

## PROGRESSIVISM IN MODERN LITERATURE AND FEMINISM

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### ABSTRACT

*As per the said general stereotype, a woman is the appendage of men. She is nobody without a man and hence is assigned only a relegated, subjugated and subordinate position in the predominantly phallogocentric patriarchal society. Since time immemorial, the silence that pervades narratives on and by women have been consistently marginalized and systematically exploited. This results in the repression of women's emotional, psychological, political, intellectual, social, artistic, and economic freedom to an extent that her very existence stifles her.*

This prejudice has particularly enforced during the partition through patriarchal society where men imposes his dominating attire over women to manifest his power and to quench his thirst for desire under the shroud of the rhetorical 'bharat mata figure'. This essay is neatly divided into sections, each providing particular insights into the writings of progressive women writers and the plight of women during the partition. How patriarchal agents exerts their dominating position over women and against all those forces ensuring feminist tendencies.

The paper discusses, how progressive and feminist movements coincide and diverts, celebrating and redefining the left wing tendency of feminists like Amrita Pritam, Ismat chughtai, Sadat hasan manto and others. Amrita pritam's subjective responses to the prevalence of patriarchy, corruption, poverty, economic disparity, power politics leading to Partition, and subjugation of women, are acutely expressed in her works. From this perspective, the kind and level of didactic realism that they use in their writings looks social realism, or what Georg Lukacs calls critical realism. This paper, accordingly, offers an incisive look at short stories of these feminists in the light of the

'Progressive' spirit: the way, through the depiction of women characters in the sociopolitical and individualized setting.

For the constraints of this 'paper', I have taken Amrita Pritam, Ismat Chughtai and a few others to mention only but they represent the general trend, the general perception of modern Indian literature. Though Ismat Chughtai had a vast readership, it won't be out of context that Amrita Pritam's idiom is more in line with Indian sensibilities.

### SOUNDS OF SILENCE IN THE WORKS OF AMRITA PRITAM AND ISMAT CHUGHTAI

Amrita Pritam started off by writing on religious themes, gradually moving toward folk songs and love poems, and finally, more progressive themes. What brought her ultimate recognition and social popularity was, unarguably, her venture at delineating with post- partition pathos and themes relating to the women's issues. The pathos of a loveless arranged marriage, for instance, can be traced as a prominent motif in her works. The fact

that she herself was bound in one such companionate marriage, out of which she finally got divorced in 1960, led her to depict her women characters traverse on a similar path, and also resist it. Her short stories such as “The Third Woman”, “A Soundless Shriek” candidly explore the intricacies of female desire and the feminine sexuality. Through her works, Pritam contended to gain an identity and a voice for the Punjabi women. She once wrote— “Society attack anyone who dares to say its coins counterfeit, but when it is a woman who says this, society begins to foam at the mouth. [It] puts aside the weapon of filth to fling her...”<sup>1</sup>

Being acutely conscious of the prevalent imbalance in the man-woman relationships, through her women characters, Amrita Pritam unveils and retrieves what has been historically ‘unspeakable’. Women’s oppression and gender relations are the precise focus of most of her later works. Feminists like Kamla Bhasin and Ritu Menon described Sati as regressive and warned us by stating that with Seeta as an ideal can Sati be far behind? Thereby opposing middle class norms and doing away with the notion of a chaste ‘Sati-Savitri’ Hindu wife, who knows nothing chaste ‘Sati-Savitri’ Hindu wife, who knows nothing about sexuality-outside-wedlock, Pritam reflects upon her persistent concern of representation of women amidst a conflictual setting – tradition versus modernity.

The character of Meena, in “The Third Woman”, is shown to be a war-widow, and consequently has returned back to her parental home. Within the short-span of the story, Pritam incorporates several socio-culture factors and surreal elements so as to prolong the main concern of the story. In fact, until the final paragraph of the story is reached, the readers are clueless with regard to who this ‘third woman,’ upon which the story is named, stands for. Portraying a classic case of repressed sexuality and an Indian widow’s fate, in the story, Pritam writes – “There are things which women know as if by instinct. Meena knew, for a truth that in our country a man as anywhere, dies only once, but his widow, as long as she lives dies many a time.”

We are made to empathize with Meena’s character with Pritam’s sensitive comments that cover the first few pages. Thereby enforcing surreal into the otherwise real depictions, the author comments that in order to ‘deprive’ Meena’s old father from seeing her wretched condition, his eyes “had been blighted by cataracts.” Hereafter, we witness an anxious Meena, who can’t decide upon where to take the course of life in spite of being offered a few prospects, in lieu of being a war-widow, by the government. In order to help the war-widows, we are told, the government had offered them a job to sustain their livelihood, or some land to build a house upon, or a loan to set up a business, or a school teaching job. It is only gradually, as the story proceeds, that we realize the reason behind Meena’s anxiousness.

