CHAPTER - III

AMRITA PRITAM AS A WRITER AND FEMININE SENSIBILITY IN HER FICTION
Amrita Pritam as a Writer and Feminine Sensibility in her Fiction

Society attacks anyone who dares to say its coins are counterfeit, but when it is a woman who says this, society begins to foam at the mouth. It puts aside all its theories and arguments and picks up the weapon of filth to fling at her.

(Amrita Pritam in Women Writing in India, Vol II)

Amrita Pritam is counted among the greatest of Punjabi writers that the Punjabi motherland has ever produced. She has taken Punjabi Literature to new heights and set such standards that are hard to beat. She is credited to be the first prominent woman Punjabi poet, novelist, short-story writer and essayist who migrated to India from Lahore after India and Pakistan partition in the year 1947. As a poet or as a novelist or prose writer, Amrita Pritam never failed to provoke readers with her rebellious thoughts. In contemporary Punjabi literature, Amrita Pritam was/is an indisputable phenomenon who has no parallel. Her works have been truthful chronicles written with honesty and integrity. Her career spanned over six decades. No other woman has enriched the Punjabi literature as Amrita Pritam has, and her life itself is one long poem, a ceaseless quest for enduring human values.

Amrita was born in a traditional Sikh family on August 31st 1919, in Gujranwala, Punjab, now in Pakistan, the only child of a school teacher and a poet, she was brought up in Lahore. Her mother Raj Bibi, died when she was eleven and she grew up with adult responsibilities. Her father Kartar Singh Hitkari was a pracharak – a preacher of the Sikh faith. She began to write at an early age, and her first collection was published in 1935 when she was only sixteen years old, the year she married an editor Pritam Singh to whom she was engaged in her childhood. After mother’s death, Amrita Pritam and her father moved to Lahore. She had a distorted childhood. She began composing poems in her teens. Her earliest work was in praise of Sikh gurus and what they stood for. At a later adolescent stage, her poetry was something that her father despised thoroughly because of
its unconventional tone. What he anticipated from his exceptionally talented daughter was religious verse and not the sensuous and spontaneous outpourings of love.

In 1947, Amrita Pritam first rehabilitated at Deharadun and later moved to New Delhi, where she began to write in Hindi as opposed to Punjabi, her mother-tongue. She got a job in the Punjabi service of All India Radio. She sang popular folk songs in pursuit of a passion that never quite withered away. And she worked until 1961 for the All India Radio. She received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1956 for her seminal collection of poems, *Sunehra* (messages). Living in India she felt that it was about time to make a clean break from her past. So she was divorced in 1960. She composed her poem ‘Aj Akhan Waris Shah Nu’ (1947), addressed to the Sufi poet Waris Shah, author of the most famous tragic Punjabi saga of Heer and Ranjah. With this memorable lament ‘Ode to Waris Shah’, Amrita Pritam shot into fame in the Punjabi speaking world, both Pakistani and Indian. She never looked back. The ode expresses her anguish. After her divorce her work became more explicitly feminine, drawing on her unhappy marriage in many of her stories and poems. Later she found a complete companion in Imroz, the eminent Indian artist. He was her partner until her death on 31st October 2005 in New Delhi.

Amrita Pritam was the first important woman writer in Punjabi literature who has written novels, essays, poems and autobiographies and has explored and concentrated on women’s world stream literature. She has accentuated women’s experience under patriarchy and has brought the marginalized to the centre. Her writings have been sustained not only by private relations but also by social and national conditions that she observed with deep insight. In 1947, at the time of Partition of India when she shifted to Delhi, she witnessed the terrible atrocities that took place. The riots tortured her and shook to the very foundations the ideal world of her imagination. While the male writers of Punjabi literature were either keeping deliberate silence over the massacre by the name of religion or were involved with literary writings which had nothing to do with the communal riots, Amrita Pritam wrote about the sufferings of those who were abducted, raped and tortured in the name of religion. The scenes of fear and violence haunted her mind and found expression in poems like *Aj Akhan Waris Shah Nu* and novel *The Skeleton* (*Pinjar*). The social oppression of women that she perceived around her is the theme of most of her short stories including *Black Rose*, wherein she shares her agony
with her characters. She remarks, “I felt as though the whole of womankind had gathered together its mental anguish and moulded my soul from it” (Tharu 161).

By universal agreement, Amrita Pritam was and is regarded as Prima Donna of Punjabi letters in general and Punjabi poetry in particular. As a distinguished Punjabi poetess and writer of fiction her literary career was by and large coterminous with the literary history of the Punjabi language. Her contribution to the evolution of modern Punjabi literary sensibility is second to none. She was destined, as it were, to usher in a new era of opening up the Punjabi literary movement to the liberating influences both ideological and aesthetic in the wake of Indian national upsurge and internalizing the dynamic cross-currents of Indian culture which found expression in the quickening of the processes of secularization and liberalization of the national consciousness, accentuation of the clashes of values thrown up by a world torn asunder by its inner contradiction and the existentialist dilemma of the ‘dark night of the soul’. Her strength was in the authenticity of her experience and the challenging sincerity of her voice. But above all, she had intoned the long muted voice of the Indian woman seeking her human dignity.

Amrita Pritam, doyen of Indian Literature, had a spectacular career spread over half a century. As she was also a prominent public figure, her works received more than the normal attention paid to literature. The range of Amrita Pritam’s literary output is quite extensive. She had published more than eighty volumes, including novels, short story collections, autobiographies, folklore, editing, literary history and translations from various European and Indian languages. Most of her work has been translated into English and various European languages and in almost all the languages of India bringing her a much wider acclaim than available to any other Punjabi writer. Amrita Pritam’s extensive literary output is an impressive contribution to the Punjabi literature, both in range and depth. She has some fifteen anthologies of poetry, over twenty-eight novels and novellas, eighteen collections of short stories, twenty-three volumes of prose, two autobiographies, three self-narrative collection of prose articles of and several books of essays, travel diaries written over seven decades. With the voluminous bulk of notable literary works produced by her, Amrita Pritam established an unprecedented record in the annals of Punjabi literature.
After the legendary poet Sita-Kanta Mohapatra, Amrita Pritam’s works have been translated into several Indian and foreign languages, including English, Russian, French, Bulgarian, Yugoslavian, Polish, Spanish and Albanian. These translations of her works provide for many an access to her creative genius. She has been widely read nationally and internationally. The nuances of Punjabi and Hindi, so eminently and intuitively exploited by Amrita will continue to be a challenge for translators. She had been involved in international organizations like Afro-Asian writers Association; She had been a frequent visitor to foreign countries especially East Europe.

Amrita Pritam, was the first living poet, a woman at that, to have won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award from the President of India in 1956 for her book of poems, *Sunehra* (*Messages*). These poems born of intense passion and regard, strike a universal chord. *Sunehre* brought her the national and international fame at the young age of 37. Her first collection of Punjabi poems was published in 1935. Be it *Amrita Leharan, Kagaz Te Kanvas, Sunehre, Kal Chetna*, or any other poem volumes, she never failed in provoking readers with her rebellious thoughts. In 1969 she received the Padmashree and in 1982 got the Bharatiya Jnanpith award for her poems collection *Kagaz Te Kanvas*. Several honorary degrees by various universities had been conferred upon her. A Georgian composer dedicated his music to her. Her novels have been made into movies. Amrita Pritam was nominated to the Rajya Sabha in 1986, but was only too happy for the term to get over. She felt power games were not her cup of tea.

**Amrita Pritam as a Writer**

Amrita Pritam a poet, novelist and short-story writer “had many facets, nuances, shades, hues. . . trying to fathom her, understanding her has been like gathering feathers burst out open from a pillow, if one could be caught, the other eludes” (Prerna 57). Her poetry and fiction has such universal appeal that she was hailed as a major writer. Amrita was a rebellious thinker who with a recalcitrant personality, broke up with the existing ideology. Her writings include stories of emotional conflict, novels of metaphysical relationships and poems of intensified interpretations of human experiences. She wrote poems of immortality, of love-relations and about the love for immortalizing relations in
life. She had a high degree of emotional intelligence. She embodied the fullness of poetic expression, creativity and the intensity of a woman in the perpetual state of love. She expressed ‘free spirit’ in her works and this ‘spirit’ generated controversy through the course of her life, but she never concerned herself with the mundane. Her voice was rooted in the South-Asian idiom with all its contradictions, diversity and a faint recognition of fate. Her audience has been global.

Amrita Pritam finds her sole object as a writer was to portray the reality as it is and the reality as it should be. “The difference between what a man is and what he can be is perhaps not shown with such clarity by any other writer” (Arora 23). This brings her in line with great thinkers all over the world, particularly Aristotle and his concept of poetic truth. She feels, “a writer is inspired by one’s own intensity which she likens to an “atom in an excited state” (Jayanthi 35). For Amrita writing was “a journey of reaching me beyond me: the journey of reaching that ‘me’ in which firstly the knowledge of ‘myself’, then of ‘you’ and then of ‘that’ is stored: ‘that’ means the entire world” (Arora 23).

