

Modes of Acceptance and Resistance in the Autobiographies of Amrita Pritam and Kamala Das

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Abstract

Women in the past have been oppressed in Indian patriarchal families and therefore are not able to deviate from the set norms, values and traditions of society. Women are degraded and persecuted because they themselves do not rise against the orthodox norms laid down by society. However since the post- Independence era; the condition of women has undergone a drastic transformation where women have become very bold, assertive and conscious about their rights as a female. Women writers like Amrita Pritam, Kamla Das, Indira Goswami, Shobha De, Dilip Kaur Tiwana and Ismat Chughtai in their autobiographical works have expressed the inhibitions of women and the cultural taboos imposed on them by the Indian society and voiced their wrath against patriarchal domination.

The research paper is a sincere attempt to examine women issues and the means of acceptance and resistance faced by two Indian women writers, Amrita Pritam and Kamla Das in their personal lives, as mentioned in their autobiographies namely *The Revenue Stamp* and *My Story*. As modern Indian women and also true feminists both these women writers have raised their voices against all forms of oppression, rebelled against the barriers of gender and finally attained dignity of self by resisting to adverse situations and establishing their identities within the dominant Indian patriarchy.

Keywords: oppression, gender, acceptance, resistance, identity

The word autobiography can be broken into three component auto which means (self) bio meaning (life) and graph meaning (writing). An autobiography is a form of self revelation where the writer reveals himself by weaving the story of his personal experiences with the help of memories of the past honestly and openly revealing facts about his personal life and striking a balance between his experiences and his 'self'.

Autobiographies in particular have a deep relevance for women who under go gender inequalities and need a platform for self expression in order to assert their identities. The question of gender therefore becomes most important as the female writer's identity is established with respect to how others see her and accept her. Women autobiographies reveal the turmoil of the feminine psyche of the Indian society and desire to express themselves through their writings and attain self-fulfillment. There remains a contradiction between a woman's inner self and what expectations society holds from her and therefore women are constantly looking for support to their resistance to the societal norms. It is therefore significant to note the reason why the study of self is important for women. Nayantara Sahgal mentions the purpose of writing autobiographies:

Writing of any sort helps to put your world in order, all the shapeless, bewildering fragments of it. It helps you to figure out what is happening in and around you...These things will never be understood until they are written and sometimes not even then. But writing helps the process.

In the later part of twentieth century women autobiographers like Amrita Pritam, Kamla Das, Indira Goswami, Shobha De, Dilip Kaur Tiwana and Ismat Chughtai who were very frank in the expression of their innermost feelings have boldly expressed their social inhibitions, the cultural taboos laid down by the society and their reactions to such constraints. While Indira Goswami's work *Unfinished* deals with her description of the plight of young widows living in Vrindavan who were trapped into the flesh trade, ShobhaDe's *Selective Memory* is about the kind of resistance she as a woman puts up within a conservative society to choose her career and to retain her individuality. Diip Kaur Tiwana's *Nangeperan da Safar* talks about the innocent rural women with suppressed desires while Ismat Chughtai's *Kaghazi Hay Pariah* gives an insight into her turbulent and unconventional life where she refused to be perturbed by societal norms.

Amrita Pritam along with Kamla Das have much in common as both have adopted the confessional mode of writing through which they reveal their innermost feelings about their encounters in love or betrayal and their craving for desire fulfillment. They have broken the shackles of social taboos, defied the patriarchal set up prevalent in the Indian social system and asserted their individuality to seek self fulfillment. Amrita Pritam, a prolific Punjabi writer woman, recipient of the Sahitya Kala Akademi award and the Padma Shri is different

from her contemporaries because she frankly asserts herself as a woman and reveals her angst and exhibits the consciousness of the hegemonic structure of patriarchal domination. She is exceptionally candid in her autobiography *The Revenue Stamp* making her work noteworthy depicting her boldness and honesty about her sexual desires and her strong physical and emotional needs which remained unfulfilled by her husband. *My Story* finds the best expression of feminine sensibility in a male dominated society.

