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## Re-presenting the Self: A Study of Amrita Pritam's autobiographies *The Revenue Stamp* and *Shadow of Words*

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### Abstract

The study of self has been invariably a multifarious subject to tackle with due to its suppleness. This is perhaps the reason that all philosophers in all times have tried to interpret according to their own ways. Amrita Pritam is a well-known Punjabi author. She is primarily a poet and her poetic self is re-presented in her autobiographies namely *The Revenue Stamp* and *Shadow of Words*. She resorts to self reflexivity through these autobiographies. She puts a deep urge to produce autobiography (ies) to re-present her 'self' without resorting to the use of tropes. Hence for her autobiographies were as much represented as they name re-presentation of their self. The present paper undertakes an investigation into the self-representation in the autobiographies/autobiographical works exploring how Amrita wrote not as much to describe herself as what she is but how did she become what she is. Hence the study of self invariably becomes a study of self both as an object as well as subject. An analysis of her self representation also paves way to understand their contribution to the literary tradition of autobiography besides providing a discourse to the public.

**Keywords:** Self, Self-reflexivity, self re-presentation, discourse, literary tradition of autobiography.

### 1. Introduction

Although self is represented as genderless, sexless, raceless, ageless and classless, feminists argue that these notions of 'self' are designed to mask a white, healthy, youthfully middle-aged, middleclass, and heterosexual man. Simone de Beauvoir's scathing observation, "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the 'Other'", (*The Second Sex* xxviii) sums up why 'self' has been such an important issue for feminists. To be the 'Other' is to be the non-subject, the non-person, the non-agent – in short, the mere body ("Feminist Perspectives on Self"). That is also the reason why the notion of 'self' as a unified whole has always been more appropriate for man rather than woman. Women's lives have been seen as fragmented or contradictory for their innate autonomous self and the oppressive expectations the society has from them. So while understanding 'self' separate from those oppressive norms often muddles women's selfhood, subjectivity and agency, in isolation their problems appear to be personal failings. The activities like friendship among women, lesbianism, support groups for rape victims and battered women, and women's consciousness raising and activist groups afford women the opportunity to express and even realize their self, and develop language to make sense of their jarring experience, which restores their self-esteem by providing them with an opportunity to reflect on the social meanings of their experience. Within these contexts, women find support for their resistance to social norms and for their struggles to overcome personal privations or pressures. Such practices seem to discharge women of the burden of 'otherness' enabling them to assert subjectivity, agency and autonomy. The latter is not conflated with self-sufficiency and free will; rather it is seen to be helped by supportive relationships and has a sense of responsibility inherent in it. Subordination endangers women's autonomy in a number of ways. Not only does internalized oppression mold women's desires and alienate them from themselves but those in subordinate positions are also offered all sorts of incentives to minimize friction and ease their lot by satisfying those with power ("Feminist Perspectives on Self"). While patriarchal society effects subordination and constrains autonomy of women, egalitarian communities amplify it. Feminist accounts view autonomy as an ongoing and improvisational process of exercising self-discovery, self-definition, and self-direction skills ("Feminist Perspectives on Self")

It is true that not an easy job to write; it is even more difficult to write a literary piece; it is something the most difficult task to write an autobiography as the genre demands truthfulness of a confession. Hence, autobiography brings special problems especially for a female autobiographer living in a male-dominated society and resisting the patriarchal norms. Since the "I" of the autobiographer enjoys the center stage in autobiography and the genre requires externalizing the innermost truths of experiential reality within the limitations of human memory,

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it becomes challenging for a female autobiographer to externalize what gynocritics would call “the feminine mode of experience” (Heinamaa 73) as thinking of, feeling and perception of the outer world. Thus representation of ‘self’ in autobiography demands truth, sincerity and honesty on the part of the female autobiographer who has to address the male dominated society and play with the literary tools within phallogocentric system. Besides, for a female autobiographer it becomes very difficult to be heard in a patriarchal social structure. Amrita Pritam for whom an autobiography is “the Gospel of truth” (*The Revenue Stamp* 146) has succeeded in penning down her inner world and in voicing her desires, dreams and idealism in her autobiography *The Revenue Stamp* (1976) and *Shadow of Words* (2004). These are bold representations of the author’s self, which are expressive of her dilemmas as a woman as well as her autonomy. Written in a style that transcends and even redefines the conventional boundaries of autobiography, the writer both re-presents herself and theorizes ‘self’.