It is not that Amrita wrote what she did under the influence of some books or great thinkers. She says she began writing because, “I was an only daughter; my mother died when I was just ten, and in my loneliness I began writing” (Mahfil 2). She herself has gone through searing pains, hard experiences and harder encounters with her contemporaries, which she has recounted in her autobiography. She said that, “all her writing was born out of forbidden consummation. It is like ‘an illegitimate child’” (Arora 24). Her writing had to suffer all its life the frowns of its literary society, because it had the fate of an illegitimate child. She received awards and was honoured all over the world for her “illegitimate” writing. She said, “When illegitimacy is honoured so widely, it is time that, one takes a second look/or even a third look at the stifling concept of what is legitimate and what is not, since organized society is never static, while natural laws are universal and unchanging” (Arora 24).

Amrita was labeled as “communist,” “women’s libber,” etc. but she did not believe in “isms”. The only thing she believed in was the liberation of human beings: “you can’t liberate woman if man is not liberated. Every man is enslaved to circumstances, society, etc” (Arora 23). Her own unorthodox life, which had raised some
eyebrows, was like her writing, a relentless “journey from reality to reality”. Amrita Pritam expressed: “Several times it occurred to me that being a woman is a curse but I would like to come back again as a woman and work because there is so much to accomplish, I would like to come back as a woman, as Amrita Pritam with a pen in my hand to continue this life, not repeat but progress and evolve further” (Abdulla 27).

Running through both of her autobiographical work *The Revenue Stamp* (*Rasidi Ticket*, 1976) and *Shadows of Words* (*Aksharon Ki Chhaya Mein*, 1995) – as well as her account of the experiences of women writers the world over, *Journey through Burning Heat* (*Kadi Dhup ka Safar*, 1983) is the theme of a woman writer’s battle against persecution and her determination to “dare to live the life she imagines” (Tharu 161).

Amrita’s devotion to the art of writing is unparalleled and irrepressible. She believed that the writer must awaken the soul of the reader. Her writings are with the purpose of reform. She writes: “I believe in action, like a seed I know the art of penetrating in the heart of the earth. Therefore I am sure, in this world full of hatred and enmity, one day my action will bear the fruit of love, evergreen. This is the pain and the gain of creativity” (quoted in Varma 75). She could successfully establish herself after a long period of struggle, through her deep faith in the value of truth. By her limitless power in the creative powers of mind and relationships she had overcome all frustrations, criticism and humiliation on personal and social level. She had emerged victorious out of all deadly suffocations in the conservative social order and very orthodox familial frame. She had never sacrificed hope, honesty and goodness and had never compromised on truth of self. She had preserved her honour and individuality at the cost of social, personal comforts and pleasures. She had cherished her freedom at the cost of financial and religious security.

Amrita’s wide reading and her knowledge of Punjab’s three main languages – Punjabi, Hindi and Urdu – and their literature, especially folk poetry and songs which she had anthologized, had enriched her Punjabi identity. In order to rekindle in her fellow Punjabis who had lost their awareness of such a composite Punjabi-ness, composed of the varied culture of Sikh, Muslim and Hindu Punjab, she embarked on a writing in which her imagination and heightened sensibilities would seek out what she describes as the ‘meaning of the poem’, that is Punjab for her (Pritam, *Life and Times* 109). The milestone
on that path is undoubtedly her best novel *The Skeleton (Pinjar)* and the much anthologized poem *Aj Akhan Waris Shah Nu*.

As a Punjabi writer she had faced problems as far as Punjabi books’ publication was concerned. Her books in Punjabi were not purchased by many. So she got her books translated into Hindi for publication. After moving to Delhi she had to switch over to writing in Hindi, through it was difficult to write in Hindi, but her publishers wanted her to. She is best known as a poet in her mother tongue, Punjabi, and as a prose artist in Hindi, the language that brought her a wider readership and the economic independence. Amrita had complained that it is easier for a woman to be accepted as a harlot than as a poet in Indian society. Her complaint was, in fact, consequential to her own experience as a woman writer in Indian society. She was never a feminist in her outlook and was never been bitter against men but she had never been blind to the actualities she observed and wrote about. It is this transparency and sincerity of expression that, in fact, brought about her sufferings as a writer. Aware of the Indian attitudes and social reactions to a woman’s self-expressions she said, “. . . they judge a woman’s writings with a sort of prejudice in their mind. A woman has to suffer a lot . . . you can’t think what price she has to pay for her femininity” (Pritam, *Kagaz Aur Canvas* 3). Like all women writers, Amrita had suffered the bitterness of social opposition to her creativity. She had known that it is very troublesome for a woman to survive as a writer. She wrote to escape loneliness and as an outlet to her inner feelings and emotions. The consciousness of public opinion had a double impact on Amrita’s writings. In her stories and fiction she was preoccupied with the emotional side of life through major themes like love, friendship and sacrifice.

Amrita opined that, “A writer is one who makes no compartments between his life and writing. He explores his own possibilities, achieves from within and gives to the society. He is the giver” (Chaudhary 49). She believed that for a writer the harmonious blend of physical, mental and spiritual strength was very necessary. This was what she tried to achieve in her life. She also believed that the beauty of this harmony needed to be communicated to people and there should not be any gap between what one experiences and what one expresses. She said that, “the ultimate aim of the writer is to realize his self and how well it is done, is decided through one’s writing” (Chaudhary 50). She expressed it is a beautiful thing to communicate one’s feeling to people as “the writer shares his own
inner richness with people. But he does not always write with an audience in mind. He just shares” (Chaudhary 51). Amrita has been described as a writer of profound depth. Her writing brings out her experiences and her thinking. Her thinking was that writers of today spearhead an ‘evolution in writing’ that works its way up from petty policies and development of today into a welfare measure for the human beings of tomorrow. She said that, “the writer is the medium who should awaken this collective consciousness to a very high level and not stagnate at the point of expressing the pain or grim reality of today” (Mazumdar 55).

To Amrita her inner image was more important. Though sometimes her inner image was very depressing she tried to improve upon it and derived strength from within. “Looking back on her life,” she said, “she did not think there was any single experience that she regretted in her life. Because each one of them was necessary to build her up into what she was” (Chaudhary 51). This kind of thought from Amrita shows her positive energy. In her autobiography, *The Revenue Stamp*, she very poignantly narrates her role as a writer as well as a woman. She considers, Amrita, the woman secondary to Amrita, the writer. She confesses that Amrita the writer had helped her discover the woman, Amrita. Writing was a mission for Amrita Pritam; she was least concerned whether she is completely approved by the society. She feels that even if none has benefited from her stories it does not make her stories less worthy. She observed: “In my eyes, my own face becomes real and alive only when I am in the act of writing a poem” (*TRS* 70). The warmth of the language always penetrated her very being.

Amrita remarks that bits and pieces of a writer’s life always creep into her/his literary works. In one of the chapters of her autobiography entitled *In Silence Passion Smote*, Amrita has elaborately expressed the sources and inspirations behind her famous novels and poems. Some characters were a replica of her. Some scenes, events, incidents from Amrita’s life are found to be relatedly depicted in her stories. Her literary works are the outcome of the conscious and subconscious merging into one another. She observes that her real wealth consists in the characters she created and she was bound to them with a deep feeling of love. Many a times she got so involved with her characters that their sufferings became her own. It is quite clear that Amrita could not have found life worth
living without writing. Her love for creation and creative writing was focused when she remarked: “There have been so many days when I have held my pen close to my breast and wept and wept . . .” (*TRS* 115). Amrita wrote that, whatsoever life offered her, the one thing that did not let her down during the most depressing times was her pen. She observed: “Whether I wrote my own thoughts down or wrote about partition, my pen was as much a part of me as the limbs of my body. . .” (*TRS* 116).

After 1960, for about half a century Punjabi literature was predominantly under the progressive movement. Amrita Pritam as a progressive writer contributed to the wide corpus of Punjabi literature. Her skill in merging creative boundaries contributes to the freshness and interest of her public voice in literature. While the range of subjects which have aroused her anger or caused her pain is broad, the common thread that runs through her verse and fiction is the emotional response, her sense of outrage and sorrow which appears genuine and not the stylistic reaction of a great deal of the rhetoric that has stereotyped progressive writing. It is difficult to place Amrita’s writings in neat literary compartments like naturalism, social realism, romanticism, because an over-riding feature of her work is the merging of creative boundaries. She has written about the exploited and oppressed sections of society mainly rural women, and about public issues – such as war and capitalist manipulation – because of this she has been sometimes counted among Punjabi progressive writers like Sant Singh Sekhon.

In later years Amrita’s writing radically altered. It was her recognition of the outside world and the interaction between it and her sensibilities as expressed in the lives and feelings of her characters and the personae of her poetry that had made her an interesting and challenging writer. Amrita’s ‘public’ writings of the sixties and seventies express a political outlook which was certainly left-wing though not affiliated to any of the communist or socialist parties of India. Basically, they are expressions of her subjective responses to events around her – the war in Vietnam, the Civil rights Struggle in the United States, the war between India and her neighbours (Ash 66). In the eighties, it was existential and philosophical questions that occupied her and found expression in her writing, a marked difference from her earlier subjects like love, and land, and still earlier, the Partition. Later Amrita was absorbed by questions of metaphysics and
existentialism. Always fascinated by the convolutions of human consciousness and its fluctuations through the various levels of the mind from the unconscious to the supra conscious, she used dreams, delusions, the fevered imagining of artists and delirium in her writings.

