Chapter 7- Exploring the Self- Amrita Pritam’s

The Revenue Stamp

Amrita Pritam’s autobiography *The Revenue Stamp* innovatively projects the self. It narrates all the incidents without chronological order- the first chapter deals with the first sixteen years of her life (1919-1935), then jumps on to 1957 when she received the Sahitya Akademi award, back to the period of the Partition (1947), on to 1960 when she separated from Sahir Ludhiyanvi, back to 1959 when she was cheated by a girl of her ornaments, on to the pain of separation in 1960. Amrita Pritam seems to suddenly switch from one topic to another, which seems to be her way of catching the disorderliness of life- quite reminiscent of Virginia Woolf. The book has been divided into six chapters and each part has been further divided into a number of sub-parts. No effort has been made to establish any link in these chapters. The only exception to it is the chapter entitled as ‘In Silence Passion Smote’, which explores the link between her subconscious mind and her writings. At the end of the earlier chapter, she writes a paragraph, which serves as a prelude for the next chapter-

Incidents one has witnessed, heard, or gone through, sometimes find their way through the conscious self into creative work. At others they get submerged in the labyrinthine sub-conscious. And yet surprisingly, without your realizing it, the subconscious influences your imaginative concepts.
This disorderliness of the book makes the book an ‘anti-memoir’, as Michael Bejour would have liked to call it- ‘anti-memoir’ is something which follows a kind of dream-logic; weaving facts, memories, fantasies, analyses, arguments etc. With this unconventional way of self-projection, the book may be considered to be a landmark in the history of the Indian woman’s autobiography.

The small introduction of the book tells us about the genesis of the book. It tells us that when the writer planned to write her autobiography, Khushwant Singh made fun of the idea. He told her that her life was so small that it could be written on the overleaf of a revenue stamp. So the book was entitled as the Revenue Stamp. At the end of the book, the writer informs us that when she planned to write the book, some friends of hers advised her to get it published in all the languages except Punjabi- her own mother tongue – because they were apprehensive about its response. Still she decided to publish it in Punjabi because she felt that serious readers would hold it against her- she also could not bring herself to break away from them and from the mother tongue that she loved very much. So the book was first published in Punjabi as Rasidi Tikat in 1976 and then it was translated in other languages. The English version of the book- entitled as The Revenue Stamp- was published by Vikas Publishing House Pvt.Ltd. in 1977. The
second edition of the book- Life and Times- was published by the same publisher in 1989.

The book belongs to the post-Independence era, in which the condition of women has undergone a lot of changes and so some women have become very bold and assertive. Both the background of the book and its title reflect the boldness, frankness of the writer, and by implication, that of the modern women- she is willing to open the book of her life even though others may laugh at the very idea of her doing it. She is also ready to stand up to all the public censure it may invite. Similarly, however small and insignificant her life may appear to others, she herself considers it to be significant and worth telling about.

Amrita Pritam is a woman of wide intelligence that is shown by the perceptive remarks she makes at times. When asked about what the word ‘freedom’ means to her, she replies,

the system of government that gives meaning to the life of the commonest man, but without snatching away anyone’s individuality.  

At another place, she defines Truth with equal clarity-

Truth to me is honest thought that brings about harmony between the body and the mind… like in a well-tuned musical instrument.

It is significant to note that she has tried to concretise even abstract and vague concepts like ‘freedom’ and ‘truth’. Such remarks give us glimpses
into her thinking and reflective mind, which makes her writing philosophical.

She has a lot of love for nature. Thus, she simply embraces branches, laden with leaves and flowers, which subtly reveals an aspect of her own personality—she has a passion for life. The sun also seems to hold a strange fascination for her—she has devoted a large part of a chapter to a long list of lines from her poems to show how the image of the sun has been recurrently occurring in her poetry right from her adolescence. This love for the sun also subtly reveals some aspects of her personality—according to the archetypal theory, as both the sun and the woman stand for creativity, a woman is naturally attracted towards the sun. Similarly, according to the archetypal theory, the sun represents the conscious while the woman represents the unconscious and as opposite poles attract each other, she is naturally attracted towards it. Thus, the book reveals different interesting aspects of the man-nature relationship.