All these prospects could have catered to her financial needs but not her desires, her dreams, her bodily angst.

Just when we begin to deliberate upon her gloomy, sad stance, we are introduced to Meena’s ten years younger nephew, Avinash, who is back at home on a vacation. For quite some time, Pritam reflects upon the motherly affection Meena feels toward Avinash, who was once a child whom she had nurtured and caressed by placing him on her lap, ever after her elder sisters’ death. And then the climactic turn begins to become clearer— in an unclear, indirect, unconventional tone that the author espouses. More often whenever Avinash would call her Meenu, the way her late husband used to call, Meena would begin to visualize her ‘gallant soldier’ in Avinash’s persona. With the fantastic use of irony and expressions, Pritam states, while in the morning, she would assume a motherly role toward Avinash, with the onset of the evening, somewhere in a state of semi-consciousness, she would dream of a possible incest. Then, ultimately:

“The light and darkness [became] one and with it the torment of her conflicting desires was suddenly resolved. A woman’s arms stretched out and eagerly groped for a man’s arms. Flesh felt the familiar smell of flesh.”<sup>2</sup>

As a consequence of this night of 'attainment', we are told, both Meena and Meenu dies, and the woman who comes out of that room, the next morning, is the 'third woman' – willful, resolute, determined. This 'new woman', in fact, that very day, signs up the official proposal to take up a job as a school mistress in a remote hill station.

Meena didn't want to be a submissive widower whose identity is nothing beyond the periphery of the enclosed place assigned to her by the society nor she accepts to remain the object of desire for the male counterpart, (of course if her husband would have been alive) as opposed to that she like tagore's Chandalika steps out after having both sexual and spiritual experience, comes out of that system where her recognition as a sexual being is just one drop in the ocean of her identity formation as someone who neither remains a Madonna, chaste figure nor a whore, hysterical woman but someone who goes beyond the categorizations of these minacious binaries, she like Jane in the yellow wallpaper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, breaks the shackles of the society in general and patriarchy in specific. Portraying the desires of a woman, Ismat Chughtai is more graphic, she does not like the lyrical stance of 'Sufi' sentiments, physicality for her is stark naked and tangible.

Amrita Pritam joined the progressive women association to highlight the fact that women have been not only traumatized physically (weaker sex) and psychologically (male as the man god) but their very existential crisis positioned them as an isolated "outsider", Ironically, patriarchy against which she has been fighting against, seeped into the it and started to build its staunch pillars in the association, the very reason being why Ismat chughtai left PWA. Companionate marriages, especially those characterized by huge age differences between the bride and the groom, figure as a recurring motif in several of Ismat Chughtai's stories as well.

She strikingly speaks about this incongruity in stories like "The Quilt", "The Rock", "The Veil",

"The Wife", and "Eternal Vine" to name a few. Offering challenge to the sexually repressive Indian Muslim society, through her works, Chughtai plays with all things taboo.

Unlike Amrita Pritam, who refused to be an official part of the Indian Progressive Writers' Movement by not accepting the organizers, Mulk Raj Anand and Sajjad Zaheer's invitation to the "Soviet-Sponsored Afro-Asian Writers Conference" which was to be held in Delhi in 1971, Ismat Chughtai had her loyalties toward the same. She once wrote – "My belief is that all literature is propaganda – the Quran, the Bible, the Tauriyat, the Vedas. The poetry of Meera, Ghalib, Zauk, Hali and Shibli, and Hasrat Mohani is propaganda. The message of the Mahatma and the Buddha is propaganda. Every conceivable literature is the propaganda of some ideology or the other."<sup>3</sup> We cannot take this statement at face value, but what she means is literature want to direct the society many a time oblique, rather than directly— but the desire to direct and mend is always there in our written word and sermons.

Chughtai's female characters such as Rani in "The Mole", Begum Jan in "The Quilt" Rukhsana in "Eternal Vine", the various wives of the narrator's brother in "The Rock", etc. are all portrayed to be dealing with a state of crisis which, at varied times, is economical, personal, sexual, or intellectual. Consequently, the stereotypically defined spatial, cultural and historical categories are most often resisted and punctured by women characters – either through mobilization or espousal of 'deviant' sexuality.