Apart from her zeal for life, she as a writer presented her vision on different planes of perception. She is romantic in her reflection of her life, literature, men and women, in the very concept of human relationship. Her platonic world signifying dreams was not shaken by the disillusionment that life brought her. She treated love as religion, on spiritual plane, with a sacred mind. Amrita’s wander-lust seeking perfection through creativity was the main reason for her continued conflict, for she always lived with the intensity of a poet. Amrita’s emotional intensity, which sometimes lapsed into sentimentality, has tended to place her with romantic writers. However, the romantic elements of imagery, symbolism, metaphor, often based on her wide knowledge of the various mythologies of the subcontinent, do not hide the realistic core of her work. Her writing is celebrated for its sensuous imagery and evocative rhythm and is widely read and appreciated, though it has also been criticized as vacuous and sentimental.

Amrita Pritam’s principle in life was live, laugh and bloom. Her pain was at the fact that society hasn’t recognized the values of life, because “most people” she observed, “are living on a low psycho–noetic plan which creates negative vibrations as a result of country, society, religion, polity suffer” (Prerna57). Amrita tried to live and work on a higher psycho-neotic plan (psycho – which is emotional, and neotic deals with intellect) to help human beings realize their own potential to live on a higher plan. She wrote to create awareness in people, so that they explore themselves to celebrate life. Amrita’s philosophy of life was humanist. The quest in her writings was for the universality of all men in society for she sees man at all places and times as formed by the Primal Thought, i.e., Adi-Chintan. The septicet of her creative philosophy was based on Ancient Indian thought. This thought embraces all that contributes to the progress and well being of the individual, the society and the humanity at large. It gets reflected in all her writings. The message of love, harmony and peace can be discovered in her writings. Amrita believed that love is the very essence of the survival of the human race. In her novels we see the portrayal of characters trying to transcend the tension and the turmoil of life towards an
understanding of love and trust. Her men and women break in their search for love the obstacles of caste and creed.

Amrita’s self had a steady and gradual transformation from a woman-in-love with life and creativity, to a woman devoted to the search of truth and knowledge. This slow transition brought spirituality in her womanhood and she started studying mysticism, philosophy and astro-sciences. She reformatted her autobiography adding some biographical details and spiritual connotations and entitled it *Shadows of Words*. The revised text appears to be a mature vision of her life with the voice of inner consciousness. It is for the first time in the annals of Indian history of women writers that Amrita had been publishing innumerable works after her autobiography and finally republished that with her own changes of presentation. It shows, on her part, the broadness of accepting the effect of time on one’s vision, outlook and perceptions.

Amrita was not only a talented writer, but also a fearless writer who did not mince her words to condemn oppression. Besides, her keen insight into human nature and her emotionally charged style of writing makes the reader live the agony or the ecstasy that she portrays. She started to write at a very early age. Her first collection of poems titled *Amrit Lehran* got published when she was 16 years old. She started off as a romantic poet but soon changed her gears and actively participated in the Progressive Writers’ Movement. Her work reflects a headstrong, revolutionary and rebellious approach that inspires the readers to break-off the contradictions of life. She is widely remembered for her emotional poem *Aj Aakhaan Waris Shah Nu* (*Today I invoke Waris Shah*). It was an expression of her agony over the violent massacres that took place during the partition of former British India.

Amrita is equally at home at shorter fiction and has written over eighty short stories, which are collected in five volumes. Most of her stories are set in the milieu of Punjab. Amrita Bazar Patrika observes: “Her excellence in prose-writing lies not only in her art or craft but in the development of the feminine personality” (Arora 22). And this is nowhere more evidenced than in her short stories, and perhaps this is what has led some critics to take all her writings to be personal. Her short stories give a glimpse of Amrita’s soul bleeding torment at the inhuman treatment meted out to women in this country. The
characters of her novels and poems mirror individuals who are fighting against the wrongs prevailing in society. To Amrita essence of life was self-realization, to know oneself and then reach beyond. Through her poems and prose she continually questions the degeneration of life – the politician’s lust for power, the emptiness of religion which teaches humans to hate and murder others. Through writing she hopes to change the attitude and outlook of people. She said it was a creative urge so that it can lead to a better society. She said she cannot change the world but could make people aware of the filth in the society.

**Uniqueness of her Poetry**

Amrita Pritam was a personality who belonged to several realms. She was a poet who gave the impression of exquisite suffering without sentimentality. Amrita was a very private person. Shahira Naim says, “It was easy for her to speak of externalities or even regions where the inner self meets the outer space. But her pains and joys had to be transformed into distilled poetry in order to find an expression” (42). Her father used to write poetry, and it inspired her. She did not compose devotional poetry, but romantic verse. Many of her poems were poems of protest, essentially against the way the world treated women. Her poem *Aj Aakhaan Waris Shah Nu* brings out the injustices suffered by women during partition. It is a poem transcending geographical and communal boundaries, capturing the pain of partition.

Amrita started writing poetry precociously at the age of fifteen with a spiritualistic, traditional, symposium type of poetry, and soon moved on to social and romantic themes and before long was prominent among the pioneer writers of modern Punjabi literature and the most prolific Punjabi poet. Though Amrita’s earliest writing is considered immature or preparatory, her later writing shows promise for future and merit attention to its own right. It was with her *Pebble Playthings* volume that Amrita definitely emerged as one of the foremost Punjabi poets and then on wrote steadily and abundantly, her poetry touching ever-new levels of excellence which marked a new mood in Amrita and strong movement towards realism.
All her poetry excepting the earliest spiritualistic writing is in one way or another inspired by love. Amrita herself confessed that she was primarily a poet of love. Love in her poems is a symbol of fulfillment in life in its totality. It is not to be confused with the conventional mannerism with which love is so widely written about in a good deal of Indian poetry. Another feature of her poetry is its social purpose. Amrita had been constantly preoccupied with social-ills and the need for social change as with love. She has written on love, pain, suffering despair, anguish especially suffering in society, on women and their plight, and on socio-political issues. As a poet with social concern, she was concerned naturally with her immediate environment. She has shown her commitment to Punjab specifically in a number of poems. Amrita had read widely but her poetry was steeped in the Punjabi folk culture. Her language is rich in the Punjabi folk idiom in general and in that of the woman’s world in particular. Punjabi folk songs are chiefly the creation of women and have been preserved by women too. Amrita’s poetic diction and style draw upon this tradition almost unconsciously and bring with it its sentiment. “To read her is to be soaked in the spirit of the Punjab” (Mahfil 69).

Punjab had been her context but it seems unfair to pin her down to a region or language for her poetic sensibility talks of an anguish which is universal. In her poetry there is a tendency towards the abstraction of experience, which is achieved through the use of symbols that give greater intensity and definition to the emotion expressed. She has covered or reflected in her writing the various phases of spiritualism, reform, romanticism, progressive realism and intense individualism. Her poetry proclaims humanistic perspective. It acquires a transcendent view of humanity in a broad sweep of concern for man’s survival in a fast dehumanizing epoch. Her poetry is a mixture of delicacy and a sardonic humour, a sad reflection upon the hopelessness of human situation.

Amrita’s writings in the view of P. Lal, project, “an image of life which culminates into the surrender of the hegemony of reason to the quagmire of impeccable passion . . . of an eternal woman, insatiable in love, hungry for illusion, unfathomable in sensibility and therefore, bound for a fall” (43-44). The romantic love of Amrita’s
creative and unfathomable sensibility was a force sustaining her desire for life in the face of her doomed fall. The passion for ideal love was a great source of her creativity. She wrote deeply passionate poems. Her expressions of love have always been very delicate and aesthetically supreme. She depicts the feelings of a woman in love in her poetry. She had loved dearly and suffered terribly. Her attitude towards love, in her early poems, is devotional, mainly because of her religious background. Her poetry is full of ardours, hungers, derelictions. She makes an admirable attempt to transcend her intense sexual impulse into poetic images of rare beauty. The excellence of her art lies in its intensity. In a poem one notices a sensibility, both powerful and exquisite:

Everyday
Dusk slumbers,
With his arms tightened around
The Dawn.
At daybreak
She awakens
Flushed to the ears.

In her poetry, Amrita unfolds a heart at once sensitive, sincere and wistful. She is totally absorbed in her personal grief and all that is around her fades into nothingness. As a poet and writer, Amrita Pritam earned the chagrin of many, “People were very furious from the beginning.” Why? “Plain intolerance of women, especially in the world of letters; for there the woman expresses herself, projects her views, her feelings. A woman doctor is all right, not a woman writer” (Mahfil 1). That was said in her early life. Later she became an outstanding figure and winner of reputed awards. Amrita said that it was her poetry that reflected her development, that had remained true to herself and which had brought her honour, stature and respect.