According to the archetypal theory, the self is made up of the elements inherited from the father and the mother. Her father is a famous poet and with her upbringing, she starts writing poetry at an early age. She seems to have inherited love for literature from her father. She is a well-read woman and her writing shows her scholarship. While telling us that her relations with Sahir Ludhiyanvi continued to be cordial even after their
parting, she cites the example of Betty Collins, an Australian writer, who had maintained cordial relations with her divorced husband and his second wife. All such references relate her to the general experiences of women at large. Her father inculcates respect for the written word in her mind and so she also holds literature and writers with respect all her life, even though this respect seems to diminish after undergoing some unsavory experiences of her contemporary writers. Literature always remains something sacred for her- she considers it a means of studying life. She does not use her talents as a writer for maligning or flattering anyone. While serving on the executive body of Sahitya Akadamy, she has been often called up by people to request her to cast a vote for this book or that one. She often tells such callers that she will cast a vote only for the book that she finds worthy of it. It is her passion for literature which takes her to various countries like Russia, Bulgaria, Egypt, Rumania, learn their languages, read their literature and meet with their writers and poets.

Her father is initially an ascetic, known as ‘Nand Sadhu’ but later on gets infatuated by the beauty of her mother and marries her. Amrita Pritam inherits both asceticism and worldliness from him. She has a streak of spirituality in her personality. At the age of eleven, her faith in God is shaken because God fails to save her mother. Even then her fascination with the Divine continues all her life. She sees the Divine in everything beautiful
that she sees in life and seems to enjoy His presence in it. As mentioned earlier, in the opinion of Jung, in women, the positive father complex can induce ‘the liveliest spiritual aspirations and interests’ and the same seems to have happened with Amrita Pritam. Of course, her spirituality does not make her indifferent to worldly life. Once she gives her ornaments to a girl at the time of the latter’s marriage but the girl refuses to part with the ornaments later on. This deception seems to rankle in her mind- she can not dismiss the loss of her ornaments as a fruit of her past ‘karma’, as a true spiritualist would do.

Self-respect is yet another quality that she inherits from her father. Her first book of poems appears at the age of sixteen and she receives an award of a sari from the Maharani and two hundred rupees from the Maharaja of Kapurthala by post. When the postman comes the next time, she rushes to the door in anticipation of another award. The father frowns to see this and this frown accompanies her all her life. Never does she run after prizes or honors in her life- the love of her readers is the only thing that she always values.

Apart from inheriting so much from her father, like all daughters, she has a lot of love for the father. She projects the father image upon Gurubakshsingh, an eminent Punjabi writer. Even then she does not blindly go in for all the values of the father. In her, the father complex does not
assume the negative form of considering the father to be ‘eternally right in everything’. As a child, she has an ‘animus’, which she calls as ‘Rajan’, who often appears in her dreams. It is rather surprising that she should have ‘animus’ even before her coming of age but this may be explained with the help of the Jungian concept of archetypes that they are ‘self-portraits’. As she loses her mother at the age of ten and as with his strict nature, the father can not be a good companion for her, her instinct for companionship seems to have remained unfulfilled and this instinct seems to have found expression in her animus. Her father makes her participate in the recitation of ‘kirtan sohile’ every night- he believes that the recitation will serve like a protective fort for her in the sleep. With her wild childish imagination, she fears that if such a fort has been erected around her in the night, ‘Rajan’ will not able to penetrate it and appear in her dreams. She uses a trick to avoid this- she deliberately omits some lines of ‘kirtan sohile’. Then the father makes herself recite ‘kirtan sohile’ completely, which makes it difficult for her to omit some of its lines . She uses another trick to counter this- she meditates over ‘Rajan’ before reciting ‘kirtan sohile’, so that Rajan can appear in her dreams. At the age of eleven, she loses her faith in prayers and meditation but her father makes her meditate. So she meditates- not over God but over ‘Rajan’. Thus, even as a child, she has her own will.
If she silently rebels against the father, she openly rebels against the grandmother. Amrita Pritam’s grandmother, who is very orthodox by nature, uses separate tumblers for Hindus and Muslims for having tea or coffee. Amrita insists upon having milk only through the tumblers meant for Muslims. When the father comes to know about this, he makes the grandmother discontinue with the practice of using different tumblers for different communities.

