

**AMRITA PRITAM AND HER NOVEL 'VILLAGE NO. 36':
EXPECTATIONS AND LIMITATIONS AS A WOMAN WRITER****DR. SANDHYA JAIN**

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ABSTRACT

Amrita Pritam is a famous name in the field of Indian writing of the twentieth century. She emerged as a great feminist writer who gave an Indian touch to feminism. She strongly advocated equal status and the rights of women. She herself faced discrimination, a lot, both as a woman and as a woman writer in an orthodox hierarchical society. Therefore, we find a kind of revolt against the shackles of old and rotten traditions, double standards in her characters both in novels and in short stories. Her Novel 'Village No. 36' gave birth to controversy due to which she was subjected to harsh criticism and faced a lot of discrimination, both as a woman and as a woman writer in Punjabi literary circle. It is assumed that women writing should be in conformation to the cultures in which they have been born and brought up. Amrita broke this myth in her writings and became an instant target for criticism. This paper will review Amrita Pritam as a woman writer and the expectations of the fellow writers and the society from her with special reference to the novel 'Village No. 36'.

Key Words: Feminism, Hierarchical Society, Conformation, Discrimination.

Amrita Pritam is a famous name in the field of Indian writing of the twentieth century. She took literature to new heights in Punjab and set such standards that are hard to beat. Her career spanned over six decades during which she produced many novels, poems biographies and her autobiography. She emerged as a great feminist writer who was not affected by Western feminism but gave an Indian touch to it. Maintaining the standards of Indian culture, she raised her voice against patriarchal domination. She strongly advocated equal status and the rights of women. Some of her novels took the literary world by storm. Her novel 'Village No. 36' gave birth to controversy due to which she faced a lot of discrimination, both as a woman and as a woman writer in a hierarchical society. Her novel 'Village No. 36' expresses the struggle of a woman to achieve the love of a man. Throughout the novel, we see various aspects of woman's power and find an opportunity to explore Amrita's stand on feminism. This novel has ample scope for the study of feminist theories and their applications to the novel.

Kumar is a famous painter who is completely devoted to his art and does not want to commit himself to anyone. On the other hand, Alka, an aspirant painter is madly in love with Kumar. Whenever Kumar requires to fulfill his physical need, he goes to prostitutes, pays twenty rupees and does not compromise on his freedom, Alka is so serious for this relationship, that she becomes ready to be physically available for Kumar in return of petty amount of twenty rupees. This was very shocking not only for Kumar, but also, for all the readers at that time.

This relationship passes through many phases and finally Kumar surrenders to the stand of Alka.

When this novel was published for the first time, it created furor in Punjabi literary circle. A great revolutionary step in a conservative society. Amrita was boycotted. The novel was banned. Society could not digest such a bold character, that too, of a girl. Men saw this character as a challenge to their, up till now, secured domain. The confidence and courage of the heroine seemed too heavy for the male society. Amrita Pritam became the instant and soft target. How she could create such a mean character!

The publication gave a push to the much-discussed topic-freedom of women writers. Anti feminists and pro feminists became vocal. Argument started about the rights of the women writers. What they should write and what they should not. Previously women were not supposed to have voice. They followed what was expected from them. Traditionally, it is expected that when women write, it is different. It is assumed that they are mothers, daughters in conformation to the cultures in which they have been born and brought up. Their writing is unconsciously influenced by this. Homans supports this attitude in 'Bearing the Word'. Amrita Pritam apparently refutes this theory in the novel 'Village no 36'. This novel shows completely different Amrita. She revolts against the stereotyped female writing about feminine sensibilities. The protagonist who is the mouth piece of Amrita moves towards an unconventional and risky zone where she has every chance to lose. Still she does not hesitate.

Amrita was not welcome in the literary circle of Punjab. She herself admits in her autobiography 'Rasidi Ticket' that women and even some men were not comfortable in her company. People did not want to acknowledge their relations with her.

Since then, Indian scenario has changed a lot. Modern Indian women writing is influenced by feminism. Feminism allows space to women to explore their own sensibilities and to express them. The women writers have become bold and write freely without any gender difference. They pose a threat to men writers and become reason of inferiority complex in them. The unprovoked comment of an erstwhile Vice Chancellor of a renowned university should be seen in this light. In an interview he said that modern Indian women writers behaved like prostitutes.

