

NEGOTIATING VOICE AND SILENCE IN THE FEMININE SUBJECTIVITY OF AMRITA PRITAM'S POETRY AND PROSE

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Abstract

This paper has analyzed the ways in which Amrita Pritam manages the dynamic relations of voice and silences to create a unique model of feminine subjectivity in her poetry and prose. The textual analysis in which the main works, including Ajj Aakhaan Waris Shah Nu, Main Tenun Phir Milangi, Pinjar, and Rasidi Ticket, were analyzed qualitatively, discussed how Pritam uses the methods of resistance, remembering, and defining the self through the lyrical expression, symbolic silence, and fragmented narratives. The analysis, based on feminist literary theory, subaltern studies, and theory of trauma, showed two aspects of voice and silence as effective means of communication in which the female characters of Pritam challenge patriarchal order, express desire, and demonstrate strength. The results indicate the creativity of Pritam in her reinterpretation of the agency of women and her lifetime contribution to South Asian feminist fiction.

Keywords: *Amrita Pritam, voice, silence, feminine subjectivity, feminist literary theory, Partition literature.*



1. INTRODUCTION

Amrita Pritam is one of the most powerful contemporary literary voices of South Asia of the twentieth century, whose poetry and prose transformed the styles of expression of female experiences, desires, and traumas in Indian literature. It is against the stormy background of Partition, the deeply rooted patriarchy, and cultural subjugation that Pritam wrote, foreshadowing the inner spaces of women who had always been sidelined in the story of history and literary expression. Her works move through a complex landscape in which voice and silence are always on a collision course, where expression is a way of reasserting agency, and silence is a way of surviving, looking inward or even rebellion. Through these interwoven forms of communication, the paper aims to know how Pritam is able to create a unique model of feminine subjectivity that challenges the mainstream narratives and broadens the limits of self-representation of women in contemporary literature.

1.1. Background of the Study

The literature of twentieth century India especially in the years of partitions and the immediate years following the partition of 1947 saw a tremendous change in the theme of identity, trauma and social turmoil, but the voices of women were usually relegated to the side in these narratives. The figure of Amrita Pritam was a revolutionary change in the times given that her poetry and prose brought the emotional, the psychological and cultural lives of the women to the limelight. Her works were a combination of the outer violence of historic events and inner struggles of women who had to deal with patriarchal demands, social oppression, and their personal needs. Within the framework of South Asian literature, the problem of feminine subjectivity has traditionally been informed by the cultural conventions that suppressed the voices of women or limited them to the confines of the representational strategies. The skill of voice and silence in expressing agency and resistance of women by Pritam was something that opened up a new avenue of interpreting women agency and resistance. Thus, this work is grounded on the necessity to find out how her speech patterns of negotiation with silence, memory and trauma helps expand feministic approaches and further our knowledge of gendered lives within the context of postcolonial literature.

1.2. Methodology

This paper used a qualitative, textual approach where specific poems and prose pieces by Amrita Pritam were critically explored using the feminist literary theory, subaltern studies, and trauma theory. Most important texts were read critically to find patterns of voice, silence and feminine subjectivity in the primary texts which were Ajj Aakhan waris Shah Nu, Main Tenu phir milangingi, Pinjar and Rasdi Ticket. The interpretive framework of the analysis was based on the concept of the *écriture féminine* by Hélène Cixous, theorization of female subalternity by Gayatri Spivak, and trauma model introduced by Cathy Caruth that provided the possibility of the subtly needed analysis of the representation of women in Pritam. The secondary sources were reviewed in order to put the work of Pritam in the context of other feminist and Partition literature. The research therefore drew on thematic coding, textual interpretation and theoretical triangulation to find out how voice and silence acted as either interwoven forms of resistance, identity formation, and emotional expression in the works of Pritam.

1.3. Objectives of the study

- Importantly, to analyze the role of voice and silence as expressive strategies used by Amrita Pritam in her poetry and prose to develop feminine subjectivity.
- -To examine the representations of women in their emotional, psychological and socio-political experience in the modes of articulation and restraint changing in the selected texts (like Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu, Main Tenun Phir Milangi, Pinjar and Rasidi Ticket) in relation to women.
- To examine how theoretical frameworks of feminist *écriture*, subalternity, and trauma can be used to understand how the female characters in Pritam bargain their agency within patriarchal and historical limitations.
- To assess the manner in which Pritam transcends silence to resistance, self-preservation, and identity creation and hence re-establishes the boundaries of feminine voice in South Asian literature.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Verma's (2018) research paper brought out the ways Amrita Pritam pushed and criticized patriarchal values and preempted the emotional and psychological conditions of women. It revealed that Pritam resorted to voice, desire and reflective narration to create feminine

subjectivity and resist cultural silencing. This source proved to be quite relevant to the current research about the topic of expression and repression in the works by Pritam.

Sachdev (2023) explained the ways Pritam wrote across the various patriarchies and how she had developed a gendered voice by means of trauma, displacement and symbolic expression. The paper revealed that through the manipulation of voice and silence, Pritam was able to express the experience of women that were being subdued. This was in line with the present study analysis of voice, which is assertion and silence, which is resistance.