Amrita Pritam, a prolific and versatile genius was born on August 31, 1919 in Gujranwala in a part of India, which later became Pakistan. She is widely considered as the first prominent woman Punjabi poet, novelist, essayist and the leading 20<sup>th</sup> century poets of the Punjabi language, who is equally esteemed on both the sides of the India-Pakistan border. Among the contemporary Indian writers she occupies a unique position for her confessional outpouring in defiance of the patriarchal social system and assertion of an individual self aspiring to understand and realize its optimum human potential. Her *The Revenue Stamp* drawing broad material details of her life tells that she was the only child of her parents, though *Shadow of Words* also talks about her dead infant sibling brother. She observes, “I was barely three when my younger brother still crawling on his knees passed away” (*SOW* 1). Her father Kartar Singh Hitkari was a school teacher and a poet. She got deprived of motherly love at a very tender age. Her childhood was spent under the loveless patronage of her father, who pined for a son and who in his spiritual pursuits could hardly understand the desires of the writer as an adolescent woman.

Erik Erikson writes, “[These autobiographies] are written at certain stages of life for the purpose of re-creating oneself with the image of one’s own method and they are written to make that image convincing” (qtd. in Eakin 102). The theoreticians of the women autobiographers repeatedly point out how the question of self representation by woman autobiographer, the question of gender becomes paramount because autobiography cannot be written outside the cultural and linguistic grid. Amrita’s personal life has been a bold subjective tale, and an investigation into representation of herself in her autobiography (ies) shows her femaleness, especially taking into cognizance terms like ‘Female’, ‘Feminine’, ‘Feminist’, ‘Sex’ and ‘gender’. Although the word ‘female’ is associated with biology and by implication all women are females/feminine in gender, in gender studies and feminist literary studies ‘feminine’ refers to the set of ideals put forth by patriarchal society for women. Hence it is more or less an imposed identity imparted to women. On the contrary, the word ‘feminist’ is used for one who talks about the rights and privileges of women; who wants equality between man and woman. In her book *A Literature of Their Own: From Charlotte Bronte to Doris Lessing*, Elaine Showalter elaborates the terms while categorizing women writers into three stages namely feminine, feminist and female. The female phase is in a sense of rejection of

imitation/ internalization and protest. The women writers of this phase feel the place of female experience in the process of art and literature. Elaine is of the opinion that autonomous art can be expected from women of autonomous self. Many women writers of female phase started thinking and writing in their own language redefining the internal and external aspects of writing. Amrita Pritam, undoubtedly, carries over the stance of female phase and truly exhibits its spirit. She carves out a path for herself both as a woman and as a writer. Her representation of herself in her autobiographies exhibits that a writer’s self has abetted her in exploring the womanly self in her. Reflecting her meta-self she says, “In the totality of myself as a writer, the woman in me has had only a secondary role to play. So often I had nudged myself into an awareness of the woman in me. The writer’s role is obvious. But the existence of the other being have I increasingly discovered through my creative works” (*TRS* 26).

Recollecting the feminine in her in her autobiography she explains how thrice she felt the feminine in her. The first incident is related to the mother in her. In her dreams a vision of a child haunted her. Pritam writes, “Very often I dreamt of one: a fair face with finely chiseled features looking into my eyes. I began to recognize it after its repeated appearances. . . . But when I woke up, I would find myself all alone – a woman in name, who, if she could not become a mother, would find no meaning at all in existence” (*TRS* 26). Next incident exhibits the erotic woman in her. She feels the entering of a woman in her while rubbing Vicks on Sahir’s throat and chest when he was ill. The mere touch of his body awakes in her a complete woman. She says, “I rubbed Vicks on his throat and chest- in fact I went on and on, as if I could spend the rest of my life doing it. The mere contact had magnetically rendered me into a woman, with no need at all for paper or pen” (26). *Shadow of Words* includes a story ironically titled, “This is Not a Story” (21) embedded in the chapter “Shadows of the Previous Birth” that expresses her longing for a home with Sahir, which remained unrealized for the silence of the latter, though Amrita was ready to cross the “trench of religion” (28) and walk out of her marriage to Pritam even if she had to “unwrap this thread with my nails. If I can’t open it with my nails, I will do it with my teeth” (28). Whenever she was with Sahir, despite his reticence she felt a “magic house” (29) being constructed and demolished before the burning desire in her could cool off over the years. Thirdly, the same feelings are aroused in her when Imroj, with whom she had a live in relation till she died, labeled a red mark on her forehead with his brush. Amrita has very succinctly given expression to the mother, mistress and wife in herself, though no where she would define herself oppressed with motherhood or domesticity.