In the modern feminist literary criticism, focus is on the equal footage, genderless and balanced writing and a stage where no one is afraid of no one. Edward Carpenter argued in his 'Intermediate Sex', "There are some remarkable and indispensable types of characters, in whom there is such a union of balance of the feminine and masculine qualities that these people become, to a great extent, the interpreters of men and women to each other."

Amrita Pritam had a great desire for a society where women are taken seriously and where, they live in complete harmony with men as buddies, not as opponents. She imagined a world in which men and women are different but equal. Her female characters never want to replace men. She was dead against the discrimination on the basis of gender difference. Her writing indicates this again and again.

The basis of all feminist movements is summarized in the following words by Teresa Billington Grieg, “The reorganization of the world upon a basis of sex equality in all human relations ; a movement which would reject every differentiation between individuals upon the ground of sex, would abolish all sex privileges and sex burdens, and would strive to set up the recognition of the common humanity of woman and man as the foundation of law and custom.” Amrita trusted this religiously and wrote against the discrimination which has become very strong during a long cultural journey, not only in India but throughout the world. Indian women writers have done their bit by honest writing against sexual stereotyping of women.

The women writers have to fight on two fronts simultaneously. First, expression of the self and the second, to swim against the stream i.e: to write against the values and norms which continue to be patriarchal. Amrita asserted herself as Alka in the novel and faced the opposition of the society as a woman writer.

Kate Millet’s classical text ‘Sexual Politics’ has tried to evolve a larger cultural critique and to develop her theory of feminism. Jonathan Culler feels that the feminist criticism aims not at interpretation of the world but at the change of the consciousness of those who read and their relation to what they read. “The first act of a feminist critic is to become resisting rather than an assenting reader and by this refusal to assent, to begin the process of exorcising the male mind that has been implanted in us”.

Amrita’s whole struggle as a writer was to change the male psyche about the feminine sensibilities. In her novels, poems and short stories, we come across the desire of a woman to be understood as a human being without gender discrimination. If something is right or wrong, it should be the same for everyone. No double standards for men and women. In ‘Village No. 36’ Alka asks Kumar, “If you cannot think of yourself in terms of respectability, why must that middle-class virtue seem so necessary for me in your eyes?”

Women writers may forget their sex, while writing, but men writers are always conscious of this fact. Woman exists in the writings of men but as a muse, the idealist inspiration, she is supposed not to do anything wrong i.e. against the fixed social norms which are always in favor of man. This causes a lot of mental pressure on women, in whatever conditions they are – a writer, a painter, a dancer or simply a housewife. A woman has difficulty in gaining access to literary production as writers. Otherwise, she is very much there, in the form of characters or images etc. Virginia Woolf has commented in ‘A Room of One’s Own’.

“Imaginatively she is of the highest importance: practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover, she is all but absent from history”.

She may dominate the life of kings in fictions but in real life she has to be dominated by men in her life, meek, submissive and ‘yes, always’ type. Only this role is acceptable in the patriarchal society. That is why, Jagdish wonders at the attitude of Alka. He is rather confused and at complete loss to understand the girl. He is surprised at the proposal of a conditional marriage. He used to think that this was possible only for him. This type of adventure, very unusual and completely unexpected from a girl’s side, “I always used to think

that if ever such a condition had to be imposed, it would be from my side. We, naval officers, have such quaint lives, each new day brings dealings with newer and queerer people, but it appears you are even more adventurous”.

A blow to his male ego. He tries to be bold but till the end, he cannot muster courage and goes back foot. “ When I look at you , I see your face, but I can also see the face of the man you love, reflected in yours. How do I know I might continue to see it that way? That is why we should not get married.”

Jagdish presents one face of patriarchal society. We may criticise him for being an ordinary man. But Kumar is the other face of the society who calls himself intellectual. In fact, he is no different. Rather he is confused. He too cannot digest the revolutionary role of a girl. He remains speechless at the proposal of Alka who is ready to become faceless and nameless. “I can manage to make myself both faceless and nameless.”

In a patriarchal society of that period, it was impossible even to think in that way. Here we find Kumar conforming to the age old norms about the physical purity of a woman. Kumar appears to be conforming to the conservative views of Norman Mailer who believes biology to be a limiting factor and thinks that women should not transgress the definitive limits. He is with the male chauvinists in thinking that the woman is always subservient to the male.

