time. I never had much to do with rites and rituals. They should not take the trouble of taking part in true or false funeral orations and condolence meetings and rallies..."

She further went on to add:- "There was hardly a Punjabi paper or magazine I could be sure of not printing some calumny against me. So often, even before I had the chance to go through them, Imroz would cut the bits that contained adverse comments....Imroz shielded me from such suffering. I can therefore depend on him not to allow any untruths to get anywhere near my dead body. My children and he, between them, know how to deal with my remains....they must have the honour."

The practice at one time was for people to place jars full of water and vessels of silver and gold by the side of a body. Not that one has to have faith in everything, but I would like Imroz to let my pen go with me."

And that is what Imroz did. The funeral was conducted without any rituals in a very low-key and simple manner. And Imroz keeps on shielding her from untruths. When after her death, Khushwant Singh, in his usual deprecating manner, tried to belittle Amrita's work, the usually reticent and soft spoken Imroz was quick to rebut him.

On her death, what comes true is what once the noted author, Krishan Chander wrote on the death of Sadat Hasan Manto. (The name of Manto has been replaced with Amrita, with due apologies to Krishan Chander).

"AIR has not observed the death of Amrita, which had broadcast hundreds of poems/prose written by Amrita. The Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu bazaar is not closed, which had sold thousands of copies of Amrita's Books and are still selling. Amrita was not a minister for whom the flags are lowered; neither was she a mafia king for whom the bazaar would shut down. No one in this crowded city has a moment to leave his work and remember Amrita".

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Remembering Amrita Pritam from Afar

*Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh**

** Crawford Family Professor, Colby College, Waterville, Maine, USA. Email: nksingh@colby.edu*

It has been a year and more

since Amrita Pritam died (October 31, 2005) in New Delhi. Though I had never met her, sitting far away in the New World, I feel a terrible loss. Doubtless it is a beautiful autumn day in New England. The skies are azure blue, and the air so clear and crisp. The trees in my garden have changed their various hues of vibrant green to flaming yellows, orange, and red. With the sun shining through the silver birch and maples, I see sparkles of gold glittering like jewels and embroidery bedecking an Indian bride. It is a mesmerizing scene.

But why do these brilliant reds evoke a deep sadness in me? They are not flowing with the warm blood of life! The leaves that sprouted in the spring and were embraced so snugly by the branches are now blowing around whispering the fragility of life, lamenting the onslaught of stark winter and freezing snow. In this dance of perpetual motion and movement, nothing, nothing at all stays still. Yes, a year and more has gone by. Remembering Amrita Pritam bares my spirit, and opens it once again to other losses. Where is my home? My beloved parents? My Punjab? The mango and guava trees? The purple bougainvillea, the fragrant marigolds? I feel pangs of separation from all those familiar sights and sounds and smells

and tastes of my childhood left far far behind. At a visceral level I am struck by the harsh reality that there won't be any more stories or poetry from Amrita Pritam's pen!

She has been modern age's greatest Punjabi woman writer. Born to a Sikh family in Gujranwala, Pakistan, in 1919, Amrita came to India after the traumatic Partition of the sub-continent in 1947. Many of her works capture the 'Radcliffe Line drawn arbitrarily by the British government who divided the Punjabi soil with its millions of innocent Sikh, Hindu, and Muslim inhabitants, brutally dismembering their bodies, their psyches, their families, their homes, and their holy shrines. Her heart-wrenching *Ode to Waris Shah* won her instant fame. After her migration to India, she worked for the All India Radio till 1961. Though her expertise was Punjabi literature, Amrita also wrote extensively in Hindi and Urdu. Her feminist spirit emerges artistically in her numerous novels, collections of short stories, and volumes of poetry. Her novel *Pinjar* was translated by the famous Sikh historian Khushwant Singh, and has been adapted into film by director Chandra Prakash Dwivedi. Amrita Pritam was the recipient of numerous prestigious awards like the Padma Shri, the Jnanpith and Sahitya Academy Awards.

This distinguished public figure seems to have been a part of my personal life as well. Early in my childhood I was introduced to her striking beauty caught in the photograph in our family album. I can still vividly see her mysterious smile, the mystery surrounding the lips deepened by her thick dark hair and penetrating eyes. My parents knew Amrita closely, and admired her immensely. After my mother passed away, Amrita was invited to deliver the annual 'Sardarni Kailash Kaur Memorial Lecture' in honor of my mother at the Punjabi University in Patiala — my childhood home. Besides, there was a regular literary exchange between her and my Father, Professor Harbans Singh. In fact he translated her short story "*Kanjak*" into English for an anthology he compiled in memory of my uncle, his beloved younger brother (vide *Mahindi*, Navyug Publishers, 1984 pp. 33-37). For many years this particular story has resonated deep inside me, and recently it has resurfaced tumultuously, forcing me to enter its oceanic world.

Amrita's seemingly simple story entitled "*Kanjak*" is full of ironic twists and incredibly dense, and so it needs to be approached from a variety of angles — literary, history of religions, and anthropological, and I must say, having just analyzed it for a Mellon Collaborative project, I found in it great meaning and vitality, its matrix phenomenally vast. On the one hand, it reaches back to the ancient Indian epic *Mahabharata*: after all, Amrita's protagonist "Daropati" is a vernacular version of the epic heroine — "Draupadi", who (as she is outrageously dragged by her hair on to an open platform) boldly asks the entire audience: *Is this morality?* Simultaneously, Amrita's fictional narrative engages with contemporary newspaper reports about the tragedy of gender-selective abortions in India — "*the land of disappearing Kanjaks*." As Amrita's wrinkled and toothless "Kanjak" prepares for the Kanjak festivities, she pushes us to reexamine our hallowed traditions and rituals, which we keep celebrating — without ever reflecting on their implications and strong subliminal messages. Paradoxically, in screeching silence, Amrita's heroine reiterates *Is this morality?* — imploring our global society to reassess our religious, social, and economic values, and rectify our patriarchal networks and misogynistic attitudes.

The story ends with: "The first rays of the sun discovered Daropati lying on the floor of the kitchen unconscious." As these rays from Daropati's kitchen fuse with my own sunny Maine landscape in USA, they radiate potentially transformative implications. Daropati can regain consciousness if we react immediately. Our society can change. By entering the recesses of our psyches, Amrita's fiction exerts tremendous influence and succeeds triumphantly — precisely where our so-called "laws" are doomed to failure. Those rays of the sun that

discover Daropati fill us with optimism. We begin to read the blue print for a new world drawn by the author in between her lines. Amrita Pritam may have departed, but her protagonists will continue to inspire and incite us to action because she has mysteriously merged herself in them. Her own words bear an uncanny reality:

I will meet you yet again
How and Where?
I do not know
Perhaps I will become a
figment of your imagination....
Perhaps I will become a ray
of sunshine to be
embraced by your colours...