The age of sixteen makes her more non-conformist by nature. In that year, her childhood innocence gives way to awareness of sexual needs. As Jung points out,

> The father is the representative of the spirit, whose function is to oppose pure instinctuality. That is his archetypal role, which falls to him regardless of his personal qualities.  

Apart from being a ‘representative of the spirit’, Amrita Pritam’s father is also a religious leader and a former ascetic and so he consummately plays this archetypal role, trying to suppress her sexual instincts. Consequently while she feels like writing love poetry, her father wants her to write religious poetry only. Unfortunately, she has no mother around to help and guide her in this turbulent phase of life. She has only her father around and he merely tries to thrust the dosage of ‘don’ts’ down her throat. Her father exercises what in Jung’s terminology would be ‘repressive authority’ over
her. All these factors seem to have made her more unconventional by nature. At the age of sixteen, she does not have much courage to fight against what she questions - she tears down her love-poems with the fear that her father will not approve of them. Later on she has the guts to break social conventions. Her ‘animus’ is a person who can be everything - a father, a brother, a friend, a God for her. ‘Rajan’, her animus in the childhood, is something like a God for her, as she meditates over him but he is also something like a brother, a father, a friend for her because he plays with her, tells her stories, draws pictures and sings songs for her. She seems to project this ‘animus’ upon other males. She seems to have left her first husband because he does not fit in with her ‘animus’. Then she has the guts to marry a Muslim like Sahir Ludhiyanvi and to project her ‘animus’ upon him. She also has the courage to leave him when she finds that even he does not fit in with her ‘animus’, though she continues to love him silently even after the separation. She is an affectionate mother, who is mightily thrilled when she hears the voice of her son on the phone in Egypt. Yet her love for the children does not prevent her from parting ways from Sahir, though it causes a number of problems for them. This shows that in spite of being a sensitive woman and an affectionate mother, she has strength of mind and firm determination. She reminds one of the Sanskrit saying, ‘Vajradapi kathorani, kusumadapi komalam’. Finally, at the age of thirty-eight, she
finds a person who fits in with her ‘animus’- Imroz, who becomes everything- a father, a brother, a friend and a God for her. Thus, her restless spirit does not let her rest till she has found the person who fits in with her idea of an ideal man. In this matter, she is more unconventional than Kamla Das, who does not go in for a divorce even after she finds that her husband is not able to love her. She is a loving wife for Imroz- even though the latter loses Rs.20,000/- in his batik experiments and laughs off the loss, she is proud of his courage which can laugh off such a loss. Yet her love for Imroz does not deter her from living apart from him for three years when she finds that she can not get on well with him. She drinks and smokes, which is not an accepted norm for women in the Indian society. She asserts her freedom in writing by writing whatever she likes, least concerned about what others think of it.

Significantly enough, it is only rarely that she needs the help of ‘the wise old man’ while rebelling against the father or social conventions. When she falls in love with Imroz, she is once in a desolate mood as she does not know whether she should marry him or not. She seeks guidance from Gurubakshsingh but he fails to give her the proper advise. Then her desolation gives her the strength to find the way out. This is the only occasion when she needs the help of ‘the wise old man’ and then too she can do without it.
Though non-conformist in many ways, she seems to be conventional in certain matters. At a place, after telling us,

I am a chain-smoker. I love a drop of whisky too, occasionally. Indeed, I sometimes have a craving for it,

she hastens to add,

But I am not an addict and I do not drink every day. I am acutely aware of the prevailing attitudes towards a woman who smokes and drinks.