**Feminine Sensibility in Amrita Pritam’s Fiction**

The need of new approaches to evaluate and appreciate the work of women creative writers is stressed in the recent feminist literary studies, in fact, the approach to
works of women creative writers should be aimed at understanding their feminine sensibility and the development of their personality. One of such possible approaches is to relate to the literary works of the writer so as to trace the parallel development of her personality as an individual and as a writer. Literary works are always subjective and as such they reveal the personality of the writer. In other words literary works do have autobiographical details. And fiction of a woman creative writer can be a great assert, like an autobiography, to understand her creative genius, her sensibility and her individualism.

It is often asked what exactly one means when one speaks of feminine tendency, feminine sensibility, woman’s point of view or female outlook. How could this be different from a man’s observation or man’s point of view? In other words, why should there be such a water tight compartment, as man’s experience and woman’s experience, when they both have similar experience? Can one distinguish between their thinking processes? More alert readers might further argue that the word ‘woman’ also includes the ‘man’. Despite this argument one has to be sure that there exists a binary nature of perception, of experience, of arguing with regards to man and woman. The experience for man and woman is always different as the ways of looking at life and living life in the same society are different. In other words one life-situation is understood by man and woman differently because a particular sort of social conditioning does not allow woman to ‘feel’ the society in her natural way. More over the society has always authenticated the male experience, the male stance and not the female experience. Therefore what man feels or experiences enters literature and what woman feels or experiences ends as heresy. Hence writers like Adrienne Rich had called for a “Revision” of literature (5). This is to say, even woman’s point of view is as important in literature as is man’s. Patricia Meyer Spacks, thinks that a woman’s point of view in literature is “doubtless the results of social conditioning” (4-5).

Today the word ‘feminine’ is not derogatory but contributes in denoting the woman’s point of view. M. H. Abrahams defines the term “sensibility” thus: “when a modern critic talks of a poet’s sensibility, he refers to this characteristic way of responding in sensation, thought and feeling of experience.” If therefore a writer’s characteristic way of responding to experience is from feminine perspective she may be
regarded as possessing feminine sensibility, and the possession of feminine sensibility presupposes not only full familiarity, but also empathy with feminine problems and crisis. Thus feminine sensibility represents a woman’s sensibility. This sensibility is truly, completely, genuinely her own. Though socio-cultural, religious, political, economic and many other factors do influence, attack or mould a woman’s sensibility, still what she feels, or senses, how she thinks, reacts, responds, or represents her own self is of genuine value. It is ultimately how women see themselves and the world from their unique point of view, as their point of view completely differs from that of men. Feminine sensibility recognizes woman’s likes, dislikes, tastes, decisions, mode of thinking and reacting to experience. Keeping aside patriarchal notions of womanhood, what genuinely a woman feels, senses, thinks, and how she reacts and responds to all situations and happenings in her life denotes her feminine sensibility.

The recent decades have witnessed the emergence of a fresh awareness of woman situation, which has brought about an unprecedented shift in the appraisal of human condition. The veritable explosion of “linguistic sexism” during the past decade has been hailed as containing “an ocean of interest.” (Thorne and Henley ix). The politicization of the sexism in-language issue has insured its future prominence for a systematic study of the complex interaction of language, sex and gender. It is believed that ways of speaking and writing are intimately tied to ways of thinking and patterns of self-and-other-evaluation. Scott observes: “The mere fact that there are two sexes gives rise inevitably to two ways of perceiving human life: the ‘us’ of one view and the ‘them’ of the other” (Scott 198). The importance of woman has been recognized in literature on various grounds. But she has been rarely defined as a subject in her own right. For centuries human experience has been synonymous with masculine experience. The importance of woman deserves to be seen in the context of what Michael Foucault calls “rupture” or “discontinuity” in history. Alex Comfort has asserted the value of “the ideology of the whole human being looking at the whole universe” (Comfort 170). Woman is wronged in a society dominated by male-oriented institutions and world-view, although she is the complementing principle to what Carl Jung claims to be the “psychic activity which transcends the limits of consciousness.” When in determining the status and role of woman in the society “the ideal man posits opposite himself as the essential other: he feminizes it because the woman is the palpable figure of other” (Bachelored 35).
The discrimination and women’s anomalous position have left indelible marks in the sphere of language also. Linguists like Stanley have posited a theory of “negative semantic space” for women. When woman move outside their traditional roles of mother and wife, they say, they enter the semantic space “already occupied by the male sex” (Stanley 67). Right from the beginning of their life, women are forced to feel dwarfed and acquire a highly circumscribed world-view. To quote Bolinger: “Women are taught their place along with other lesser breeds, by the implicit lies that language tells about them” (Bolinger 541). This unfortunate state of affairs has been responsible for many problems and confusions which women have been condemned to face.

A major development in modern Indian fiction has been the growth of a woman-centered approach, an approach which seeks to project and interpret experience from the viewpoint of a feminine sensibility and consciousness. Feminist critics assume that women experience the world out of their different perspective. As Patricia Meyer Spacks remarks, “There seems to be something that we might call a woman’s point of view . . . an outlook sufficiently distinct to be recognizable through the centuries” (4-5). The study of women’s writing includes the study of feminine sensibility, feminine experience and feminine ways of expression. This feminine sensibility includes the changing position of women in the social evolution of a country. Apart from the biological differences, there are well-established gender-based differences in several mental abilities, which are deeply grounded both by nature and nurture. Women can better portray the psychic mind of women, the feeling of inferiority, a sense of contempt for their own sex, envy of man’s greater freedom and every kind of attempt to make up for this biological deficiency among women.

The psycho-sociological and emotional approach to women engenders new awareness about women as an artist and also as an individual. As an artist a woman writer portrays the psychic mind of women, the crises in their lives-physical and psychological torture experienced by her in general. Women writers as fellow women, they keenly observe and study the life and inner mind of women and write about their miserable plight. The focus is on the existential predicament and travails of the subdued woman in a
male dominated society. Women writers voice out the inner mind of the depressed women. They unravel the plight of women, who are caged like animals, without freedom and discretion. They delineate the social predicament, religious barriers and its restrictions on women. Male writers have always portrayed women either as stereotypes or as the ones resembling the mythical figures, which are not closer to women in real life. Man embodies patriarchy and woman – innocence. Men in general write about woman, touching only the exterior not penetrating into their fine emotions, their fears, their hopes, etc. They seem to be intimidated, over whelmed and sometimes unable to grasp the functioning of the female mind. They cannot comprehend the feminine sensibility, the feelings and nuances of women.

Today women writers refuse to be forced to explore the world through men’s eyes as was done earlier, neglecting their own feminine responsibilities. Women writers reveal psychological and emotional complexes, social concerns that delineate the sensibility of a woman. Thus the woman writers’ writings have become more personal, more direct and truer to themselves. Judith Fetterley has argued that a female writer’s aim is not simply to interpret the world but to change it by changing the consciousness of those, who read and their relation to what they read. To quote:

Fictions by male writers in the modern period are often characterized by splitting fragmentation and atomization . . . particularly of woman characters; on the other hand women writers tend to experience things, people and feelings as concrete rather than objectively. Women writing about women, usually have a very personal approach, an approach which may not be objective but which draws from experience (Fetterley 55).

An interesting aspect of the Modern Indian Enlightenment has been the creative release of the feminine sensibility. Women in modern India have not only shared the exiting and dangerous burdens of the struggle for independence but have also articulated the national impulse and the consciousness of cultural change in the realm of letters. The feminine sensibility has achieved an imaginative self-sufficiency in all the Indian literatures which merit critical recognition. Contemporary women writers deal with the
themes of love, marriage, man-woman relationship, and alienation, social-psychological and emotional problems in general and often in particular. The autobiographical element is unavoidable in their writings. They describe the exploitation of women and their sufferings by virtue of their womanliness and sensibility. They closely watch women while creating women characters. They represent them as lively with characteristics like love, sacrifice, sympathy, care, foolishness, arrogance, sensitiveness, and insensitiveness. Often the writings by women appear to be personal statements of courage and acknowledgement of their own weakness. Sometimes their fictional output is limited to familial ties or man-woman relationship. In spite of these limitations, they emerge as being universal in their thoughts and expressions.

Ashley Montague regards woman as a natural artist in the light of her natural function of reproduction. He believes that women are naturally creative and “for the most part women are busy creatively living the life, about which they can write better than man” (176). Some of the women writers in Punjabi and the creatively inclined and talented women such as Amrita became creative writers in their own right. Writers like Amrita want society to rethink about woman and her position in the society. She has displayed an amazing courage in portraying her feminine experiences without any inhibitions. She “like Margaret Cavendish was addited to write with pen rather than to work with the needle” (Kaur 122).

Amrita Pritam was described as an enigma, an eternal woman. She had many identities that made her a rare poet and a woman. She was a woman who identified herself with the phoenix which rises again and again from its own ashes (TRS 135). She was the stuff romantic rebels are made of. A lonely childhood, an anguished adolescence, a womanhood racked with emotional spasms, poet, novelist, Amrita Pritam believed in wearing all her experiences on her sleeve, metaphorically through her creative outpourings. Branded as a pagan for her candid views on religion and fundamentalism, hated for her outrageous honesty, Amrita’s life had been an open book, beautiful in its truthfulness. The men she loved, the dreams she dreamed, the desires that burnt within her can be gleaned from her autobiographical works, The Revenue Stamp, Shadows of Words and Life and Times. She was suffused with a deep and throbbing passion for life
and people, a strange pain which subsides when poured out like molten lava through language only to stop and start again.

