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Woman, a Search, Through the Protagonists of 'Stench of Kerosene' and 'the Weed'

Abstract

When woman peeps through the literature in the social values, oftentimes, she is found enlightened and revolution personified. She is wailing, submissive of pitiable condition but with the burning tears rolling from their eyes, when she touches the blank pages then each page starts to flutter by the effect of truth. Truth, the mirror of society, in which intentionally, society itself does not want to look because there are thousands of thousand scratches of malpractices of society framed in it. For centuries, history repeats itself in the sense of women's condition. With the passage of time, many things changed, we put the glistened remark upon the forehead of development but the woman is still at the same place. It is thoughtful to understand the reality behind it. Amrita Pritam, who was brought up and nourished in the Punjabi blood, had shown such calibre to pour the harsh reality of women's condition in society on the paper.

Keywords: Enlightened, Revolution Personified, Malpractices of Society, Woman, And Punjabi Blood.

Introduction

"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." (Page no. 160, Lines 27-30, *Women Writing in India: The twentieth century*) In this statement, Amrita Pritam, in sarcastic tone, talks about digestive system which becomes unhealthy for society when a woman raises her voice and seeks freedom of her own part. Woman's freedom which is visible to all of us is actually not freedom but a designed pattern of chain prepared by patriarchy. In the original sense of term, the freedom of woman has been curtailed for centuries. A man can live his life at his own conditions but a woman cannot even if she dares to imagine.

Objective of the Study

Amrita Pritam was a sensitive writer towards the gender issues. Women in Indian society are victim of the gender difference. Patriarchy is playing a major part in the society and generating some critical and severe condition in society. The present paper is also dealing the issues of gender discrimination, loss of identity and suppression of female sexual desires.

Review of Literature

1. Women are actually nothing but a body to be played by the male dominated society. Being in society, she must be entitled of equal rights and respect but she is fighting for her rights for decades. She is thought as commodity and a piece of beauty and art which is only for display. (From *The Skeleton*, written by Amrita Pritam – 1987)
2. Amrita Pritam had the feeling of pain of every pitiable woman. It was the power of her writing that each woman can find her own existence in her prose and poems. She was veteran of life and what she learned through the lessons of life, she projected everything in her writing. It will not be wrong to say that her writing is a confessional path. (From *Women Writing in India: The twentieth century* Volume II edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita – 1993)
3. Women characters in the stories of Amrita Pritam never go beyond the duties inflicted upon them by the society. They deal with their responsibilities according to their capacities which show the power of Indian women. The Indian women are actually the pillar and nation builder not only from the point of a woman but also from the perspective of wife, mother, administrative officer, government officer,



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doctor, social worker etc. Being in such deplorable condition, they are never less than men. Even they have challenged the male dominated society to prove their own part. (From the article "49 Days: The Novel, Describing the Complex and Critical Aspects of Love, Friendship, Religion, Society, Scriptures and System" by Shweta Maurya – 2018)

Amrita Pritam was such great Indian writer who stroke over society fearlessly. She never took back her steps from the responsibilities as a writer. Here responsibilities as writer mean not only amusement but to give a new way to society to show its wrongs and rights and to give the suggestions and solutions of the issues also through which society is dealing. Being a woman, a female writer, a lover, a social member, she felt and experienced the closed and uncovered layers of problems, evils and malpractices. Whatever way she crossed, she felt that scary face of patriarchy of society was the biggest impediment among them. In Kala Gulab, Amrita Pritam says, "I felt as though the whole of womankind had gathered together its mental anguish and molded my soul from it." (Page no. 162, Lines 6-7, *Women Writing in India: The twentieth century*). She uttered through pen and revolutionized the Indian literature. "In the name of home, society, religion, and politics... those shadows were wrapped around the doors and walls. Somewhat deliberating, this book reaches that desired destination- when the shadows of inner consciousness may not be captured in words- yet conserving about them are these few pages- which can be anointed as an inner journey." (*Preface to Shadows of Words*)

In the short stories: 'Stench of Kerosene' and 'The Weed', Amrita Pritam has flauntingly explored the patriarchal set up of society. Both stories are sketched in different way but the pathos structured in these stories are quietly same. Both the stories deal with two female characters: Guleri and Angoori, the two beautiful and young women. Both the names relate with the rural natural folk touch and seems like a garden full of flowers and fruits. Being ignorant of cruel patriarchal rules, standards and behaviours, both get crushed in the jaws of their fate which was drawn by the dominant patriarchal hands. The patriarchal society, feminine encroachment by the cruel masculinity, individual definitions of identity and desires are the prominent themes in the prose and poems of Amrita Pritam.

'Stench of Kerosene' and 'The Weed' both are remarkable short stories written by Amrita Pritam regarding gender discrimination, female sexuality, female barrenness prevailing in the society rooted in the superstitions and strongly conditioned by patriarchal standards and values.