Amrita Pritam has effortlessly redefined her typical and individual experiences as a woman. In her early period of her life which may be put equivalent to that of the feminine phase, she goes by the societal norms raising no voice against the suppression. Her consciousness of being a daughter and not a son and her father’s frustration thereon, triggers the self narration in her autobiography *The Revenue Stamp*. She is conscious of her femininity yet she is determined to vindicate it against male supremacy. While describing the conservative norms of society which are invariably established by members of patriarchal set up, she seems to present a critique of preference for a male child. She indirectly points out that her mother too desired for the birth of a son. The ‘mother’, ‘the woman-mother’ and ‘the wife’ are pointer to the feminine in her, which do not shade out the female in her. Even as a

mother, she exhibits an exceptional straightforwardness as she does when asked by her son if Sahir is his father. Instead of betraying a moral confusion, she expresses her desire.

Though brought up in a repressing atmosphere, the autobiography reflects on how the seeds of resistance too were sown in her in the same house. The portrayal of her father's only sister Hakkoo, who went on fast for forty days and put on saffron robes later on when she realized that her husband Bella Singh was not the one for her, exhibits the emergence of her consciousness of resistance, though through renunciation of desire, to male social order a strategy which she later reworked as seeking desire fulfillment. In her autobiography, she has nowhere shown herself as a woman protesting for herself against patriarchal oppression, though she does symbolically refer to the patriarchal limitations. This aspect of the self of Amrita is best reflected in her dreams. Remembering her childhood days as an adult writer at the age of forty, she represents in her dreams 'forts', symbolizing societal walls that were raised and demolished around her but she always felt supported either by "the form and features of a man's face or sometimes by her pen" (TRS 7). But her bold spirit takes a leap over such a limitation. She observes, "I dreamt of a great big dark castle, with my little self a prisoner within . . . Fearless, I flew over the vast expanse of the earth below . . . the guards flailing their arms but failing to reach out and catch me (10). Her visions reflect the feminine and the feminist in her. The feminine and the feminist blend in her sometimes in the form of a dilemma but she is able to overcome them by invoking the female in her. This underlines the growth of the self of Amrita which her autobiographies represent as in continuum. They clearly show her sense of struggle and how she is able to find the solution within herself. Pritam observes:

Like a genie from a streak of smoke it emerges – sometimes from the anguish that goes into the smoke of a song, from the budding leaf of a twig, even from the moon as it shines on the waves of the sea. At times, when I am engulfed in my loneliness, I have found it gushing forth-coursing in the veins and speeding up the flow of blood in my body. And with all this, the pallor that should otherwise come with weariness of a kind, takes on a fresh color. (TRS 7)

Instead of becoming the prey of sultriness, she is able to poise her 'self' in all conditions and bring harmony inside. She does not let herself be the victim of either external or internal turmoil. Her inner most self is able to reach poise. This has been abundantly represented by her in *The Revenue Stamp*.

The self representation of Amrita Pritam in this autobiography shows how even in repressing environment, she did not internalize a sense of inferiority because of the emergence of a rebellious self in her, and, therefore, could choose the path that leads her to freedom. Feminists including Luce Irigaray, Elaine Showalter and Elizabeth Meese have grappled with the question of how the situation can be overturned if the interpretive community has instilled in the mind of the women the inferiority regarding their gender. But Albany is of the opinion that "nothing can be internalized totally and irrevocably; we always have internalized norms from various cultural contexts and contacts. Each internalization of repression contains the possibility of rebellion" (Albany xii). The manifestation of this idea can be seen in Amrita's representation of self in her autobiography. She exhibits a consciousness of the patriarchal dilemmas but questions the authority of the hegemony and asserts herself as the feminine, feminist and the female self in different periods of her experiential reality blending into her memory at the moment

of writing. Thus Amrita, the narrator revisits, recollects, reevaluates, reinterprets and reconstructs the past in her autobiographies.