The bold progressive aesthetics of her age went well with her acute sensibility with regard to the oppressive patriarchy. To quote Sukrita Kumar Paul: "[Chughtai] plumbs the depths of the marginalized female psyche, and creatively exploits the power that psyche has to express itself.

## EXPLORING FEMALE SEXUALITY AND DESIRE

The feminist critique of the family and the open ended discussion on sexuality and the morality initiated by some feminist group led to the wider controversies, feminist were detected as Ultra left, petty bourgeoisie, anarchist or worse. the reason for this reluctance to support the struggle for women's Liberation among left could be that all males including those of the left do not want to lose the benefits of patriarchy in the home and in the society. However, it would be wrong and somewhat unwise to portray the left movements/ organisations, that they failed to take up women's issues. There has been some perceptible change in shaking off the patriarchal bias in the treatment of women members and women's organisations, yet they did not go far enough to see the significance of the housework, the gender construction, women's sexuality and other issues raised by the feminists. The greater the societal repression, Chughtai argues, the stronger the need for expression and rebellion."

Coming again to Amrita Pritam, in another persuasive story, "The Weed", she explores the deplorable state in which rural Indian girls are brought up and married. Through the depiction of the naive nature of the central woman character, Angoori, the author apparently aims at revealing the strong-hold that superstitions, which are meant to facilitate the which are meant to facilitate the functioning of patriarchy, can exert on young minds. So as to keep women subjugated within the four walls of the house, we are told how, myths such as "It's a sin for women to read !" were massively prevalent. Regarding the prospect of education for women, such belief is inculcated in Angoori's conscience that she would never dare to transgress this dictum.

Apart from this apparent reformist streak, what one can construe from within the story is the possibility of an alternative sexuality. The way Pritam gazes at Angoori's body, and gradually passes the verdict of her being an utterly mis- matched

marriage, whereby, she writes—"I felt her face, arms, breasts, legs with my eyes and experienced a profound languor. I thought of Prabhati: old, short, loose-jawed. A man whose stature and angularity would be the death of Euclid ... He was her napkin, not her taster."4 If one reads between the lines, one can argue, probably she herself wished to 'taste' Angoori's body, and it is for this reason, perhaps, that she finds it funny to even imagine the couple together.

Progressive movement didn't really operate in the so-called Western feminist fashion of the 'personal is political' it merely sought a structural transformation. the question of what comprised women freedom wasn't well formulated or thought out deeply. The concept of freedom too evolved, particularly in the West where it came to be associated with sexuality. mostly the liberals were highly influenced by French and Russian writers like Chekhov and Gogol. So the assertion of sexual freedom overtly symbolised what it meant to be truly free. Novels like "fathers and sons" by Ivan turganev portrays characters like Kukshina who had a nihilistic tendency and search for a complete freedom and liberation from the domestic setting and her positionality in it. Though progressive writers lacked such interrogation in the idea of freedom for women as clearly as we may find in the second and third wave of feminism, their idea of women freedom had much more grave issues like child marriage and education beyond which they were yet to think. And this acceptance and assertion of female security and desire is what brought forth by writers like Amrita Pritam, Ismat Chughtai, Sadat Hasan manto etc.

Kamla Bhasin says, "My feminism is not Western it is a local organic based on the issues like objectification of women, Sati, dowry, sex selective abortion etc." She says that her concerns are local but Global, because patriarchy is global, violence against weak is global. Her feminism takes the shape according to the patriarchy which exist in society not just in real life but in popular culture also i.e in books and Cinemas, whose repercussions are evident in the minds of youngsters who carry in themselves a

potential to perpetuate patriarchal norms. Dialogues like “if she laughed, she is trapped”, “ there is a yes in a girl's no” etc. Romantic sizes and legitimises the reckless chase of the girl which positions her as a weaker sex, who needs a knight in shining armours to save her from the scraps.

As a concluding remark, one can say, under the influence of the Progressive Cultural Movement and ‘Socialist Realism’, Indian writers had begun to represent unidealized versions of women protagonists. In line with the reformist mode, women were now depicted not only as objects of male desire but as being vocal and thoughtful about their own sexuality and desires.

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individuality of man (or woman) and a free, uninhibited self expression and self-assertion thereof”<sup>5</sup> Seen in this light, Amrita Pritam and Ismat chughtai truly emerges as the most prominent women writers, India has ever produced, where on one hand amrita attacks the male domains by chronically enlisting the past grotesque events through her words, it is the riotous sexual-bodily politics of Ismat chughtai’s prose that succeed in reserving a corner for itself at the conjecture of modernity in the first half of the 20th century.

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