Neutral Territory

Cynicism it was that prompted Khushwant Singh to tell Amrita Pritam: “All this could be written on a postage stamp”. By sticking this very term “Revenue stamp” as title for her autobiography, Amrita made it to mean the very essence of her character: Resilience and Courage. Khushwant Singh recollects his caustic remark within a fortnight of her death in 2005:

‘All this could be written on a postage stamp’,
I told her. So when she wrote her autobiography, she called it Raseedi Ticket (Postage Stamp).

The few good things that he ascribes to her are almost suppressed by his adverse comments: she was a “woman of modest education”, and with her knowledge of a single language—Punjabi—she was unsophisticated in her writings; “she was a taker, not a giver”, “unwilling to acknowledge what other people had done for her”; like Kamala Das, she was “incapable of giving a simple answer to a simple question”; and of course, she had “stunning good looks” to make her the toast of “Punjabi literary circles”, etc. “All praise that is now being lavished on her is mainly from people who have not read her”—he gives his ruling. (Khushwant Singh, www.outlookindia.com)
Khushwant Singh’s ‘rightness’ or ‘wrongness’, in his supposed tribute is not here the issue to contest. If his comments within fifteen days of her death can carry this much malice, his attitude when she was alive must have had a lot more sting. It is admirable for Amrita to, without insisting on a literary fight on an individual level with the man that slighted her literary merits, orient her self to freedom in a hostile and narrow-minded world. Very early in Revenue Stamp Amrita says: "I was yet a child when I heard those myriad voices of hate and abuse" (Pritam 14). Even as a child, she is pained by the bigoted divisions in humanity:

There were flags of many denominations and so many flagstaffs on which they fluttered. They thought I too wanted to fly one of my own. I wanted to cry out to them all, ‘My friends, have no illusions. You are welcome to your faith and your flags. I want nothing.’ (Pritam 14)

For a person whose temperament dislikes schisms, the Partition of the country comes as a shock. It is a traumatic experience in her life. It uprooted her from Lahore to Delhi. The vantage point in time from which she views Partition is her sixteenth year. In fact, she recaptures her whole life with her sixteenth year as the
reference centre. When speaking of the country’s
Partition for example, Amrita writes:

I caught its [sixteenth year’s] spirit again
and again. At the time of the Partition of the
country in 1947, when all social, political and
religious values came crushing down like glass
smashed into smithereens under the feet of people in
flight [...] Those crushed pieces of glass bruised
my soul and my limbs bled. I wrote my hymns for the
suffering of those who were abducted and raped. The
passion of those monstrous times has been with me
since, like some consuming fire—when I wrote later
of a beloved’s face; of the aggressions from
neighbouring countries; of the crime of the long
Vietnamese night, or at one stage, of the helpless
Czechs [...] In the haunting image of beauty and in
the anger and cruelty, my sixteenth year stretches
on and on [...] (Italics added, Pritam 13)

Her sixteenth year for Amrita is not just one of
moral outrage; it is also the age when she clearly
asserted her own free spirit through creative writing.
Though she was initiated much earlier into poetry-writing
by her father Kartar Singh, who was himself a poet, she
dates her writing from her sixteenth year, for that was
the time from where she deviated from her father’s expectations. He would honour only religious poetry:

Not that he objected to my writing poetry. He had himself given me my first lesson in metrical composition. But what he expected from me was religious verse, orthodox and conventional in style.

(Pritam 12)

Her sixteenth year awakens in her a sense of ‘rebellion’ (Pritam 12). Kartar Singh the father wanted her to be “an obedient self-effacing daughter” (Pritam 13), but she, in her words, was bearing her “cross”. The rebel in her is firmly established:

I questioned parental authority, I questioned the value of doing my work at school by rote. I questioned what had been preached to me and I questioned the entire stratified social scheme.

(Pritam 12)

When she says she continued to live her sixteenth year all through her life, she means that she never allowed the intensity of her rebellious spirit to subside:

Each thought of mine intrudes upon those innocent years. I pity the patience and resignation of those who come to terms with wrong ... And like in my sixteenth year I do not negotiate my walls by
stealth. I do not avoid confrontation. As I begin my fiftieth year, my feelings have the same intensity.