Even modern authors display such biased attitude. Sir V.S. Naipaul infuriated everyone by saying that no woman was equal to him in writing, undermining the critics and authors who acknowledge the role women have played in developing literary possibilities. In an interview at the Royal Geographic Society, Sir Naipaul said, “I read a piece of writing and within a paragraph or two I know whether it is by a woman or not. I think (it is) unequal to me. ...This is because of women’s sensibility and their view of the world....Inevitably for a woman, she is not a complete master of a house, so that comes over in her writings too.”

Famous Hindi novelist Mridula Garg has written, “I do not think all women writers have a sentimental view of the world. Tony Morrison and Doris Lessing are both Nobel Prize Winners. They are not sentimental. In fact, they are brutal. You cannot define writing by gender.”

No one denies the biological differences which divide broadly man and woman. Each one has a different role to play. Therefore to declare one inferior or superior is a stereotype which has polluted the psychology of society. This division of the world into two unequal halves can be seen everywhere in homes, workplaces etc. This bitter reality and its realization has made the women writers and feminine activists to contradict and to challenge it. Amrita Pritam felt this discrimination since her childhood. She has mentioned in her autobiography that in her childhood, she was allowed only to write religious poems. As a revolt, of course a child’s revolt, she decided to do many things in dreams because nobody can control dreams. This revolt was expressed through her writings when she grew up.

Amrita was writing in a very conservative society, before freedom. It was not easy to assert her views, her sensibilities and knowledge as a writer, within the existing pattern of culture. In the society, male ego cannot tolerate the equality with women. The authors wanted to

enjoy the company of Amrita who was very beautiful. But it was very difficult for them to accept that a woman, a beautiful woman can be intelligent and can write sensibly. Man knows only one way to handle: violence, be it love, battle or writing. Character assassination is very easy. Amrita Pritam herself writes in 'Kala Gulab'(1968), "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."

In fact, the feminist movement does not demand upper hand of a woman but co-existence with each other where gender becomes unimportant. It was Shaw who smelt the change. He wrote, "I am bound to say that of late years she has been working extremely hard to eradication that impression, and make one understand that a woman is really only a man in petticoats, or if you like, that a man is a woman without petticoats. "In the world of literary production, there should be no difference. Writing is writing. There is no male or female writing.

Mahashweta Devi's writing is contradictory to the stereotyped woman writing. On the other hand, it was Sharad Chanda Chatterjee who got immense success in portraying feminine sensibilities. Biological differences affect writing. But cultural, civilizational factors affect more. Every author, male or female, carries gender difference. But question is raised only in the cases of women writers. Their writing is read not only as a text but something written by women that requires only cursory glance.

The women writers are often criticized for lacking in artistic, aesthetic and creative excellence. This may be true to some extent. Amrita's writings, especially novels, artistically are not very fine. But they have immense readability. Stories touch the heart.

At least Amrita got a chance to give herself a voice in a highly conservative society where the writing of women was limited to make miscellaneous household lists and family letters. She did not use various narrative techniques and simply narrated what she herself experienced or found around herself. She was less willing to tread the strange paths. Lakshmi Kannan says, "The woman who writes is forced to spend considerable time not in struggling or striving for artistic excellence in whatever she undertakes, nor even in her ambition to improve her range, her quality, her depth, her style, but more in addressing some very routine notions about women and feminism to the gatekeepers of writing."

Now scenario is changing very fast, finally it has been accepted. Scholars and thinkers like Ward, Veblen Thomas and Addams laid the foundation for a new generation of scholars who think of feminine and masculine traits as alternative human characteristics rather than as badges of inferiority or superiority.

Basic truth is that when a writer writes, male or female, he or she is purely a writer converting his or her experiences, ideas and thoughts into words. A woman writer is first a writer and then, a woman. The only need is a change in the psyche which refuses to accept it. Shashi Deshpande writes, "We need to remember that in writing, in expressing themselves and in giving in to the urge for self expression, women are doing what they were not supposed to be doing. When a woman writes she is in fact flouting traditions. She is

proclaiming herself and saying 'I will speak, I will say what I want to say'. The very process of writing is a loud declaration of the self, something that tradition barred her from." That is exactly what Amrita Pritam did. Her novel 'Village No. 36' is a proof of it.

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