The Revenue Stamp is a true story of Amrita Pritam both as a woman and the writer. It is actually a stamp on the life of a woman who loves literature, who is outspoken about her family life, her uneasy relationship with her father, a troubled unpleasant marriage and her romantic relationships. She has been often criticized for being overtly outspoken in her treatment of sex or writing against her religion (Sikhism). She asserts her identity as a 'female self' and says:

Whatever 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 (2)

The very fact that Pritam planned to write her autobiography *The Revenue Stamp* despite Khushwant Singh mocking at this idea saying that her life was so small that it could be written on the overleaf of a revenue stamp shows her resistance and obstinate determination towards the publication of *Raseedi Ticket* (The Revenue Stamp). Her relatives and friends also advised her not to get her work published in Punjabi, her own mother tongue as it would evoke negative response shows that Amrita did not bother about what people said and even though society would go against her still she decided to publish it in Punjabi. Ultimately it was published in 1976 in Punjabi language and further translated into several other languages.

In *The Revenue Stamp* she expresses her rebellious ideas and also the acceptance of the sufferings of a woman. She very boldly reveals her personal experiences regardless of any moral judgments and refuses to conform to the patriarchal set up prevalent in the Indian social system. She expresses her inner thoughts and feelings and desires and dilemmas as a woman and feels the need to write about the incidents which occurred in her life that question

the hegemonic structures that exist within Indian society. The depiction of Amrita's father's sister Hakku who fasted for forty days and puts on saffron robes on the realization that her husband Bella Singh was not made for her shows her strong resistance to the societal walls that limit her desires and freedom but is daring enough to accept such limitations and overcome them.

The only child of poet and school teacher Kartar Singh, Amrita, after her mother's death had to move to Lahore with her father. When she was sixteen she wrote poems secretly and tore them as her father only encouraged her to write on religious matters. At that time she had no option but to accept her father's orders. She says "I began writing and it seems to me that I wrote because I wanted to forget those moments of rejection I felt in him. In addition in every poem I wrote I called the cross of forbidden desires." (3) As she lost her mother at an early age her desire for companionship remained unfulfilled. She silently rebelled against her father who wanted her to meditate and also openly against her grandmother who was orthodox, used separate tumblers for Hindus and Muslims for having tea or coffee. Amrita insisted upon having milk only through the tumblers meant for Muslims. Consequently her father made the grandmother discontinue with this unjust practice. As she was growing up she began questioning parental authority. She recalls the she "questioned what had been preached to me and I questioned the entire stratified social scheme...I was thirsty for life...what I got instead was advice and constraint, which only fed my rebellion" (7) Although she had prayed to God during her mother's sickness when the latter passed away she was heartbroken and refused to believe in the supreme power "burst out in red hot rage, God heeds no one, not even children..there is no God". (5) Henceforth Amrita remained disillusioned, emotionally shattered and found herself insular. She started imagining a companion who would be her protector which eventually gave rise to the artist in her.

In Indian society marriage has been a social bondage imposed on women. Amrita's engagement at four and later marriage to Pritam Singh and her divorce at the age of twenty eight left her unhappy and lonely though she doesn't mention much about her relationship with her husband. Writing served as a defense mechanism for her to escape from the memories of rejection that she experienced. She mentions in *The Revenue Stamp* about her reluctance towards the institution of marriage and how helpless she felt while conforming to this practice:

I went up to the terrace and wept my heart out in the pitch-black dark, father knew about my state of mind...I kept on telling him repeatedly, I do not want to get married. The bridegroom and his party had already arrived. Both father and I had given prolonged thought to this wedding ...not having much hard cash, he was stung to the quick when he told me of this more from their side...my one and only thought was to put myself to death then and there.(20)

In spite of social and religious taboos she maintained passion at relationships with Muslims activists and artists like Sajjad, Sahir and Imroz. While Sajjad was her friend from Pakistan with whom she shared a platonic bond but after his death she was in great distress and gloom. Sahir Ludhianvi was a famous Urdu poet and with whom she shared an intimate yet silent relationship which was disapproved by Muslims and Sikhs but Amrita hardly cared for this opposition. She admits that whenever Sahir came to see her he would carry on smoking while “she would intensively long to touch him but could not overcome ...My own reservation”. (12) However when she separates from him her heart becomes desolate. After his death she cherished beautiful memories of their “silent” and “pure” relationship. She says, “It was a beautiful relationship in silence. The dignity of a blank paper is even there today.” (13) Her relationship with the painter, Imroz has been the most fascinating as despite being eight years younger to her she accepted him as her man and did not hold any regrets about her decision to stay with him without getting married. Commenting on her relationship with Imroz she openly states that she found a person, who becomes everything for her, one who is her friend, lover, mentor and God to her.