Amrita used her emotions as they presented themselves with scant regard for the damage they might have done to her being. She was very true to herself so even self-inflicted wounds healed. Although her sensitivities recreated moments of hurt, pain, joy and serenity, it was the price she had to pay for it, which unknown to the reader, adds a touch of renunciation that lends it the sharp cutting edge of truth. This is the essence that was woven through her poems and writing which lifts it up and beyond the ordinary.

All her life Amrita Pritam was bold, outspoken and cared not a whit what her detractors might say. It was the staunch belief in freedom of expression and life that had been her whetstone of creativity. Her style of life, lack of discretion in emotional matters, her blunt honesty and fearlessness were criticized. It become a source of controversy and was a very painful phase in her life. Though it was painful she never compromised with truth. She said, “Many a times I felt like a ruin, disgusted with so many things, but I retrieve myself with an inner force” (Chaudhary 50). This shows her strength of mind.

Feminine sensibility appears to be an integral part of Amrita’s emotive life. She being aware of the woman in her confesses of her different longings. Her dreams reflect her inner self. In her autobiography The Revenue Stamp (Rasidi Ticket, 1976), Amrita brings out her inner world. She externalizes what Gynocritics would call ‘the feminine mode’ of experience in thinking, feeling, and perceiving the outer world. She has been successful in penning down her inner world and invoking her desires, dreams and idealism in her autobiography. The relations and incidents of her life left a permanent mark on her to shape the kind of person she was. Her autobiography with its endearing candour and intellectual integrity touched the hearts of many. In Punjabi literature Amrita has been an indisputable phenomenon who has no stamp parallel. Her autobiography The Revenue Stamp published in 1976 is an honest chronicle written with warmth and truth. “I have always lived life on my own terms – irrespective of what the world thinks. I have loved without restraint, wept without end and today when the winter of years has arrived, I am serene” (Aurora 29). This brings out a facet of her feminine sensibility.
Retrospectively, when Amrita Pritam disclosed her plans to write an autobiography to Khushwant Singh, he commented: “what is there to your life? Just an incident and two . . . you could use the back of a revenue stamp to write it.” (www.languageinIndia.com/Dec2005/amritapritam_sunwanil.html) She was a firm minded, bold woman who was not affected by the comment of Khushwant Singh. In brief prologue to *The Revenue Stamp*, Amrita Pritam shot back:

> What ever happened in my life happened between the layers of thought that found their way into novels and poems. What was left? 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 this revenue stamp as it were or am I with this revenue stamp setting a seal to my novels and poems . . . . my entire, literary work . . . . I wonder.” (www.sunwanil.html)

Her autobiography is a master piece. As she is basically an artist, her artistic sensibility continually comes to the forefront in her autobiography. Through her artistic touch she has revealed herself as a writer as well as a woman.

Amrita’s autobiography captures her entire life in its fold. She has proved writing it that ‘her life was an open book’. Autobiography has been ‘the Gospel of truth’ for Amrita. She has penned down her inner world and voiced her desires, dreams and idealism in it. The title *The Revenue Stamp* symbolizes the writer’s own soul; for the size of stamps keep on changing, but that of the revenue stamp remains the same. *The Revenue Stamp* then appears to be a tale of unchanging soul which survives all storms like a steady flame of a lamp. By writing it, Amrita authenticates the truth of her journey both as a writer and as a human being. She makes a candid confession of the intimate experiences of her life. Apart from being a record of the confessional outpourings of a sensitive soul, the autobiography is also a reflection on the patriarchal social constrains.
Even a casual reading of her autobiography suggests that all the experiences of her life since childhood have been created and lived under some shadow or another: the shadow of death, weapons, words, dreams, patriarchy, and shadows of authoritarian power, shadows of contemplation, etc. Amrita has woven a prodigious mass of personal experiences in her writings. *The Revenue Stamp* within the dignity and decency of feminine aestheticity gracefully offers the reflection of her rebellious views as an expression of a romantic mind and a suffering woman in her. She maintains her pure image as a writer and being a poet with convictions she preserves her creativity while narrating her life story. Anees Jung found that in Amrita’s narration of her life:

There is no harking to a childhood that was denied, a youth that was disturbed or living that was filled with tribulations. When Amrita talks about her life it acquires the force and majesty of a water fall, still in the beginning full in the end and in between fragmented by the fury of speeds and boulders (99).

Amrita’s *The Revenue Stamp* shows the woman’s urge to discover and establish the truth of self as an ultimate force, operating the female mind and its identity.

Anees Jung records, for Amrita:

Love is basically a communication between two human beings that which is based on the whole being of the two, spirit, body, everything. This kind of love I have only found once, in Imroz. There is one kind of love like that of the sky. There is another one which is like a roof over one’s head. Sahir was like the sky, Imroz became my shelter, a roof over my head (6).

Amrita expresses that a woman seeks both, the roof and the sky. She finds the roof, eventually opens a window to the sky. She says, “It was chance and circumstance that led me choose the roof. The sky was very distant. Love for me has always had an immediacy, an energy that stirred me, awakened me. Love is inside you. But you need another love in the light of which you can recognize your own. (Jung 6). She says, “I write about love but not in narrow sense, love means relationship. The first relationship is with your own self then with the person you like, admire then with society . . . countries” (Sinha 8). Amrita Pritam believed that there is more depth and intensity in unexpressed love.
In her personal life, she said, she never spoke about her love but she had lived it. She had loved two men in her life and she had the urge to express herself, her love only in her poems. She said that she had never romanticized her love. She felt that there is a lot of difference between love and romance. Even though love is an overused word, it cannot be defined and can only be experienced, she felt. She also felt that love has nothing to do with rules or customs or tradition.

The complexities of love, the torment of the human mind, loneliness and pain have also moved her to put pen to paper. To Amrita pain, torment, loneliness was part of the process of life. It is the way of a human being discovers own life. Amrita’s poem gives a portrait of her.

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

Amrita was not a feminist because she felt that a man needs a woman to be fulfilled and a woman needs a man to be fulfilled. She believed that both complement each other. As a writer, she has written on man-woman relationship proving this perspective. She said, “Man-woman relationship is the meeting of two individuals, two complete persons. Two incomplete persons do not make a complete relationship. You cannot fill a vaccum with another person’s vaccum. Two incomplete people remain incomplete even when they are together” (Abdulla 25). She believed, “Love is the admiration for each other, where the growth of two people should continue and should not be static. Human beings are growing entities, they blossom with time. Even when the body decays, the growth of mind continues.” Amrita expressed, “Love is a blanket term used for all sorts of relationship. What is love at first sight but just physical attraction? Love is a marriage of values and ideals, and a deep recognition of these in your companion”. Another aspect she strongly disbelieved regarding love is compromise. She said, “True love does not
entail compromise. I do not know what compromise is. Love is effortless without any pain, questions or compromise. Marriage may be a compromise but never love” (Abdulla 25).

Amrita’s view that women need heterosexual love to fulfill themselves is a highly contentious issue for most feminists. She felt that the essence of women’s liberation is to recognize and develop to the fullest women’s own potential. Undoubtedly should she choose to love and share a life with another, she should have the right, but fulfillment is essentially from within the woman’s own self. However, for Amrita, the supreme writer of love poetry, love in its fullest sense of physical union and psychological and emotional excitement and joy, should be open to women. She said sexuality is for both men and women and as one who had read and appreciated Henry Miller (Introduction to Punjabi Poetry in Indian Poetry Today 89), Amrita parts company with American feminists like Kate Millet who finds Miller’s treatment of women as sex objects highly repugnant (Ash 63).

In an interview by Rama Jha, Amrita Pritam was asked what her idea of woman was. And what she thought of Woman’s Liberation? Amrita Pritam’s perceptive reply was: “Women’s Liberation is not a separate thing from man’s lib. Like woman, man also is mentally a slave; man has not yet tasted the friendship and company of liberated woman as an equal partner” (188). What Amrita Pritam means is that woman’s liberation can be complete only when man is also released from bondage to the inherited structure of beliefs and ideas. This view of Amrita Pritam comes close to the penetrating observation made by J. S. Mill on the subject: “Women cannot be expected to devote themselves to the emancipation of women, until men in considerable number are prepared to join with them in the undertaking” (58). Like Amrita, Mill had pointed out that “the generality of the male sex cannot yet tolerate the idea of living with woman as an equal” (Mill 34). But the irony is that what Mill said at the end of the nineteenth century is true of Indian society even after a hundred years. Amrita was much too progressive for her times in so far as her views on women’s emancipation were concerned, although there is behind her a great tradition of liberal thinking of such men and women as J.S. Mill, Ibsen, Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan and so on (Vinoda 55-56). Amrita appears to remind the paradox of this unaltered position of woman in a world generally believed to have
changed out of all proportion. Many feminist writers have expressed comparable views and prominent writers on the subject like Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan, found women scarcely yet emancipated from the helotage of a male-dominated world. Women’s position can be summed up in de Beauvoir’s phrase: “one is not born, but becomes a woman” (Bergonzi 3). Man is implicated in this process of woman’s becoming a woman even more than woman is.