The term 'autobiographical reliability' or 'authenticity' in narrative self-portrayal investigates the nature and usages of memory addressing the conflicting notions of autonomy and reliability in present, past, perceived and actual subject identities, followed by considerations of narrative continuity, inclusions and omissions, and the deceptive nature of the nostalgic impulse (Smith 2). In this way the imaginative becomes more appropriate than the imaginary. Since memory is always fragmentary, autobiography is the compilation of disparate and fragmentary episodic memories into a coherent linear narrative (5), Amrita while writing her autobiography *The Revenue Stamp* struggles to give it linearity but true to the nature of memory cannot help giving it a fragmentary structure. In *Shadow of Words* she at the outset gives up the idea of giving her self-narrative a temporal continuity, and therefore recollects her past and represents herself rather thematically. Memory, thus, itself becomes a constructive mechanism. During the acts of recalling and representing, the autobiographical voice sometimes goes uncertain. This may be termed as the "reliably unreliable" (5) where a conscious awareness and imaginative portrayal of uncertainty is as important as any documentary intent. A degree of subjectivity and uncertainty, therefore, becomes synonymous with, rather than opposed to, autobiographical 'authenticity'. It is only by sharing their conscious handling of these issues that the texts achieve a sense of authenticity. As such Amrita's defiance of the conventional structure of an autobiography, its memory like fragmented body strengthens the authenticity of the representation of the self.

A conventional autobiography is likely to begin with the details of one's birth, native place, description of parents and childhood. The autobiographer takes back imprints of life from the earliest memories in childhood and recreates the original phase of life in autobiography but as often stated that there always remain difference between the narrator/writer at the time of observation and the writer at the time of writing. Amrita Pritam's autobiography *The Revenue Stamp* begins in the usual way, stating the times, climate of society as backdrop to her birth and childhood. While doing so she traces back the source of her mental structure of ideas, traits and tendencies. She does not open her life story in the past tense; rather the beginning of her self-narrative with dramatically exclaimed interrogative, actually questions the pastures of the past. She has entitled the first chapter "Resurrecting Time" (TRS 1). It starts with "Is it doomsday? Moments of my life in the womb of time, lived a while and after the span of time, seemingly entombed are today alive again, stalk past me" (1). The lost childhood "Seemingly entombed" (1) can become a part of the present existence, in the process of recollection and contemplation for autobiography. The memories of childhood lie buried in the "womb of time" (2) but never die. Truth has been a preoccupation with Amrita's self since her childhood. She recalls how she was troubled over the suppression of the truth and its utterance right in her childhood, "I never told an untruth to father; I can never lie to myself either" (4). The merger of the past in the present semi-coloned, in fact does not offer antithetical statements. Though representing two time frames these shows the self of the narrator in continuum. Amrita seems to present the events of her life chronologically but only initially. Later on she moves from present to past and vice versa. This nonlinearity helps in portraying the self in a

manner that helps the writer to relate the seeds of resistance in her as a child to later subjectivities of her life.

The seeds of her creativity and rebellious attitude find their ground in her childhood and teenage anguish. This agony was actually the result of her loneliness and the self's desire for love. Deprivation of anything attracts the fulfillment of the same thing. This is what happens with the author. The deprivation of love attracts Amrita towards the deep desire of its fulfillment. Amrita's childhood and youth passed without any great event except the loss of her mother with whom she also lost her faith in God. The relation between the two, love and spirituality, is so close that both seem to constitute the very core of Amrita's inner self. A woman's life related to love in various forms. The empathy between the two is so close that both seem to constitute the very core of her inner self. The concept of love and woman's existence are so closely interrelated that love occupies a very valuable space in woman's life and as a determinant of self it also occupies a very important place in woman's autobiography. Amrita Pritam declares that the complete texture of her book is threaded by her personal feeling. She reveals her feminine agony openly in this book while her other book depicts the same agonized experiences and feelings but with a mask as in an autobiography the writer can narrate in confessional mode and at the same time also conceal through the reflections of self. Amrita Pritam's self reflections in *The Revenue Stamp* are the passages appropriately analyzing how a sensitive woman finds it very difficult to talk about, to write about her love and life in love. Amrita Pritam as a woman felt everything concretely but as a writer expressed it more symbolically: "Abstraction has no meaning for me. Each entity must take on some sort of shape that I can touch . . . that in fact, can thrill me with a touch" (*TRS* 7). When unable to achieve it thus, she wove visions and lived them as keenly as she would do them in real life. As a result Amrita's self gets truthfully reflected in her visions and abstractions. She created an image of an ideal lover in her mental visions in girlhood. She valued this image with a romantic quest for realizing it in life. It was her dreamy instinct in the beginning and a philosophical vision later on. She recalls:

A deep dark shadow walked along my side . . . the face of my ideal lover and mine that I imagined growing wiser, stronger, and more mature. The layer deepest down was of the freedom of my own and other land. Whatever I wrote was inspired by the shadow . . . in which I sought to reveal something luminous in quality. (*SOW* 14)

Thus shadows in her life take many forms and are so significant a part of her existence that she titles her last autobiography as *Shadows of Words*. A self, her inner being under various shadows is re-presented in the shadow of words implying how words are abstractions and hence insufficient to convey the concrete realities of life.