Then she goes on to give some kind of religious veneer to her drinking and smoking-

After all, I was born in a Sikh family. When a plate of sweet, semolina ‘halwa’ is placed in offering before the great Sikh book ‘Guru Granth Sahib’ the blade of a sword is passed through it. Thereupon, the simple ‘halwa’ becomes ‘kraah prasad’ which is distributed to congregation. Similarly, the cigarette between my fingers or the glass of drink in my hands transform themselves into something purer. The intensity of my thoughts is cut through as with the blade of a sword: and my thoughts, like the ‘halwa’ that is transformed into ‘prasad’, are then ready for distribution. ⁶

All this suggests that in her heart of hearts, she has a sense of guilt for smoking and drinking, but she seems to be unable to acknowledge it. Just like Kamla Das, she seems to be unable to bring about a consummate reconciliation between her traditional and modern selves.

Even though she can do without the help of ‘the wise old man’ while breaking social conventions, she does not seem to do without ‘a persona’. 
Thus, her sensitive heart gets desolate after parting ways from Sahir. Then she recalls a scene from an English movie, in which Queen Elizabeth gets desolate while watching her lover and his girl-friend, parting from her by a ship. A well-wisher tells the Queen, ‘Madam, look a bit higher’. The Queen looks a bit higher and sees her flag fluttering above the lover and his girl-friend. Similarly, Amrita Pritam also tells herself to look ‘a bit higher’ and finds her stories and poems above all the problems and defeats in her life. It means that she wears the ‘persona’ of a great writer to somehow salvage her ego. As usual with persons wearing a ‘persona’, she identifies herself with it and considers herself a great writer. So in spite of her spirituality, she seems to suffer from superiority complex, which finds expression in the hyperbolic claims she makes about herself like

I am proud of my existence. If the earth of Punjab is like a poem, I am the meaning of the poem. Wherever in the world a wrong is done, I continue to feel a deep sense of outrage.

Her tall claim that a glass of wine or a cigarette become ‘something purer’ in her hands shows her bloated ego. Her claim regarding a bold statement made by Alka, one of her fictional characters, also reflects her vanity—

Only Amrita could have said what Alka said. No other woman could have had the courage...

This overestimation of the self seems to make it difficult for her to cope with others, which could be the reason for the failure of her first two
marriages. Her conceit also gives her a tendency to heavily come down upon her critics. Despite her spirituality, she does not seem to be able to receive bouquets and brickbats with equanimity. She seems to admire those who have admired her and criticize those who have criticized her.

In this way, the self-portrait is very comprehensive but as the writer has not fully dealt with her matrimonial experiences, her different roles like that of a wife and a mother are not fully explored.

The self-portrait has been drawn with some honesty, which has been marred by her tendency to make hyperbolic claims about herself. At a place, she claims,

If no one had benefitted from my stories and poems, so what? I did not expect any recognition for my work. 10

but the book shows that she values recognition very much. She has made a point to record facts like 15 books of hers have been published in Urdu, 3 in Kannada, 2 in Gujrati, 2 in Marathi, 2 in Malayalam and all that she has written has appeared in Hindi. She has also made a point to record all the compliments that have come her way. In a part of a chapter called ‘Meeting with Centuries’, she has recorded all the complimentary letters she has received from others. So her claim that she did not expect any recognition for her work does not carry conviction.
Amrita Pritam's egoism also occasionally misleads her into giving the reader the impression that her life is so great that the reader may not understand it properly. After narrating the unusual way in which the wedding of her son was celebrated, she states,

These are but some pages from the book of life...fully comprehensible only to those who have borne the heat of the sun and have been frozen by the cold of the winter and who have known the strength that comes from facing life with fortitude.  

On the same page, she quotes a statement by Basu Bhattacharya regarding his poverty,

As lord and master of my own home it will not cross the threshold... without my permission! How could it dare to?

and goes on to say-

I too think whatever I am churning out of my mind is really for those who steadfastly change conventional norms, and form new patterns of life with truth alone as their beacon-light.