(Italics added, Pritam 13)

The pivotal image in her self-narration is that of captivity-freedom. Her father’s insistence on the children’s night-prayers is meant to erect forts of faith: Father believed that with each syllable of the prayer, faith itself got fortified.” Such fortification, secure from all sides, would allow no entry to non-religious thoughts. Amrita as a child would worry, for the barricades would keep her friend ‘Rajan’ out of her dreams. Her attempts at skipping the lines in the prayer would be quickly detected by the father who would then involve the children in the prayer in such a way as to avoid lapses. But the child Amrita keeps thinking of strategies to allow ‘Rajan’ to enter the fort. Says Amrita past her fiftieth year:

Around me forts have been raised and demolished but the reality of the One, has in one form or the other, been always with me. At one time in the features and form of a man’s face; at another in what has taken shape from my pen; and at yet another some sort of divinity has arisen from the leaves of a book or has stepped out from a canvas to be with me. (Pritam 07)
All activities of Amrita, that is to say, become an expression of the free Spirit within. In a dream that she dreams over the years, her “little self” is a “prisoner within”. She gropes about in the “overwhelming” “murkiness”, but the “strong walls of rock would not melt or fade away” (Pritam 10). She tries to “fly up and over” in vain. And she falls down breathless” (Pritam 10). Then slowly and softly I felt my feet rising above the ground [...] higher and yet higher up above the turrets and towers to hail the blue expanse of the sky! Fearless, I flew over the vast expanse of the earth below [...] the guards flailing their arms but failing to reach out and catch me (Pritam 10).

The image of captivity-freedom appears to capture well her predicament as poet. Throughout her autobiography, she speaks of her encounter with the adverse but eventually ineffective literary-critical circles around her, and of her re-emergence with greater literary vigour. In a dream which “lived” with her for several years, she is fleeing a crowd of people pursuing her wildly. The chased and the chaser arrive at a river. The pursuers are jubilant now as there is the river blocking their way. But then, she walks over the water as the flowing water takes on a “strange solidity” to facilitate her walk. “The crowd would come to a dead
stop. They would stand on the bank and scowl and growl and clench and thrust their fist out [...] But I had escaped them all” (Pritam 11).

Amrita’s refusal to be captive to convention expresses itself in a number of ways. It expresses itself in her early denial of God. It expresses itself in her childhood in her insistence to drink water from any of the “three tumblers meant for the Muslim visitors to her house. After the Muslim friends were served buttermilk or tea in those cups, they were promptly “scrubbed and washed and put right back in their ostracised niche” (Pritam 5). Her non-conformity finds expression in the way she gets herself out of her mismatched marriage. “We were far too immature when we were married”, she says. The laws relating to marriage are above “codes of law”. She is clearly aware of this truth. It needs exceptional wisdom and courage to say that sanctity of marriage and separation does not get limited to law-courts. “When the parting came”, observes Amrita, “the truth that had to be faced by both of us was stronger than any ‘code of law’” (Pritam 30). It is with extraordinary humility and concern for the “fellow-traveller” (marriage-partner) that Amrita speaks of the parting:

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.

We still met but like friends, fully aware that loneliness cannot be got over with such meetings. I bow my head low before anyone who has to bear the curse of solitude [...] (Pritam 30).

Her non-conformity shows itself in the way she lives, without marriage with Imroz; it shows in her love for Sahir Ludhianvi; and in her smoking and drinking habits (She was no slave to addiction, though).

Nowhere in the autobiography is there a flaunting of the spirit of revolt. On the other hand the reader is impressed by the humane attitude accompanying the rebellion. The best illustration of this would be the very choice of the title. She articulates in her Prologue, the reasons for the title. Very calmly she first brushes aside Khushwant’s malicious remark to her (‘What is there to your life [...]? ... You could use the back of a revenue stamp to write it.’): “It is the kind of thing one might expect from Khushwant Singh.” Next, she reveals that she has recognized fully the sharpness of the sting: “A revenue stamp mind you! Other stamps come in different sizes. A revenue stamp is always the same size, the smallest.” Finally comes the reaction:
“May be there was something to what Khushwant Singh said ...

... Still I thought I might write a few lines—something to complete the account book of my life and at the end, seal it with a revenue stamp as it were” (Pritam Prologue).