"Angoori was the name of the very new wife of the very old servant of the neighbours of my neighbours." The statement is sarcastic in two ways that Angoori is new in two senses: firstly, she is newly married young woman and secondly, she is the newly wife of her very old husband whose first wife has died. The rigid fashion of society is sarcastically ridiculed by Amrita Pritam in this story. In our Indian society, this is

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culture and tradition adopted in normal way. Man's first, second, third and so on marriage is acceptable in our society without any kind of hindrance and oppose. No one fingers out or raises voice against this tradition. In major cases, a large age gap is found between man and woman in such traditions still it is accepted. In many cases, it has perceived that if wife dies, the man gets married to her younger sister. Practically, it is injustice and a kind of taboo in society. The great writer, critic and feminist, Tasleema Nashreen has also advocated this issue to figure out that if a man desirously can have two or more wives, why a woman cannot? If a man, being so old can marry a woman at the cost of necessity, why a woman cannot? Why is it not easy for woman as much as for man living in society? Why is there a double and different standard for man and woman while both are living in society and creator of society? Feminist concludes this issue considering "Patriarchy" as only reason. If we could think deeper with reality then we can perceive that this patriarchal society is more difficult for alone woman than a man because every custom and tradition, every rule and standard, every character and morality is woven around the patriarchal sphere. And everyone knows how much difficult for alone woman to survive in this patriarchal society. Each day, she is criticised and she has to prove the clauses of morality through giving exams of her character. It seems impossible to define the word "Character" especially in the sense of Indian society that is only applicable to a woman not to man.

In 'The Weed', Amrita Pritam has explored the gender discrimination and female sexuality. These are the relevant issues of society injected in the superstitions by the patriarchy. Angoori, the protagonist of the story, is a young, beautiful but uneducated woman, who is taught to believe that the reading and writing are the sinful practices by which the village women must be far away. But the women of cities are not considered in such way. Angoori says to Bibiji, "It is a sin for a woman to read." Then she says, "No, it is not a sin for a woman of the city. But it is sin for a village woman."

Angoori is ignorant about the reality of world. She does not know about love and sexual desires. Only what is taught to, she knows and believes. She believes that it is sin to love another man except her husband. She tells to Bibiji about a tradition that a girl child, when five or six, "adores someone's feet." In this, the girl is directed by father's wishes because he has placed money and flowers at the man's or boy's feet. In this way, it is decided whom the girl will marry later in life. The same tradition was also done to Angoori and she became wife of old Prabhati. In the initial stage, Angoori is happy to marry to Prabhati because she is taught only husband is everything. She is taught that it is sin to have love affairs. Those girls, who have love affairs, are thought to have eaten a kind of unknown "wild weed" that is given by those men, who love them, in sweet or betel. Angoori tells about her friend who had eaten this "wild weed" then she fell in love and she used to sing sad song whole day and night without caring her own self.

Angoori is like a blank paper and ignorant to this world but after facing the reality of life, she starts to understand everything. Her sexual desires and the need of her beautiful ripen youth were crushed under the patriarchal traditions and values. Prabhati is too old to suit her. He is neither able to fulfil his desires nor he is physically capable of it. Ram Tara, who was chowkidar, oftentimes, used to take tea at Angoori home. Before coming of Angoori, he begs tea from home to home of colony but when Angoori came to city, Angoori, Prabhati and Ram Tara started to enjoy morning tea altogether. Ram Tara was "a quick grace, soft features and eyes that smiled shyly. He also spoke very well." Angoori felt love for Ram Tara. She liked the gestures, smiles, jokes of Ram Tara. Unknowingly, Ram Tara was the man who had sprinkled the feeling and fragrance of love in Angoori's heart. The desires and love, which must have been for Prabhati, were for Ram Tara. There were many serious reasons which were inflicted upon her by society. Prabhati was so old and cook in his master's home this was the reason that he used to eat there always not with Angoori. Angoori was living deserted life without any charm, love and happiness. Only Ram Tara was the other one who often used to go Angoori's home. It was natural for Angoori to have soft corner in her heart. Thus, when Ram Tara was absent in colony for few days, everything had withered inside of Angoori. She sings a sad song like her friend,

"Meri mundri mein lago naginva,
Ho bairi kaise kaatoon jobanva."

In such condition, Angoori recalls Ram Tara and wants to read and write. She wants to write a letter to Ram Tara. Angoori, who had usually adorned jewellery after her marriage from head to feet, now she has forgotten all those jewellerys. Even it will be much better to say that now she has become free from the chains of patriarchy. She has forgotten food, water and sleep. Now, she wants to enjoy the pain and happiness of love. Being in pain of the beats of love, she says to Bibiji, 'Curse on me!' she started in a voice trembling with tears, 'I never took sweets from him... not a betel even.... but tea ...'

A kind of superstition that was taught to Angoori, actually that was nothing but love. But for understanding this harsh reality, Angoori, still, has to experience the life closely. Angoori has to explore that this is nothing but the patriarchal spell casted over specially upon the girls and women. Not only this but there are also many other superstitions generated in the society by patriarchy. Even, in the twentieth century, the patriarchy has spread many superstitions prevailing in the society as, girls must get marry in the proper age otherwise they will elope or will do love marriage. Love is also a curse in society. Marriage must be happened within same caste not in inter caste. Actually, patriarchy is nothing but the power and rule over society and women. Thus, patriarchy is developing a healthy society while it is making society like dustbin to whom termite like hallow values of patriarchal standards are eating.