The self-portrait reflects a lot of self-development but the book does not trace her development as a writer or a poetess. In this matter, the book may not bear comparison with R.K.Narayan’s autobiography My Days, in which Narayan tells us how his literary perceptions matured while reading book reviews-

Gradually I began not only to read all the novels in the library but also to acquire through the book
reviews a critical sense, so that a certain degree of tempering occurred in my early enthusiasms for some writers- such as Marie Corelli, for instance.\textsuperscript{13}

Narayan also tells us how he learnt something about writing while working upon his first novel \textit{Swami and Friends}.

I reread the first draft at night to make out how it was shaping and undertook, until far into the night, corrections, revisions, and tightening up of sentences. I began to notice that the sentences acquired a new strength and finality while being rewritten, and the real, final version could emerge only between the original lines and then again in the jumble of rewritten lines, and above and below them.\textsuperscript{14}

All such indications of literary development are conspicuous by absence in Amrita Pritam's book.

\ \textit{Amrita Pritam occasionally tries to probe her subconscious mind. She offers a psychological explanation for her beginning to write- her father wanted to again go in for renunciation after the death of her mother. He could not do so because of his love for Amrita Pritam. So she was both accepted and rejected in turn by him. He desired his daughter to be a poetess and it was in order to forget those moments of rejection that she felt in him that she probably began to write. Amrita Pritam also tries to trace the motivation for her writing all her life-}

That is why perhaps I have written all my life- so that whatever I could not accept in me, I would in time not reject altogether.\textsuperscript{15}
Similarly, Amrita Pritam has tried to probe the link between her subconscious mind and her writings. She tells us that she has subconsciously projected her own self in Sunderan, the heroine of her novella ‘Yatri’, and her father in Mahant Kirpa Sagar in the same novel. She also tells us how some experiences of her own life have subconsciously found their way in her writings.

Amrita Pritam has also described some of her dreams in vivid details, without trying to interpret them. She tells us that two dreams have been very dear to her. The first one is that she is a prisoner in a green big dark castle and armed guards stand without. She looks in vain for a door that will open at her touch. In the murkiness overwhelming her, she gropes about, but the strong walls of rock do not melt or fade away. She flaps and flutters her arms till she falls down breathless. Then she feels her feet rising above the ground and flows over the vast expanse of the earth below. The guards flail their arms but fail to reach out and catch her. This dream shows her subconscious belief that though her restless, rebellious spirit may get trapped in the stranglehold of traditions, it can get rid of that stranglehold after a lot of efforts. Her rising up above the earth may indicate her spiritual aspirations—her desire to rise up above earthly life. It may also indicate her superiority complex—her idea of having something divine about her.
The second dream is that there is a crowd of people wildly pursuing her and she is fleeing them and then she sights a river. Her pursuers are wildly jubilant, as they feel that now she can not get away from them. However, she calmly walks over the water- the flow of the river takes on a strange solidity and gives support to her feet. The crowd just stands on the bank and scowls and growls and clenches and thrusts their fists out. This dream shows her feeling that while traditionalists are out to trap her, she can always escape from their clutches. As in the earlier dream, her calmly walking over the water may indicate her idea that she has got some kind of supernatural powers. They may suggest that she wants some kind of magic wand to save her. Both the dreams may hint at her sense of guilt for rejecting social conventions or her trying to be a conqueror in a dream. These dreams may reflect her troubled, restless spirit, caught in the cage of earthly life or blind traditionalism.

The character of Imroz, her third husband, has been drawn quite comprehensively. Imroz, as the book projects him, is a creative person, a man of courage, a lover of poetry, a generous man and a loving husband. The portrait has been also delineated with some objectivity. Thus, in spite of revealing his creativity or generosity, things like his not being able to create a great work of art or his occasional quarrels with her have not been hidden or glossed over.
The number of other characters in the book is large and they include even foreign writers and poets but they have not been dealt with very comprehensively. The only two characters that stand out are Amrita Pritam’s father and Sajjad, her friend from Pakistan. Sajjad is a very graceful man—when he ascends a stair case, it seems that grace itself is walking up with him. He loves Amrita Pritam but that love is without lust. He considers her to be a Goddess - even the very name ‘Amrita’ is something sacred for him.