Revenue Stamp contains a chapter, “The Phoenix Dynasty” which could be considered as Amrita Pritam’s philosophy of Resilience. Does not the phoenix that “rises again and again from its own ashes” stand for resilience of the ultimate kind? After giving the basic information that “the phoenix is also associated with the cult of sun worship, the sun that rises and sets” (Pritam 126), she goes on to declare: “The best writers in the world ... consume themselves in the fire of creation and rise again from the ashes to take on new images” (Pritam 127). Amrita quotes profusely from her own poems to show her preoccupation with sun-imagery. “The sun touches my innermost depths” (Pritam 134), she declares. She is fascinated by a version of phoenix from Greek Passion. This is the case of a shepherd boy who is cast for the role of Christ. The boy, in order to achieve total identification with the role, practises intense spiritual exercises, and achieves success to a high degree. But this only earns for him the villagers’ antagonism. “He fights against wrong and injustice and provokes the
villagers to the point of stoning him to death.” The only
man in the village who has “grasped the truth” of the
shepherd boy’s character takes the body up a hill for
burial, and says: “His name is inscribed in the snows of
today that will melt tomorrow and course it down the
streams and rivers” (Pritam 145). Amrita uses this to
describe her own self:

I could well say as much for myself. Whatever I
had in me has been buried under the snow [...] that
will course down streams and rivers when the snows
melt. Then will come into the world those who will
have faith in the word they write with new pens
[...] and in the intensity of the ideas that move
their pens they will reappear in that part of me
that is being buried in the silence of the snows.
(Pritam 146)

Throughout her autobiography she keeps referring to
the—mostly unjustified—antagonism with which the
literary world of Punjab regarded her. An example should
suffice to convey her sense of hurt. This happens when
she is member of the Sahitya Akademi. A certain literary
figure (he is not named) manages to get some support from
the Akademi Award Committee. Amrita’s assessment of the
man’s literary merits is different, and so does not cast
her vote in his favour. The man starts vituperative
attacks on her in newspapers, accuses her of plagiarism, and finally, his “sense of revenge” takes “a more vulgar form” (Pritam 84):

Holding a glass of liquor high in the air he danced a jig at the house of another contemporary and jubilantly proclaimed; ‘I’ve got her [...] I’ve got her [...] for three years! I’ve been elected to the Bharatiya Jnanapith Committee for three years. I’ll lay a wager [...]. The Award won’t go to her during this tenure of mine.’

Another of his cronies joined in. ‘We’ve got her [...] We’ve got her for five years!’ And he informed the revellers: ‘Amrita would be completing her term as a member of the Sahitya Academi Executive this year. She can’t have another term under the rules. We’ll see that this road too is blocked for her [...]!’ (Pritam 84-85)

From the very early pages of her autobiography she records the literary malevolence that surrounded her, and it is possible to see in Amrita a certain unjustified touchiness when it comes to adverse criticism. In a long wrangle it is quite possible for one to imbibe—to a little extent at least—the ugly expressions of the adversaries. The autobiography can appear as a long and bitter recollection of the hectoring and intimidation by
many of her contemporaries. She quotes from her own poem twice in the work:

I have many contemporaries,

I alone am not contemporaneous with myself.

(Pritam 136)

The feeling that one’s literary achievement is undervalued is perhaps not very rare among writers. But in Amrita Pritam this belief is extraordinarily strong. When she thought of writing a film-script based on her novel *A Line in Water*, she comments that she received a “candid and well-considered advice” from Revti Saran Sharma: “No! the novel has appeared a century too soon. The Indian mind is not yet ready to grasp it fully” (Pritam 142). She also says in her autobiography: “My poetry does not fit into the pattern of any of the usual Kavi Durbars. That is why I do not take much interest in these poetry recitation sessions” (Pritam 66).

The abundant references in *Revenue Stamp* to the adverse criticism—by mostly Punjabi writers—go along with the strong suggestion that Amrita Pritam considered her works to be too unconventional for the existing literary tradition, and that her works appeared much before their time to be accorded the reception they deserved.
One gets the feeling on reading *Revenue Stamp* that if adverse criticism targeted her 'personal' life, it was inevitable, since Amrita Pritam almost always saw her works in terms of her own life and vice versa. A few examples should make clear Amrita Pritam’s habit of juxtaposing her own life and the ‘self-reading’ of her works.

(a) After completing *Yatri*, a novella, she reads it to Imroz. In a long passage, she dwells on the identification of herself with Sunderan the central character: “A lump came into my throat on the mere mention of her name” (Pritam 97). Such is her identification with the character that she says: “I had tears in my eyes when I came to write about her” (Pritam 96).

(b) Recollection of a tragic event in her own novel *Ik Saval* makes her remember vividly an event in her life:

I was not exactly eleven years old when mother died. I have the last day of her life clear in my mind. I remember having stood the way Jagdeep ... stands beside his dying mother’s bed.

