

Classic Poetry Series

**Amrita Pritam**  
**- poems -**

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# Amrita Pritam(31 August 1919 – 31 October 2005)

Amrita Pritam born as Amrita Kaur was a Punjabi writer and poet, considered the first prominent woman Punjabi poet, novelist, and essayist, and the leading 20th-century poet of the Punjabi language, who is equally loved on both the sides of the India-Pakistan border, with a career spanning over six decades, she produced over 100 books, of poetry, fiction, biographies, essays, a collection of Punjabi folk songs and an autobiography that were translated into several Indian and foreign languages.

She is most remembered for her poignant poem, Aj Aakhaan Waris Shah Nu (Today I invoke Waris Shah – "Ode to Waris Shah"), an elegy to the 18th-century Punjabi poet, an expression of her anguish over massacres during the partition of India. As a novelist her most noted work was Pinjar (The Skeleton) (1950), in which she created her memorable character, Puro, an epitome of violence against women, loss of humanity and ultimate surrender to existential fate; the novel was made into an award-winning film, Pinjar in 2003.

When the former British India was partitioned into the independent states of India and Pakistan in 1947, she migrated from Lahore, to India, though she remained equally popular in Pakistan throughout her life, as compared to her contemporaries like Mohan Singh and [Shiv Kumar Batalvi](http://www.poemhunter.com/shiv-kumar-batalvi/).

Known as the most important voice for the women in Punjabi literature, in 1956, she became the first woman to win the Sahitya Akademi Award for her magnum opus, a long poem, Sunehe (Messages), later she received the Bhartiya Jnanpith, one of India's highest literary awards, in 1982 for Kagaz Te Canvas (The Paper and the Canvas). The Padma Shri came her way in 1969 and finally, Padma Vibhushan, India's second highest civilian award, in 2004, and in the same year she was honoured with India's highest literary award, given by the Sahitya Akademi (India's Academy of Letters), the Sahitya Akademi Fellowship given to the "immortals of literature" for lifetime achievement.

## **Formative Years**

Amrita Pritam was born in 1919 in Gujranwala, Punjab, in present-day Pakistan, the only child of a school teacher, a poet and a scholar of Braj Bhasha, Kartar Singh Hitkari, who also edited a literary journal. Besides this, he was a pracharak – a preacher of the Sikh faith. Amrita's mother died when she was eleven. Soon

after, she and her father moved to Lahore, where she lived till her migration to India in 1947. Confronting adult responsibilities, and besieged by loneliness following her mother's death, she began to write at an early age. Her first anthology of poems, *Amrit Lehran (Immortal Waves)* was published in 1936, at age sixteen, the year she married Pritam Singh, an editor to whom she was engaged in early childhood, and changed her name to Amrita Pritam. Half a dozen collections of poems were to follow in as many years between 1936 and 1943.

Though she began her journey as romantic poet, soon she shifted gears, and became part of the Progressive Writers' Movement and its effect was seen in her collection, *Lok Peed (People's Anguish)* (1944), which openly criticized the war-torn economy, after the Bengal famine of 1943. She was also involved in social work to certain extent and participated in such activities wholeheartedly, after Independence when social activist Guru Radha Kishan took the initiative to bring the first Janta Library in Delhi, which was inaugurated by Balraj Sahni and Aruna Asaf Ali, she contributed to the occasion accordingly. This study centre cum library is still running at Clock Tower, Delhi. She also worked at Lahore Radio Station for while, before the partition of India.

Renowned theatre person and the director of the immortal partition movie 'Garam Hava', MS Sathyu paid a theatrical tribute to her through the rare theatrical performance 'Ek Thee Amrita'. Culled from her many writings this rare biographical docu-drama is produced by K K Kohli of Impresario Asia. Written by Danish Iqbal, who had earlier penned 'Sahir', this Play has memorable performances by well known actors like Lovleen Thadani, Mangat Ram, Vijay Nagyal, Kedar Sharma, and others.

### <b>Partition of British India</b>

Some one million Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs died from communal violence that followed the partition of British India in 1947, and left Amrita Pritam a Punjabi refugee at age 28, when she left Lahore and moved to New Delhi. Subsequently in 1948, while she was pregnant with her son, and travelling from Dehradun to Delhi, she expressed anguish on a piece of paper as the poem, "Ajj akhaan Waris Shah nu" (I ask Waris Shah Today); this poem was to later immortalize her and become the most poignant reminder of the horrors of Partition. The poem addressed to the Sufi poet <a href="http://www.poemhunter.com/waris-shah/">Waris Shah</a>, author of the tragic saga of Heer and Ranjah and with whom she shares her birthplace, the Punjabi national epic:

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Aj aakhan Waris Shah nun kiton kabraan vichchon bol, Te aj kitab-e-ishq daa koi agla varka phol..