Amrita Pritam hit the nail forcefully and exactly on the head of the problem when she astutely pointed out:

If men and women are not economically independent how can they love? Generally women love out of a sense of insecurity. Love is admiration and companionship of the other person. Economic enslavement obstructs the experience of love. Women’s liberation is not mere shouting of slogans for one’s rights. At least I do not believe in that sort of liberation. To me women’s liberation means a fuller development of her personality, so that, she does not have to ask for freedom, she herself develops a capacity to achieve it (Jha 188-189).

This is largely true of the Indian social context and Amrita Pritam’s fictional females, simple as they are, bear it out. In many of her tales and novels Amrita shows how suspect man-woman relationships are, especially those that are based on woman’s economic dependence upon man and those that are sanctified by traditional morality.

Amrita as a writer does not conform to the expectations of many feminist theorists in some of her ideas. Certainly she was a critic of the oppression and subjugation of women through patriarchal domination in the family and the many obsolete customs that enforce a double standard of morality. She was clearly critical of the economic dependence of women upon men, and in her own life always tried to earn her living both during and after the breakdown of the marriage. In her writing, Amrita accentuated women’s experience under patriarchy and has brought the marginalized to the centre. Her poetic vision combined philosophical outlook with her concern for the truth and knowledge. She viewed the intellect and temperament of woman from a different stance,
in the sense that she was not a stereotypical sympathizer, nor an outraged feminist or a sloganist viewer. Her regard for the social values of human virtues, in both men and women, is implicit in her respect for human existence. For Amrita, women are the citizens of the family and the society. She sought to bring her revolutionary ideas into the social consciousness. To many critics, her objectives of social reform sound like the feminist advocacy of women’s progress. One has to know that Amrita was a humanist rather than a feminist. She maintained that her poems are the “needles to prick the consciousness of man, for liberating his mind enslaved in regional, religious and intellectual powers around” (Varma 48).

A rebel in her teens, a forceful critic of the subjugation of women under patriarchal social institutions and outmoded custom, Amrita had spoken against oppression and injustice. She was very serious when she said, “Men want service and pleasure from women. But they cannot appreciate a woman with a mind. Man’s concepts are conditioned and run along set prehistoric grooves: he can see woman as a slave, goddess or prostitute. He venerates the mother image in the Goddess only because that too is one role in which a woman serves him selflessly.” Amrita firmly said, “Men are afraid of responsibility,” “Men want no liability – neither in emotional nor in material terms! He can admire a beautiful woman that is youth, he can worship the distant intangible goddess that is an image, and he can use his wife as a slave. But where is the man today who can value an intelligent woman?” (Aurora 30) The question was not mere rhetoric. Amrita did experience such situation in her life.

In The Revenue Stamp, Amrita philosophizes her consciousness of womanhood with a sort of mythifying sensibility. “I was born with the body of woman; hence it was the urge of my existence that I should probe into the ancient . . . history of woman’s being and myths of her existence to bring out such relics and zones that inform the question as why woman is next to man? . . . What was the value of her being?” (quoted in Varma 45)

Amrita’s vision of womanhood is so clear and without inhibitions. She never denied the gender-orientation harshly as a feminist would. The recognition of gendered experiences and that of gender-roles was felt by her as an artist more profoundly than any
common being. She had been too sensitive to adopt the posture of a radical feminist. She seemed to offer some feminist implications in her philosophized observations of woman’s identity and existence. In the same contemplative mood, she analysed:

I don’t claim any ideal in womanhood. I don’t idealize woman. What is important for me is the mental set-up and its evaluation. The only difference between male mind and the female mind is that their drawbacks are different. Economy in man’s control makes him forceful and imposing while the lack of power makes woman reserved... and slavish... I think slavery is a part of mind rather than gender. It is equally related to man as to woman... the difference is in the face, not in the mind (Varma 45).

As a thinker and philosopher, Amrita’s outlook successfully transcends the narrow-bordered gender-consciousness and she visualizes both the male and the female as human entities with different drawbacks. The feminist thinkers are yet to shed off their gender-bias and reach the maturity of Amrita’s contemplation, wherein they can discover how the new ways of expression and the new channels of responses are open to women, depending on their purity of perceptions.

It is true that Amrita Pritam did not glorify the ideals of womanhood but she did glorify the role of woman, especially that of beloved and mother, in her fiction, which is the contribution of the artist in her. In her fiction, Amrita held the narrow selfishness of man and society responsible for all the struggle and suffering of woman, although in book *Aurat Ek Drishtikon* she has stated that women themselves obstruct the path of woman’s liberation and development. Amrita herself never lived like a traditionally ideal woman. She did what she thought she should, at the moment. (Her early writings/characters showcase this.) She not only defied the codes of feminine conduct that are patriarchal, but also revolted against the age-old system of marriage; she admitted frankly what she adopted in her lifestyle: “I am a chain-smoker. I love a drop of whisky too, occasionally. Indeed, I sometimes have a craving for it. 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” (*TRS* 139). She lived like a man in the world of men. She has written that in the totality of herself as a writer, the woman in her had only a secondary role to play. She
finds the woman in her assisting the writer and the writer in her ever assertive in the vision of life. In a contemplative book she has written: “It is not easy to carry the responsibilities of ‘I’...; “we” come ahead and... the writer hides his ‘I’ in the names and roles of many characters in his writings... I could not name myself Amrita, and went on disguising in the stories, in various names as Anita, Alka, Meenu, Chetna and so on” (Pritam, Aksharon Ki Chhaya Mein 86). Amrita’s devotion to art of writing was thus, rooted in her consciousness of being a woman. The private self that she could not present in its bare form, has been covered in all her women characters. Some of her novels like Two Faces of Eve etc are autobiographical throughout.

Amrita was not happy with the present view of womanhood, it was a very distorted vision she felt. To the woman of India, her kin, she pleaded to:

find yourself, learn to analyse yourself. Do not be carried away by reaction. Life comes from action. Reassess yourself. Own yourself. Many Indian women treat marriage as their due career – a way to earn your bread, butter and bondage. It is the easy way out. Women must revolt amongst themselves, break out of self-limited circles” (Aurora 31).

Amrita said that parents prepare girls for marriage but they do not prepare girls for an independent existence. This must change if the picture of woman must re-focus itself along new lines. She wrote, “Our scriptures have it, we have that sanction for those who want it: woman is half of the God image. ‘Ardh Nari-Ishwa’ and it is said that Shiva is a dead body without Shakti. Taking cue from here: woman must realize their strengths and go on to find themselves” (Aurora 31).

Even as an explicit painter of the subjugation of women, Amrita does not resent her being a woman. “As a woman I found it very difficult to survive, but I am sure that if there is any rebirth I would still wish to be born as a woman... There is only one condition – a pen in my hands” (Aurora 29). Amrita Pritam, working in a rigidly conventional society, she had required extra-ordinary inner resources and courage to hold militant feminist views, let alone be faithful to those view in conducting her life. Her bold convention shattering views lead to social dislocation and to “broken homes”, as her
interviewer Revati Saran Sharma put it, but her passion for truth does not waver before the bleat prospect of a ruined family (TRS 77).

Motherhood is a contentious issue in the context of women’s liberation in feminist thinking these days. The demands made by child bearing and child rearing have become a focal point of debate. For the older generation of Indian women writers, like Amrita, Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai, motherhood is a very important aspect of woman’s self-development. Amrita, as the loving mother of two children and a fond grandmother, understood the significance of motherhood. Bhagyasree Varma opines that, “because of the loss of her mother, Amrita Pritam tried to compensate by glorifying motherhood and intensifying the portrayal of mother-son as well as mother-daughter relationship in her fiction” (21).

What one notices in Amrita Pritam are certain features that make her to be a personality far ahead of her times. First she was a rebel spirit who attempted to live and act against the established norms about women. She challenged the social expectations and stepped out of the stereotyped roles through her shocking responses. Second, the creative force in her was the source of her unconventional thinking and defiance of social and cultural patterns. The activating force was her quest for freedom of self-expression pushing her ahead to reject the standards of morality that keep altering according to place, time and milieu. She belonged to a different cultural ethos and her refusal to find fulfillment in the so-called conventional role of women as domesticated, sacrificing god women led her to into the options other than the domestic world.

Amrita Pritam’s Fiction

Amrita Pritam’s fiction is the reflection of her poetic flights and idealism. Her fiction portrays her aesthetic craving for the human relationship that she always pursued. She was a writer who could touch the heart of rigid and conservative critics. She dealt with the multiple dimensions of life at once. Her stories depict a deeper sense of psychoanalytical perceptions of personal lives of ‘individuals. The stories present the
socio-cultural, ethnic, familial and religious issues conflicting with her perceptions. Her stories cannot be categorized as social, feministic, sentimental or private. The characters she portrayed cannot be classified as flat or round, classical or modern. They are individuals truthful to their experience of life.