Some of the incidents are parallel or contrasting to each other. The writer’s father, for example, entrusts a chest full of jewellery and gold ‘mohurs’ to a woman before going abroad. On his return from abroad, the woman blandly asks him, ‘Which chest?’. This incident is parallel to the writer’s being cheated of her ornaments by a girl. Both these incidents are contrasting to another incident- at the time of the writer’s first marriage, the bridegroom’s party gives a message to the bridegroom’s that it needs so many thousands as a part of the dowry. The writer’s father does not have that much money on hand. A friend of the writer’s mother gets to know about it. She removes all the gold bangles she has on her hands and places them before the writer’s father. Being thus parallel or contrary to each other, these incidents light up each other. All the incidents have been narrated evocatively, though in a cold, analytical style. Similarly, the narration has an
occasional touch of humor. While telling us about the shirts made by her husband, for example, Amrita Pritam says,

An American woman took a fancy to them. Alas, she insisted on trying one out on her own body which was not exactly the Urdu poet's idea of the form of his beloved. How she managed to get inside that shirt I do not know. But presently, she screamed for help. She was having trouble wriggling herself out of it, 'Pl-e-e-ase get me out of this!'

The style is highly but unartificially poetic. The book has a number of similes, derived from different fields. There are some few archetypal images—she compares her sixteenth year with 'apsaras' breaking the peace of meditating sages. At the beginning of a chapter dealing with her conflict with contemporary writers and critics, she calls upon all right-thinking people to join her side just like Yudhishtira asking all right-thinking people to join his side before the war of Kurukshetra. This primordial image could have appealed to her mind because just like the battleground of Kurukshetra, where the mighty army of the Kauravas was pitted against the relatively smaller army of the Pandavas, her mind is also a battleground where her spirituality is pitted against the mighty pulls of earthly life. Thus, the range of these similes is wide. Most of these similes have some freshness and originality about them. At a place, she compares the years that have passed with the tattoos that remain permanently tattooed on the body. The book also has a lot of metaphors. Just like the similes, the metaphors are also wide in
range. At a place, for example, she calls all genuine writers of the world as those belonging to the caste of Pheoneticians, as just like Pheonix, writers burn themselves up in the act of creation and then rise up from their own ashes. The use of the archetypal image of pheonix, which belongs to the universal collective consciousness, shows the expanding world of the modern woman. As with similes, most of the metaphors are fresh and original- she uses the sixteenth year as a metaphor for anger for everything that comes in the way of the implementation of a good idea.

In conclusion, it can be said that the book is remarkable for its interesting self-portrait and the portrait of the husband as well as innovative narrative-technique and unartificially poetic language-style. In view of all this, it seems to be difficult to agree with Prema Nandkumar when in her review of the Indian English literary scene 1977 in Indian Literature, she comments on the book,

The Revenue Stamp by Amrita Pritam belied expectations. The celebrated novelist-poetess of Punjab was constant to do a ‘confessional’ of her extra-marital affairs with Sahir Ludhiyanvi and Imroz.¹⁷

This view is not acceptable on two counts- in the first place, Amrita has married both Sahir Ludhiyanvi and Imroz and so the book is far from being a ‘confessional of extra-marital affairs’. Secondly, the book does not offer just a ‘confessional of extra-marital affairs’- it has to offer something far
more than that. It is an innovative articulation of a restless self. One of the limitations of the book is that barring the matters of her going in for writing and continuing with it all her life, the writer has not tried to trace the subconscious motives behind her other actions and decisions. The next chapter will deal with a book, which more profoundly explores the self.
References

1 Amrita Pritam. *Life and Times*. Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1989. (Subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition)

2 Ibid. 81.

3 Ibid. 80.

4 Ibid. 67.


7 Ibid. 109.

8 Ibid. 12.

9 Ibid. 125.

10 Ibid. 56.

11 Ibid. 94.

12 Ibid. 94.


14 Ibid. 101


16 Ibid. 69.