Pritam candidly reveals and boldly admits that she drinks and smokes, which is not accepted norm for women in the Indian society. She is “acutely aware of the prevailing attitudes towards a woman who smokes and drinks”. However at the same time she justifies her sense of guilt not being able to strike a balance between her traditional and modern self by giving a religious appearance to her acts of drinking and smoking. She says, “...the cigarette between my fingers or the glass of drink in my hand transforms themselves into something purer”(220) Similarly she has the courage to openly accept her relationships that she had with different men. Regarding the treatment given to females in Indian society she expresses in an interview :

...I do not idealize woman, what is important for me is the mental makeup and its evaluation. The only difference between male mind and the female mind is that their drawbacks are different. Economy in a man's control makes him forceful and imposing while the lack of power makes woman reserved jealous and slavish...I think slavery is a part of mind rather than gender.

Kamala Das also known as Madhavikutty or Kamala Suraiya has been a popular Malayalam writer from Kerala with several novels, volumes of poems short stories and essays to her credit. She is popular for the frank and open manner in which she has expressed the deep secrets of a woman's heart and the disappointments and frustration of marital and extra-marital life. The story of Kamala Das is extraordinary due to her daring treatment of the theme of sex which was a taboo among women writers of her generation. Kamala Das expresses in her autobiography '*My Story*' that she felt "chained in a loveless, torturous, meaningless marriage." As a woman she is not shy of her intense physical and emotional desires and describes her sexual, romantic adventures with great honesty that is the hallmark of her writings.

My Story mentions how Das resisted the marital rape which her brutal husband inflicted on her while she was still too young and his homosexual relationship which he continued even after their marriage. The selfish husband never understands the resistance of his sexual partner and exploits her completely. She mentions in the chapter 'Wedding Night' how his callousness shocks her, on the first night of her marriage when "his hands bruised my body and left blue and red marks on the skin" She writes, "...then without warning he fell on me, surprising me by the extreme brutality of the attack." His flirtatious relations made Kamala indignant, 'I made up my mind to be unfaithful to him, at least physically.'¹⁹

Kamala Das has explored man woman relationship in concrete terms liberating and empowering women. Kamala Das is then entangled with an elderly man known for his lustful adventures where she finds ultimate gratification and security. She indulges in infidelity which she justifies "I was ready for love....Rite for sexual banquet." (25) Kamala Das felt betrayed, lonely and disappointed when she found that her love was, "Like almost looking for a begging bowl which only sought for a replace." (34). She goes on to relate to another touching experience which depicts her ecstasy at having found her ideal love.

During that summer while the Gulmohurs burnt the edges of the sky, he dressed my hair with white flowers plucking them; from beneath my window what did he want from me once or twice standing near him with his arms around my shoulders. I whispered, I am yours do with me as you will, make love to me but he said No, in my eyes you are a goddess, I shall not dishonor your body (37)

Her narration of sexual exploits and her hopes and frustrations represents her attempts to be submerged to the other self realizing she loses a part of her in every encounter. Kamala Das describes all the events and situations she comes across without any reservation. Her quest for identity leads her through multiple relationships each hurting her emotionally. She describes one of her lovers as “a handsome man, with grey eyes and glossy skin and a beautiful smile”. She says she fell in his arms as though she had found her Krishna. She says: “...I was looking for an ideal lover. ...Perhaps I was seeking the cruelty that lies in the depths of a man's heart: otherwise why did not I get my peace in the arms of my husband”.⁴¹

. *My Story* portrays the inner life of a woman in agony and is a revolutionary book which showcases a shameful society where males do not respect women. On '*My Story*', M.K. Naik remarks:

Kamala Das" person is no nymphomaniac; she is every woman who seeks love she is beloved and betrayed expressing her 'endless female hungers' the muted whispers the love of womanhood; she may flaunt a grand flamboyant love, but in her heart of hearts she remains the eternal eve proudly celebrating her essential femininity.²⁷

To conclude being iconoclasts both Amrita Pritam and Kamala Das have asserted their freedom in writing whatever they like, irrespective of what others think of them. They have discarded traditional canons of Indian womanhood. Being women with strong feminine sensibilities they have explored in their autobiographies the concept of a modern woman who no longer is subjected to domestic oppression and who does not hesitate to express her frailties and virtues as a woman. They have inspired Indian women to liberate themselves from the shackles of male domination and social taboos by rebelling against the numerous restraints of society and all kinds of female exploitation.

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