Ik roi si dhi Punjab di tun likh likh maare vaen, Aj lakhaan dhian rondian tainun Waris Shah nun keh..

Uth dardmadaan dia dardia uth takk apna Punjab, Aj bele lashaan bichhiaan te lahu di bhari Chenab..

Kise ne panjaan paaniyan wich ditti zehar ralla, Te unna paaniya dhar ton ditta pani laa..

Iss zarkhe zamin de loon loon phuteya zehar, Gith gith chadiyan laliyan foot foot chadeya zehar..

Aj aakhan Waris Shah nun, kiton kabraan vichchon bol, Te aj kitab-e-ishq daa koi agla varka phol..

Weho walissi waah fer wan wan waggi jaa, Unne har ik wans di wanjhali ditti naag bana..

Naagaan keelle log muuh,bas fer dang hi dang, Pallo palli punjab de neele pai gye aang..

Galeyon tutte geet fer, trakleyon tutti tand, Tarinjneyon tutiyan saheliyan, chrekhre kookar band..

Sane sej de bediyan,luddan ditiyan rod, Sane daliyan peengh ajj, peeplan ditti tod..

Jitthe vajdi si kook pyar di, oh vanjali gayi guwach, Ranjhe de sab veer ajj bhul gye usdi jaach..

Dharti te lau vaseya, kabran paiyyan chon, Preet diyan sehziyan ajj vich mazaaraan ron..

Ajj sabbe kaidon ban gaye, husan ishq de chor, Ajj kithon le aaiye labh ke waris shah ik hor..

Aj aakhan Waris Shah nun, kiton kabraan vichchon bol, Te aj kitab-e-ishq daa koi agla varka phol..

Today, I call Waris Shah, "Speak from your grave" And turn, today, the book of love's next affectionate page Once, a daughter of Punjab cried and you wrote a wailing saga Today, a million daughters, cry to you, Waris Shah Rise! O' narrator of the grieving; rise! look at your Punjab Today, fields are lined with corpses, and blood fills the Chenab.

Amrita Pritam worked until 1961 in the Punjabi service of All India Radio, Delhi.

After her divorce in 1960, her work became more clearly feminist. Many of her stories and poems drew on the unhappy experience of her marriage. A number of her works have been translated into English, French, Danish, Japanese and other languages from Punjabi and Urdu, including her autobiographical works *Black Rose* and *Revenue Stamp* (*Raseedi Tikkat* in Punjabi).

The first of Amrita Pritam's books to be filmed was *Dharti Sagar te Sippiyan*, as 'Kadambar' (1965), followed by 'Unah Di Kahani', as *Daaku* (*Dacoit*, 1976), directed by Basu Bhattacharya. Her novel *Pinjar* (*The Skeleton*, 1970) was made into an award winning Hindi movie by Chandra Prakash Dwivedi, because of its humanism: "Amritaji has portrayed the suffering of people of both the countries." *Pinjar* was shot in a border region of Rajasthan and in Punjab.

She edited "Nagmani", a monthly literary magazine in Punjabi for several years, which she ran together with *Imroz*, for 33 years; though after Partition she wrote prolifically in Hindi as well. Later in life, she turned to Osho and wrote introductions for several books of Osho, including *Ek Onkar Satnam*, and also started writing on spiritual themes and dreams, producing works like *Kaal Chetna* (*Time Consciousness*) and *Agyat Ka Nimantran* (*Call of the Unknown*). She had also published autobiographies, titled, *Kala Gulab* (*Black Rose*) (1968), *Rasidi Ticket* (*The Revenue Stamp*) (1976), and *Aksharon kay Saayee* (*Shadows of Words*).

**Acclaim**

Amrita is the first recipient of Punjab Rattan Award conferred upon her by Punjab Chief Minister Capt. Amarinder Singh. She is first woman recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1956 for *Sunehey* (*Messages*), Amrita Pritam received the Bhartiya Jnanpith Award, India's highest literary award, in 1982 for *Kagaj te Canvas* (*Paper and Canvas*). She received the Padma Shri (1969) and Padma Vibhushan, India's second highest civilian award, and Sahitya Akademi Fellowship, India's highest literary award, also in 2004. She received . honorary degrees, from many universities including, Delhi University (1973), Jabalpur University (1973) and Vishwa Bharati (1987)

She also received International Vaptsarov Award from the Republic of Bulgaria (1979) and Degree of Officer des Arts et des Lettres (Officier) by the French Government (1987). She was nominated as a member of Rajya Sabha 1986–92. Towards the end of her life, she was awarded by Pakistan's Punjabi Academy, to which she had remarked, *Bade dino baad mere maike ko meri yaad aayi..* (*My motherland has remembered me after a long time*); and also Punjabi poets of Pakistan, sent her a chaddar, from the tombs of <a

[Waris Shah](http://www.poemhunter.com/waris-shah/), and fellow Sufi mystic poets [Bulleh Shah](http://www.poemhunter.com/bulleh-shah/) and [Sultan Bahu](http://www.poemhunter.com/sultan-bahu/).