Amrita Pritam understood the feelings and sentiments of women in general. She echoes the emotional trauma of women in her fiction. She plunges deep into the heart of women, closely observes and understands them and writes on their/her experience. She voices forth the emotional experiences, the crises in the lives of women; the (physical and) psychological torture experimented by them using proper diction and technique. Her fictional out-put is suffused with her feminine sensibility. She depicts woman as a struggler and an emergent winner in her writings.

Amrita as a writer wrote novels which offer a wide variety of social, cultural and psychological interpretations. Many issues related to feminine sensibility have been treated in her novels – love, marriage, divorce, social taboos and inhibitions, cruelty and violence towards the female sex, crisis of conscience and values. When Amrita’s novels are deeply analyzed from the stand point of feminine sensibility, one arrives at a stage where all the issues get connected to the issue of crisis of conscience and values. Amrita tried to portray the sensibility of an Indian woman in her fiction in various roles. She believed that woman should try to understand and realize herself as a human being and not just as an appendage to some male life. Her forte was in the analysis of her characters. She was able to go deep into the psyche of her female characters and study them with sympathy and understanding. She has portrayed women’s longings and sufferings.

Amrita Pritam seems highly interested in exploring the social fabric through the individual protagonists of her novels. She was reluctant to accept the abstractions and idealistic representation, and portray the social condition, disturbed psyche and predicament of Indian women. Her prime concern was human relationships, the existential pain and predicament of women. The themes in her novels reflect the inner
world of her characters. She does present a kaleidoscopic picture of her characters’ mind. She used her own language and style to depict the inner crisis and tension of existing in the life of a character. She was a writer who concentrated not only on the ‘outer’ world but also on the ‘inner’ world of her characters. She had been novelist who tried to understand intimately the predicament of women through her female characters. Her novels exhibit the creative release of the feminine sensibility, the inner realities and psychic reverberations of her characters. It may be mentioned at the outset that while dealing with her female characters, especially their relations with men, their drives and responses and their repressions, Amrita had tried to look at things essentially from the women’s point of view.

Amrita Pritam had a very different idea of virtue and virtuous woman, different from the stereotype virtuous women in India – self-effacing, self-sacrificing. But women in her novels represent different kinds of virtues. They do not suffer but take a stand. Amrita Pritam’s novels give an expression to the long smothered wail of a lacerated psyche. They tell the harrowing tale of blunted human relationships. The portrayal of feminine sensibility is a pervading strain in all Amrita Pritam’s works. Amrita’s ability to focus on the sensibility of her protagonist is found in novels like Dr. Dev, The Skeleton, Trump Card, The Closed Door, Two Faces of Eve, Earth, Sea and Shells, A Line in Water, and An Aerial. In her novels Amrita Pritam has gone deep into the female psyche; she explores the nature and scope of the trauma of womenfolk.

Amrita’s narration of simple events also is shaded by the emotional stress and intellectual expression. Apart from her intense subjectivity, she is broadly appreciated for her broad outlook and exact articulation of a creative woman’s conflicts. In her fiction, she depicted women from all age-groups, both the elite and the illiterate classes. Her women characters are presented as the victims of their outer life-situations and inner struggle, their options and perceptions, their realities and illusions.
As a prolific writer, all her writings reflect the human predicament, particularly as seen through the eyes of a woman, and are full of passages which have ‘a terrible beauty and ecstasy’ which haunts us. Her fiction (short and long) was an alternative medium to take in the confusions, paradoxes and dilemma of the life of women in the new secular, urban society spanning feudal values with the demands of the post-industrial social milieu. This marked not only an expansion of her awareness but also her disillusionment with the utopias offered by the new system and ideologies. She performed an impossible task of sustaining an undimmed passion for social justice along with her stout refusal to compromise the integrity of her vision and allow her to be commandeered to support the suppression of man’s freedom under any pretexts.

Amongst her outstanding work in this genre special mention may be made of The Skeleton which deals with the social background of the woman’s suffering heightened by the partition and its dehumanized consequences. In later novels the emphasis shifts to man-woman relations in all the joyous details of their mutual discovery of one another and accounts of their alienation from each with the resultant ennui and sense of absurdity. All drama in Amrita’s fiction is situated in the paradigm of man-woman relationship. An Amrita Pritam novel (or novella) is inconceivable without a love story being at the centre of it, and fictional situation in her has any worthwhile dramatic possibilities unless it is permeated by love. Perhaps she could not seriously think about human life or human society, whether in particular or in general terms, without relating it to love. “Love to her seems to be the crux of the total human situation, with all other human concerns deriving, as it were, their very raison d’être from its fount. All forms of morality, whether interpersonal or social or religious or national is subsumed in a broad humanism, whose essence consists in love” (Dhamija 139).

Amrita Pritam’s idealism in love shades her poetry and fiction with an intense feeling of sadness that results out of consciousness of reality. She creates two different worlds intermingled in the responses of her characters. One is the poetic and dreamy world of emotional fluctuations of mind and the other is cruel world of pragmatic and indifferent human beings, exploiting the weak and the minor. Her poetic vision acquires a new world-view, newer depths to mature into a rare inner wisdom in her novels. Her
writing imbibes the complexity of human situation and multiple facets of human experience and their significance.

**Themes and Modes in Fiction**

Using the Indian concepts, Amrita Pritam has traced the gradual degradation of man, leading to a sense of alienation, loss of identity, a recurring theme in all her writing. The conflict that arises out of socially unaccepted love is a major theme in her fiction. Illegitimacy has been a haunting theme in Amrita’s fiction to reveal the victimization of women and their consequent suffering. She establishes, nevertheless, a finely knitted pattern of relations, wherein nature and introvert women find themselves isolated. The agony of female mind through alienation and disillusionsments in their lives, constituted the core of Amrita’s vision. In *Dr. Dev* and *Earth, Sea and Shells* the same theme recurs in one form or the other and in many of her novels. Man-woman relationship and the place of woman in the so-called male-ordained society is another recurring theme of her fiction. Feminism and humanism are the main themes used by Amrita in her write-ups. Through her work she always tried to portray the realism of society. Mythopoeism and psychic reality were her concerns in the later novels, like *Thirteenth Sun* and *49 Days*. She takes up two different systems of thought, Indian and Tibetan and weaves them into tales of unusual charm. Both these novels are better read as two volumes of one, though they are complete in themselves. One reason could be as the same characters appear in both.

Amrita uses different modes to portray her subjects. She generally employed modes like fantasy, dream-sequences, associationist interior monologue (also sometimes called ‘Stream of Consciousness’) to cognize reality. From 1968 onwards, almost all her novels/novellas recourse to one or the other of these modes. Amrita’s goal was to deprive humans of opacity and rigidity which makes masks and puppets of them instead of filters and living beings. To heighten the reader’s interest in the psychical progress of her protagonists, the plot of the novels is kept simple, cut down to the minimum, with the facts all internal. The shadow of impending doom or death is ever present. Sequences are cut loose from the present external event and range freely through the depths of time and
memory, so that the sense of reality is illusory. Amrita Pritam, the creator is just, as she sets the stage, raises the curtain and obliterates herself – in her character’s actions.

**Style and Language**

Among women writers, especially, it can be observed that the sense of presentation is stronger and women are concerned, most of the time about the effect they shall create by their language and style. Amrita’s style is multi-dimensional as she was the master of three languages. Her style is so forceful that it seems a vain effort to translate her lines into any other language for the fear of losing the beauty of her original expressions. As far as Amrita’s language as a woman writer is concerned, some passages can be studied to find how the style she adopts is that of a poet rather than that of a woman or a novelist or a dramatist. Her language portrays the unique combination of depth and clarity in her vision. Amrita’s language as a poet never allows the readers to feel the drudgery of routine life around. Her sublime world of ideas lifts one’s mind to reach the vision of aesthetic world full of passions, love, devotion and faith. This world is created by her strong sensibility and offers no place to hatred, bitterness or harsh feelings. Her expressions are not critical even when she talks about negative realities. The translated works of Amrita’s are admirable attempts by the translators since the translations convey the same tone and shade of meanings as in their original texts. The originality of her thought makes her language indispensable even in translation. One can enjoy the translated versions of her writings with the same pleasure as the original ones.

**Women in Amrita Pritam’s Fiction**

Amrita Pritam was an empathetic writer. As a creative artist of fiction, she had assumed the role of an analyst exploring the ways of marking the specificity and separateness of women in their suffering; and gender for her became a prime factor in the formation of her artistic dispensations. In Punjabi literature, she is popularly known as the most significant voice of the women. Ranavir Rangra says, “Amrita Pritam’s life and writings are a little removed from the usual beaten path of ordinary mortals. Both contain a rejection of tradition and a passionate search for individual truth” (3). Her writings
bring out woman’s anguish and her pitiable condition in a male-dominated society. Facing life in all its complexity with all one’s strength – not caring even for the risks involved or the outcome – is the main motif of her writings. Her writings overflow with love for entire humanity.