The second marriage condition also occurs in 'Stench of Kerosene'. Guleri has been married for seven years but she has no child. Manak, her husband loves her so much. First time, when Manak had seen her in the fair of Chamba, he had subdued by the beauty of Guleri. At once he complimented Guleri in metaphorical tone, "You are like unripe corn-full of milk". Then, Guleri had replied, "Cattle go for unripe corn. Human beings prefer it roasted. If you want me, go and ask my father for my hand."

Guleri's father was prosperous. They wanted only the happiness of her daughter. And thus, Guleri and Manak married each other. They were living a happy life but Manak's mother was demanding a child. Here in Manak's mother, the patriarchal values could be seen. Girls, women are always brought in to patriarchal atmosphere. In such condition, when any woman becomes head and gets power, the patriarchal traits in her can be seen. The same thing is visible in Manak's mother. Being a woman, she is unable to understand pain of her daughter-in-law. Manak's mother is just following the patriarchal pattern of values to be in a society, that is completely embroidered by the thread of patriarchy. When Guleri leaves for her home Chamba, Manak feels pain. Seeing her son, Manak's mother says, "Why do you croak like an old woman"? "Be a man."

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" talks about the thing that is in "absence form". Here "absence" is a mystique thing to understand. Someone who is present as an alive figure to whom we can feel but cannot have sense of that character. Being present in stories, such characters do not show their real intention. We cannot draw or understand the inner selves of such characters. Here Guleri is subaltern. We are unable to understand her grief and perplexities through which she was going beyond.

The story draws the grief and anguish of Manak and Manak's mother but the clash between Guleri and unrequited demand of society is not shown in the story. Manak's second marriage will not be decision of one day. Manak's mother's behaviour will not be changed suddenly. But yet like all hopeful and patient married women of Indian society, being so close to harsh reality of patriarchal clutches, Guleri is ignorant of upcoming danger in her life.

Amrita Pritam was very eminent writer and iconoclast. Peculiar Indian rural tradition is beautifully projected by her. Demand of a boy baby, big hampers of dowry, girls' dumb role in parent-in-laws home, kitchen as the whole world for newly brides, husband as the first worship and service for woman etc. are the typical peculiar Indian rural tradition and culture. Guleri had an unbreakable belief upon Manak and Manak's love. At the time of departure from Manak, Guleri asks with a smile, "Will you come and play it on the day of fair"? Here she asks about playing flute. She was fond of music played on flute by Manak. Without receiving any positive answer, having belief upon Manak's coming in the fair at Chamba, she goes to her parents finally. She tells with privilege when Manak will go to fair then she will return with him.

Suddenly, beautiful happy life turns in tragic fate. She commits suicide to hear the news of Manak's second marriage. When Bhavani, friend of Manak, returns from the fair of Chamba. He tells to Manak, "Guleri is dead." He also told to Manak, "When she heard of your second marriage, she soaked her clothes in kerosene and set fire to them." The strike of patriarchal standards and values fired everything of peacefully, happily married life of Guleri and Manak. Manak becomes isolated and goes through the pain of identity crisis. Manak grieves over the loss of Guleri to whom he had loved more than anything else.

In this story, Manak is also suffering by the hollow and decayed patriarchal values. While he is man but he has to pay the cost to be in the patriarchal society, where barrenness is a curse, where a woman is only a puppet and controlled by the cruel hands of patriarchy. Manak does not act against his mother's desires and result brings the death of Guleri. He regrets on the loss of Guleri. Manak becomes a body on stature after death of Guleri. When Manak's mother give new born baby into his lap, Manak stares on new-born babe a long time and suddenly with pain and anguish starts scream and tells, "Take him away! He stinks of kerosene." Regret and guilt subdues his mind and body and he becomes unresponsive. Once his second wife complains to her mother-in-law, "I am not his wife", "I am just someone he happened to marry." Even the second wife of Manak is also victimized of patriarchy. She gets married to Manak only because Manak's mother needs a baby of her son but she does not get love of Manak. Here, in this story, she becomes means and medium of patriarchy. Neither, she is happy to live with Manak nor Manak is responsive to the desires of his second wife because he had loved only to Guleri, who has passed away. With the death of Guleri, Manak loses his existence also.

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Conclusion

Thus, through the stories 'Stench of Kerosene' and 'The Weed', Amrita Pritam has portrayed the most relevant issues of society of twentieth century. There are many girls like Angoori and Guleri, not only in the rural and lower society of India but in the middle society also, who are victimized of typical Indian traditions and customs. Amrita Pritam was not only a writer but an iconoclast. Her own life was also a revolution which she bore and experienced and evolved like eminent literary writer. A well known Indian critic Suresh Kohli told to define Amrita Pritam, "It is the name of a yatra, a journey, a travelogue of evolution, an odyssey of inner growth..."

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