### **Personal Life**

In 1935, Amrita married Pritam Singh, son of a leading hosiery merchant of Lahore's Anarkali bazaar. In 1960, Amrita Pritam left her husband. She is also said to have an unrequited affection for poet [Sahir Ludhianvi](http://www.poemhunter.com/sahir-ludhianvi/). The story of this love is depicted in her autobiography, *Rasidi Ticket*. When another woman, singer Sudha Malhotra came into the life of Sahir, Amrita found solace in the companionship of the renowned artist and writer Imroz. She spent the last forty years of her life with Imroz, who also designed most of her book covers and made her the subject of his several paintings. Their life together is also the subject of a book, *Amrita Imroz: A Love Story*.

She died in her sleep on 31 October 2005 at the age of 86 in New Delhi, after a long illness. She was survived by her partner Imroz, daughter Kandlla, son Navraj Kwatra, daughter-in-law Alka, and her grandchildren, Taurus, Noor, Aman and Shilpi. Navraj Kwatra was killed in 2012.

### **Works**

In her career spanning over six decades, she penned 28 novels, 18 anthologies of prose, five short stories and 16 miscellaneous prose volumes.

# A Letter

Me—a book in the attic.  
Maybe some covenant or hymnal.  
Or a chapter from the Kama Sutra,  
or a spell for intimate afflictions.  
But then it seems I am none of these.  
(If I were, someone would have read me.)

Apparently at an assembly of revolutionaries  
they passed a resolution,  
and I am a longhand copy of it.  
It has the police's stamp on it  
and was never successfully enforced.  
It is preserved only for the sake of procedure.

And now only some sparrows come,  
straw in their beaks,  
and sit on my body  
and worry about the next generation.  
(How wonderful to worry about the next generation!)  
Sparrows have wings on them,  
but resolutions have no wings  
(or resolutions have no second generation).

Sometimes I think to catch the scent—  
what lies in my future?  
Worry makes my binding come off.  
Whenever I try to smell,  
just some fumes of bird shit.  
O my earth, your future!  
Me—your current state.

[Translated from the Punjabi by D.H. Tracy & Mohan Tracy]

Amrita Pritam

# Empty Space

There were two kingdoms only:  
the first of them threw out both him and me.  
The second we abandoned.

Under a bare sky  
I for a long time soaked in the rain of my body,  
he for a long time rotted in the rain of his.

Then like a poison he drank the fondness of the years.  
He held my hand with a trembling hand.  
'Come, let's have a roof over our heads awhile.  
Look, further on ahead, there  
between truth and falsehood, a little empty space.'

Amrita Pritam



# I Ask Waris Shah Today

I say to Waris Shah today, speak from your grave And add a new page to your book of love

Once one daughter of Punjab wept, and you wrote your long saga; Today thousands weep, calling to you Waris Shah:

Arise, o friend of the afflicted; arise and see the state of Punjab, Corpses strewn on fields, and the Chenaab flowing with much blood.

Someone filled the five rivers with poison, And this same water now irrigates our soil.

Where was lost the flute, where the songs of love sounded? And all Ranjha's brothers forgotten to play the flute.

Blood has rained on the soil, graves are oozing with blood, The princesses of love cry their hearts out in the graveyards.

Today all the Quaido'ns have become the thieves of love and beauty, Where can we find another one like Waris Shah?

Waris Shah! I say to you, speak from your grave And add a new page to your book of love.

Amrita Pritam

# I Will Meet You Yet Again

I will meet you yet again  
How and where  
I know not  
Perhaps I will become a  
figment of your imagination  
and maybe spreading myself  
in a mysterious line  
on your canvas  
I will keep gazing at you.

Perhaps I will become a ray  
of sunshine to be  
embraced by your colours  
I will paint myself on your canvas  
I know not how and where —  
but I will meet you for sure.

Maybe I will turn into a spring  
and rub foaming  
drops of water on your body  
and rest my coolness on  
your burning chest  
I know nothing  
but that this life  
will walk along with me.

When the body perishes  
all perishes  
but the threads of memory  
are woven of enduring atoms  
I will pick these particles  
weave the threads  
and I will meet you yet again.

Amrita Pritam

# Me

Lots of contemporaries—  
but 'me' is not my contemporary.

My birth without 'me'  
was a blemished offering on the collection plate.  
A moment of flesh, imprisoned in flesh.

And when to the tip of this tongue of flesh  
some word comes, it kills itself.  
If saved from killing itself,  
it descends to the paper, where a murder happens.

Gunshot—  
if it strikes me in Hanoi  
it strikes again in Prague.

A little smoke floats up,  
and my 'me' dies like an eighth-month child.  
Will my 'me' one day be my contemporary?

Amrita Pritam