And like Jagdeep, Since I had prayed with all my heart and soul, ‘Please do not take Ma away ...’ I was fully confident she would not be taken away.
God heeded a child’s prayers, did He not [...]? But mother died. I lost my trust in God.

And just as Jagdeep hides the chappatis made by his mother, ‘I’ll eat these bit by bit [...] day after day [...] I too carefully crushed the dried up chappatis and preserved them in a box as long as I could.(Pritam 98)

What is curious is that a considerable part of Amrita’s autobiography appears to emerge from her fictional world! She does mention various instances of her experience entering her literary world—which is what readers can readily understand—but it is unconventional that in many ways her own life should issue from her fiction/poetry. The following episode should add to the intriguing phenomena. After the novel Jebkatre gets published,

... Savita and Ravi [friends of Amrita’s son Navraj] whose marriage is described in it at some length, came to see my son and also met me. They were amused to read about themselves while I was as intrigued seeing my characters from my books stepping out to confront me. (Italics added, Pritam 106)

Again, with Alka, the heroine of A Line in Water, Amrita says she “discovered complete identification” (143). The hero of the novel tells the heroine that every
time he visited a woman for gratification of his baser needs, he paid her some money, whereupon the heroine “wistfully suggests: ‘If only I could be the one!’” (Pritam 142) Amrita becomes deeply introspective:

Imroz had been retelling some difficult moments of his life to me, one of which was as illustrated in the novella. It had produced from me the same reaction in exactly the same words

Only Amrita could have said what Alka said. I recognized my own self then. No other woman could have had the courage [...] (Italics added, Pritam 142-43)

One must not read that this effect on Amrita is at the time of writing the novel. The effect is after reading it her feelings and thoughts issue from the book as it were.

This aspect of Amrita Pritam—the juxtaposition of the factual and the fictional so as to grasp her life as emerging from the literary world—is indeed fascinating. The discussion of this aspect should extend to the references involving her children. When her son is born, she looks at the child’s face with the face of Sahir Ludhianvi in her mind. That is because she had read somewhere that a child’s mind and development is shaped by the mother’s thoughts! It is a very bold thing for a married woman to say that in her pregnancy she was
concentrating only on her lover’s face, but that is not the precise subject now; it is the juxtaposition of the factual and the imaginative. Once, Sahir taking Amrita’s attentive daughter in his lap tells a story. “Once a woodcutter, who chopped wood of the forest by day and night ... caught sight of a lovely princess and wanted to run away with her.” What happened next?—is the child’s curious question. Sahir completes the story:

And the woodcutter stood at a distance, gazing with the eyes of wonder at the princess and then he sadly got back to hacking and chopping the wood.

(Pritam 109)

Doesn’t the child think it is a true story, asks Sahir? The child’s answer is most interesting: “[...] I saw it all with my own eyes” (Pritam 109). Sahir poses another question: “You were there in the wood weren’t you?” The child nods her head in affirmation. He prompts her again with a question: “You saw the woodcutter as well did you? Who was he?” The child’s answer is surprising: “You.” “And who was the princess is Sahir’s concluding question. “Mamma”, replies she with a chuckle. (Pritam 109)

Amrita Pritam’s autobiography is permeated through and through with such instances of the emergence of the
real from her own literary world. She also includes many dreams in this process.

Amrita Pritam’s autobiography is heavily punctuated by references to the emergence of the actual world from her own literary realm. Dreams are liberally employed in the process. In this play of the ‘actual’ and the ‘literary’, the literary it is that prevails over the other:

In the totality of myself as a writer, the woman in me has only a secondary role to play. So often have I nudged myself into an awareness of the woman in me. (Pritam 26)

She recollects that in the course of her life only three times did the woman in her surface over the writer.

The first time was when I was twenty-five years of age. I had no child until then. Very often I dreamt of one: a fair face with finely chiselled features looking into my eyes. I began to recognise it after its repeated appearances. I used to dream of it speaking to me—so I began recognize the voice as well. In one of those dreams I was watering plants. From one of those pots, instead of a flower, the face would suddenly spring up. Aghast, I would ask: ‘Where were you?’ ‘Right here!’ He would break
out into laughter with the reply. And I would hurriedly lift the little one from the pot.