Amrita’s writing is significantly rich in feeling and craftsmanship and exhibits a refinement and sensibility which are essentially feminine. In her stories and novels Amrita has held the narrow selfishness of man and society responsible for all the problems of woman. She, in her writing “Woman: A Viewpoint” (Aurat: Ek Drishtikon) admits that more than anyone else women themselves obstruct the path of woman’s liberation and development. Her writings after 1960 deal more and more with women who acknowledge their desires and their independence and accept responsibility for their lives even at the cost of love, as in the celebrated novel Aerial. Among her explicitly feminist fiction, Two Faces of Eve (Once there was an Anita), The Closed Door, Earth, Sea and Shells and A Line in Water (Village No. 36) might also be included. In Shadows of Words (Aksharon ke Saaye Mein, 1977) she acknowledges the autobiographical core in each of her stories that deal with husband-wife relationships and the loneliness of married women. In Black Rose (Kala Gulab), she explains, “My story is the story of women in every country, and many more in number are those stories which are not written on paper, but are written on the bodies and minds of women. . . ” (Tharu 162).

After 1960, her work became visibly feminist. Feminism and various aspects of feminist ideas got reflected through her novels. In fact, most of her work depicted the unhappy experiences of her married life. Amrita was overwhelmed by the suppression of women, because of their economic dependence on the male members of the family. Women had become just an artifact, an object. Through her deeply felt handling of delicate subjects of women; she captured the hearts of her readers and placed Punjabi literature on national scene. She has gifted Punjabi literature by creating some powerful women characters in fiction; Sundaran in Yatri, Pooro in The Skeleton, Chetna in Earth, Sea and Shells, Alka in A Line in Water, Annie in The Ariel and many more.
Amrita valued freedom of self and also thought of freedom of others as her own. She was a writer in search of truth and so are her women characters. She was a very independent and individualistic kind of person who was honest to self and also heard the inner voice of her heart. A great critic Revti Saran Sharma asked: “Amrita! If the heroines of your novels in search of truth leave their homes, don’t you think the effect of it can be shattering in the social context, I mean?” Amrita replied: “If false social values have until now accounted for broken homes, let a few more be broken - but, mark you from now on, at the altar of truth! Truth to me is honest thought that brings about harmony between the body and the mind …like in a well tuned musical instrument” (TRS 77). Such was her life - a long and painful search for truth which is the same in case of her women characters. In her fiction, Amrita has often attacked the system of early and arranged marriage. She offers her women characters choice between the husband and the lover voicing their consciousness of disharmonious relationship with the husband they proceed to opt for the life with their lovers, stepping out of closed domestic set up. Amrita’s attitude in portraying characters like this seems to be rooted in the notion that it is better to be truthful to oneself and isolated than be a member of pretentious relationships, actually agonizing (Varma 320).

Amrita’s women characters are well-drawn, fully-rounded human beings. Sometimes they adjust themselves to the circumstances without giving up their own ideas, as Mamta and Rajkumari in Dr. Dev, sometimes they are liberated, do what they want to without caring for the social norms as Alka of A Line in Water, sometimes they live in their dream-world with their images like Anita of Two Faces of Eve, sometimes they surrender to the social taboos like Geeta of Blank Sheets. But nowhere are they other-worldly or superhuman. They are very much from this world, belonging to this society. Amrita recalls in her autobiography, she used to get letters from women who saw themselves portrayed in her novels (Arora 22). Amrita’s women characters are all bold, courageous, optimistic, forward-looking, and never-repentant – like a part of herself. They go through misery and pain but they never complain of it. They suffer gladly for the sake of the one they love. Amrita’s tragic vision of life is portrayed in some women characters like Kammi of The Closed Door or Geeta of Blank Sheets. They have a tragic grandeur comparable to Thomas Hardy’s heroines. Amrita as a writer was passionately concerned with the nature of womanhood. Her bold and uncompromising stance in life is
reflected in her brain-daughters. “Amrita Pritam’s women characters in a bid to protect their identity – flounder between voluntary and involuntary (Anita and Annie, even Mamta) memory and keep their own sense of values. They are sensual, sensitive, dreamy people who startle readers with their honesty, caprice and raring escapades” (Varma 126-127). Nearly all her women characters are serene and silent, intellectually blessed and condemned to a painful experience of missing their image of ideal-lover in the male they find, only to disillusion themselves.

There is an air of vague sadness cocooning the women in Amrita Pritam’s novels – the tangled workings of their minds seem afloat in a water-colour of emotions. The boundaries of their self are uncertain – every one of them is a victim to vast inarticulate desires. They are bleakly honest at times, and move inexorably towards the novels’ end to expiate that are sins in the social, and not personal, context. They sacrifice all the palpable security and comfort that lies within their grasp to attain the ultimate truth. Yet the goals of their desires remain eternally outside the intense circle of their renunciation. For Mamta, Anita and Alka, ‘love is God incarnate.’ Anita, loving Iqbal, sees her love for Sagar in a larger context. She expresses: “Love can be one’s religion, the Quest one’s substance and a Man one’s God. I don’t know about others but it’s this way for me” (TFE 97). This is their goal, and they seek it passionately. Their first lovers remain defied in their memory, and they see his reflection in each man they might be attracted to.

Amrita’s women characters in remembrance of things past, relinquish their hopes for present or future happiness, “My hands are empty, I’ve lost everything I had” they whisper, and there is always a slight tinge of regret palpable in their clenched teeth attempts to find the remedies for their secret sorrows. They despair, but never lack in courage or dignity, as they draw out their existence in a continuous state of tension and intense soul-searching. They can be projected only through a direct transcription of their consciousness. A character closely resembling Amrita’s women, who inhabits the nebulous zone of indecision, is Sue, the heroine of Hardy’s Jude the Obscure, and Tess of Tess of the D’Urbervilles, to some extent. They desire the unattainable with a part of their very being, while the other part rejects the attained, and so the nexus of despair remains unbroken. The poetic sublimity and uniqueness underlining the monologues of Amrita’s heroines elevate her novels to the level of poetry.
Amrita Pritam as an outstanding woman writer of her age, dared to achieve in life what she portrayed in her fiction. She broke the Sati-Savitri image the permanent mould destined for Indian women, and advocated the chastity of the soul. Amrita’s women are always contrary for not only does a single body house two separate identities, but also two diametrically opposed modes of morality. This is the duality inherent in them, the personal cross they have to bear in search of their true identity. As Anita says:

I want to live one life Iqbal, both inside and out I broke the rule because I lived one life inside me and something else outside. What I thought with my eyes closed was different from what I was with my eyes open. It’s not easy to break the web society weaves. I spent years just thinking it over. And now I’ve gone and done it so that I shouldn’t have to lie anyone, nor to myself (TFE 102).

Amrita’s women, who surge forth to search for truth – the truth of their moral existence have the self-knowledge that their life would be difficult and tortured. They know that persona life would be shattered, and society would treat them as pariahs because they had dared to question its norms. The women in Amrita’s novels have a rare honesty and candidness that the men sadly lack. Mamta who has the world to lose – her secure home, her husband’s respect and love and her child – blurts out: “Jagdish I was not a virgin when I married you. I was not only a wife, but also a mother – I the mother of somebody else’s child” (DD 36).

Amrita’s women, who seek the truth of their love, have the courage to break away from their husbands because they cannot live a lie. Mamta, Kammi, Anita, or Annie leave husbands as they need to seek the truth of their love and their individual dignity. These women refuse to be mere wives, because “wife in this country generally means a broken woman” (TFE 141). There is a streak of reckless adventure in their mental make-up which is seen in Anita, Mamta and Annie. The security of the husband is not enough for most of Amrita’s women. Anita expresses lack of an intangible something in the marriage with rare sensitivity and poetic vision. Anita says, “The gates of this city of mine have been closed by order of society and my city it plagued by the pestilence of the rules made by society” (TFE 33).
For Amrita’s women, “love or fidelity isn’t so frail that it is lost just by the tough of someone’s body. Maybe by passing through someone else’s body, they both become stranger, like a man’s mind does by passing through some calamity” (TFE 157). Yearning for blissful romance, they break out of secure, staid relationships with husbands who are neither gods nor beasts. All their lives they feed simultaneously on the manna that dreams are made of, and again on the empty husks of the might-have-beens. A tragic truth rings at the end of the each novel that these courageous, honest and dreamy women can never get or possess what they would like to have. In turgid, poetic prose, Amrita depicts the agony of the women.

Women in Amrita’s fiction start out accepting the conventional morality with the placidity of Dickensian maiden but they generally end by pronouncing a death sentence on the very social ethics they have hitherto affirmed. The substance of much of this fiction is made of the lives of women in whom a kind of holy unrest is created by the assertion of the natural impulses of love and freedom. This unrest is seen to transform them into human beings revolting against convention in the name of love and freedom. This pattern of change could be discerned in several of Amrita Pritam’s tales/novels. Though a more radical approach is found in her novels and short stories as far as women’s issues are concerned, however, Amrita Pritam was too much of a realist to compare to the feminist idealism.

Thus in story after story Amrita Pritam appears to voice protest against inequities suffered by women. Her writing has a large significance especially in an era in which the feminine mystique is sought to be exploded by the feminist writers. It appears Amrita had responded to the spirit of an age in which the perspective of the woman artist and the female psyche itself are subject of serious and exhilarating re-examination.