The representation of self and identity is masked by Amrita in her quest of love. The seemingly intense erotic sexual overtones in her poetry or prose are steeped in spirituality. The quest of love starts from the loss of her mother. The death of her mother when she was eleven was so devastating an experience that puberty was no longer a natural experience but led to the suppression of desires and a consequent questioning of paternal authority, middle-class morality, rigid religious practices and the entire stratified social structure. An early engagement at the age of four and marriage at sixteen and unfulfilled self within marriage resulted in quest for love outsider marriage and divorce. Social opposition also played a major role in shaping her consciousness and self

representation in her autobiographies. These are her efforts to recreate a convincing image of herself as a woman who has equal rights to her desire fulfillment and that desire is not necessarily a corporeal/pure sexual one; she represents it as having spiritual depths.

Amrita Pritam has both represented and re-presented herself in her autobiography *The Revenue Stamp* and *Shadow of Words*. Her artistic poetic self creeps compulsively into herself narrative, making her autobiographic multi-generic. It represents her pluralistic self as well as marks her breaking away from the limits that genres impose. Artistic sensibilities are an essential part of Amrita's self. Through her artistic touch she has revealed herself as a writer as well as a woman. Time and again we find the illustrations from her poems in her life-story. Her vision of life is broad and all inclusive as is her self-narrative which blends prose, poetry and drama. Each page of her life story appears as an individual poem/ story. Retrospectively, when she disclosed her plans to write an autobiography to Khushwant Singh, he commented: "What is there to your life? Just an incident or two . . . you could use the back of a revenue stamp to write it" (Kumar 54). In a brief prologue to *The Revenue Stamp* she writes:

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. (Pritam, *TRS* ii)

Clearly she too was aware of the fact that the autobiography is a culmination to self re-presentation. The metaphorical dimension of the very title indicates her core poetic self. Though her imaginative writings are also reflections of her soul, she chose to write an autobiography to squarely face and represent her life in truthfulness. The title of the book symbolizes the writer's own soul. *The Revenue Stamp* is the true account of her confirmation of her artistic talents. It affirms how she lived her life as a woman and as a poet; her autobiography comes as a stamp on the cognitive life vision of a woman, who not only loved poetry, but also breathed and lived it. Being a poet, she maintains the grace of her creativity while narrating the story of her life. Her vision of life is broad enough to make her story the 'Stamp of Truth'.

*The Revenue Stamp* is an autobiography which arrests her entire life in its fold. While the confessional nature brings to the fore her inner most thoughts, desires and feelings, like a memoir it captures the entire expanse of the diverse nature of her experiences including those of her travels, some of which have diary like entries. The confessional strains are very much evident here in that Amrita makes a candid confession of the intimate experiences of her life. Even a casual reading of autobiography suggests that all the experiences of her life since childhood have been revisited, recreated and relived under some shadow or another: the shadows of death, weapons, words, dreams, patriarchy, and shadows of authoritarian power, shadows of contemplation and shadows of unrequited love. She does not expose her selfhood candidly like any other confessional writer but at the same time she takes truth as the first and foremost essentiality of an autobiography. She opines that the basic truth is actually the writer's own need. It is a continuous process that leads to one reality to another. She says, "All art consists of re-creating what was created before. This process also is reality. Truth put into the crucible of the womb gives birth to truth" (Pritam *TRS* 146).

Despite her preoccupation with the intimate and the confessional aspects, she does not ignore the existential delineations of life. Amrita Pritam has entwined an exceptional quantity of personal experiences into the texture of her writings. Amrita Pritam's autobiographies, therefore, are a personal testimony of the new sense of worth she experienced as an 'individual'.

To conclude Amrita Pritam moves from concrete to abstract. She crosses all physical boundaries and goes beyond such physicality. Her multiplicity of selves knows no boundaries. Being spiritual minded she is moved away from the materialistic world. She transgresses the social system and moved by her own wishes and desires. As a woman and as a writer Amrita Pritam shows her resistance. She explores her self having no inhibitions from social patriarchal system. This all provides her a unique identity in literary arena.

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