But when I would wake up, I would find myself all alone—a woman in name, who if she could not become a mother, could find no meaning at all in existence [...]. (Pritam 26)

The second time the woman in her emerges is when she applies Vicks on Sahir’s throat and chest when he is down with fever and breathing problem. She says: “I went on and on, as if I could spend the rest of my life doing it. The mere contact had magnetically rendered me into a mere woman, with no need at all for paper or pen” (Pritam 26).

The other time the woman in her surfaces over the writer is when she is with Imroz:

The third time the woman in me came to the forefront was when Imroz sat once, working on his studio. On completion of the canvas, he dipped the brush into the red paint and with the tip of it, dabbed a mark on my forehead. (Pritam 27)

What is remarkable is that there Amrita asserts that there was no conflict whatsoever between her identity as a writer and her identity as a woman:

The secondary role as a woman, however, rakes up no quarrels with my main being as a writer. Rather, the woman in me has in a disciplined manner
learnt to accept that secondary role. Only three times over the year did she wish to assert herself and the writer move aside to make way for her.

(Pritam 27)

It would not perhaps be improper to borrow the term “neutral territory” from Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* to describe Amrita Pritam’s autobiography. Hawthorne uses the term to define “Romance”; but the expression serves well to describe a distinguishing quality of Amrita’s autobiographical work. The woman and the writer meet there to make a covenant as it were. This is the meeting ground of the factual and the imaginative/poetic/ fictional. In a section subtitled “Truth and the Author” Amrita informs us that her story, *Adalat* was all about her friend Dhuswan Swamy who was a writer, diplomat and Cultural Secretary at the Nepalese Embassy in New Delhi. Amrita’s novel was “about him and his own particular condition” (Pritam 111). She informs Dhuswan about it when the book is in press. The name of the country, “Nepal”, which was to be printed at the end of the story, is changed to “Assam” instead. This she does, because “envisioning the possibility of trouble for him if he (Dhuswan) allowed the fact to be divulged, he sought the deletion of the reference to his country.” But then Dhuswan writes a note, permitting her to include at the
relevant place” whenever she ‘chose’ to write her autobiography, the following note:

This story is based on Dhuswan—but the respected Cultural Counsellor is so faint of heart that in the earlier publication his country of origin was concealed. (Pritam 111)

Adalat, reports Amrita, had “such a deep effect on him that he read it out to his wife, as well as to his girlfriend” (Pritam 112).

One final example is here provided to substantiate the view that the real and the imaginative in Amrita Pritam’s case meet in a neutral territory, which is her autobiography. Amrita prefaces the following account with a question: “How does one get obsessed with truth from alien lands that it becomes part of one’s own being?” Then she proceeds to narrate a dream she had when she fell asleep while reading the Mahabharata. In that dream a dove chased by a hawk descends in to her lap seeking her protection. The pursuing hawk demands that the dove be released, or that she yields a piece of her (Amrita’s) equivalent flesh for non compliance. Amrita agrees to give her own flesh equalling the dove’s weight. Alarmingly, the dove gets heavier and heavier. Finally she almost loses her life. But the story’s significance for Amrita is interesting:
Then the revelation came to me [...] the dove had symbolized the pen and the courageous resistance I had put up was against forces trying to snatch it from my grip. (Pritam 141)

She wakes up to find the Mahabharata open at the page ... where the Fire God goes in the guise of a dove to Raja Usheenar for protection, but the latter prefers to give himself up to the hawk rather...” (Pritam 141).
Works Cited


Notes and Reference

Except the Prologue the quotations from Revenue Stamp are from the 1998 edition of Amrita Pritam’s autobiography, which does not include the author’s Prologue. The Prologue is to be found in the 1977 edition. Both versions are translated by Krishna Gorovara; and are published by Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi. The 1977 edition carries the Prologue without the last chapter, and the 1998 edition does not show the Prologue.

* A novel by Kazantzakis.
Faustina Bama (1961- )

Faustina Bama writes to share her dalit experience and to create awareness in society. Her Karukku was a major milestone; for the first time in the history of Tamil literature a Dalit woman was speaking in her voice about the experience of being Dalit. The first text to explore the connections between caste, religion and Tamil identity, Karukku drew a range of reactions from literary circles. It received accolades as well as caustic criticism; was dismissed as mere reportage as well as hailed as literary landmark. Karukku is also translated into French. In 2000, it won the Crossword Award for translation.

Bama works as a teacher in Uttaran District of Tamilnadu. Bama has written around half-a-dozen of books including Karukku (1992), Sangati (1994), Kisumbakkaran and Vanmam and her latest novel is in press.