Minocha's (2023) examined the autobiographical works of Pritam and proved that she formed her identity by using selective revelation and intentional silence. It underlined that Pritam employed introspection writing and silent protest in order to bring out autonomy. This was a direct support to how the study perceived silence as an ethical and creative approach in the process of Pritam self-representation.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper was based on feminist literary theory and relied on three overlapping conceptual threads: the concept of *écriture féminine* formulated by Hélène Cixous, the theorizing of the subaltern and the politics of silence developed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and the trauma theory formulated by Cathy Caruth. These structures, combined, enabled an exploration of the role of voice and silence in the poetry and prose of Amrita Pritam as an expressive and opposing mode. They provided instruments of comprehending feminine subjectivity not as merely an act of articulation, but as an elaborate negotiation of expression, suppression, memory and agency.

3.1. Hélène Cixous: *Écriture Féminine*

There was a theory of *écriture féminine* created by Hélène Cixous that was used as a guiding light to interpret the lyrical and intuitive style of Pritam. Cixous suggested that female writing is a product of the body, fluid, disruptive and non-conformable to strict lines of patriarchal discourse. Her groundbreaking essay titled *The Laugh of the Medusa* called on women to write themselves in order to reclaim their bodies and identities as they are suppressed by languages and culture.

Cixous famously wrote:

“Write yourself. Your body must be heard.”

This idea plays well with the poetic voice of Pritam who frequently blurs his emotion, body, memory, and landscape. The eroticism of such poems as *Main Tenun Phir Milangi* where the speaker identifies herself with the wind, scent, and touch resembles the wide-ranging spirit of writing that Cixous advocates as feminine.

The prose of Pritam as well breaks down linear narrative patterns, which correlate with *écriture féminine*. Her autobiographical writing *Rasidi Ticket* often moves around in fragments of memory, feelings pulses, and dreams, what Cixous called:

“A language that breaks up, a language that begins to overflow...”

In this way, the framework proposed by Cixous clarifies the strategies of writing the female self out of the patriarchal grammar by Pritam so that the desire, vulnerability, and autonomy are shaped.

3.2. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: The Subaltern and the Politics of Silence

The highly regarded essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* by Gayatri Spivak was an interrogation of the systematic silencing of the subjectivity of the marginalized, including women. Spivak suggested that the subaltern woman has been muted on two fronts: by colonial and secondly by local patriarchal order that disenfranchises her.

Spivak writes:

“The subaltern cannot speak.”

This assertion does not mean complete silence, but refers to those socio-political processes that deny the marginalized women the power to be heard. The theory of Spivak is essential to the understanding of characters in Pinjar such as Puro in the context of the writing of Amrita Pritam. Puro does not keep it to himself but rather communal violence, gendered regulations, and displacement during Partition is structurally forced that makes Puro stay quiet.

but Pritam makes this Spivakian impossibility a complication. Her stories depict women developing alternative forms of expression, gestures, resistance, self-withdrawal and moral

judgments that go beyond social boundaries. The fact that Puro refuses to go back to her natal family, such as refusing to come back to her family at all, serves as a kind of paradoxical speech-speech, as delivered by means of silence.

In another passage, Spivak clears this paradox up:

“Between patriarchy and imperialism, the image of the woman is no longer visible, not in a virginal nothingness, but in an act of violent shuttling.”

The work by Pritam retrieves this lost woman and presents her not by making her heard but by the silent resistance and inner strength that work outside the inspection of patriarchy.

3.3.Trauma Theory (Cathy Caruth)

The theory on trauma by Cathy Caruth adds more context to the silence in Pritam writing in the form of a psychological and mnemonic event. Caruth explained that trauma can be in assimilable form; it does not know how to be narrated coherently and manifests itself in fragments of memories, repetitions, or silences. In *Unclaimed Experience*, she writes:

Trauma is not found anywhere in the mere violent or original event, but how it was not assimilated and returns to haunt the survivor later in life.

This paradigm applies specifically to the works of Pritam which were informed by the Partition of India, a historical discontinuity that caused delicate psychological traumas. In Ajj Aakhaan Waris Shah Nu, the general trauma of the abducted and violated women is uttered not through the detailed narration but through metaphor and lamentation, and invocation, which, according to Caruth, is the indirect speech of trauma through poetic displacement.

These silences in Pinjar and in the autobiographical thoughts of Pritam indicate the unspeakable aspects of violence and loss. Silence is like a container of what language is not able to contain. As Caruth theory underlines, the fragmented narratives of Pritam, recurring images, and emotional gaps of his work are the manifestation of disruption of linear memory by trauma.

4. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The poetic and narrative oeuvre of Amrita Pritam helps to show a complicated game of voice and silence, which form the feminine subjectivity. These are not binary opposites in her texts,

but in many respects, voice has its origin in silence, and silence itself is a form of expression. In lament-desire poems, in partitions trauma narratives, and through autobiographical self-interest, Pritam develops a specifically female discourse in which emotional expression exists next to the symbolic withholding. This discussion explores the role of these mechanisms in the major works of hers.

4.1. Voice as Assertion in Pritam's Poetry

One of the most common uses of voice in the poems of Amrita Pritam is a form of rebelliousness, witnessing and wailing together. Among the most echoing of them is her classical partition poem *Ajj Aakhaan Waris Shah Nu*. The poem is written after the communal violence and his voice changes to the voice of Pritam to the entire world demanding justice. The opening invocation—

Ajj aakhan Waris Shah nu, kiton kabraan vichon bol...

(I call out to Waris Shah to-day, talk to him in his grave)

--makes a historical consciousness a call out of an utterance of a poem. Waris Shah is the voice of Pritam, but also of the raped women of Punjab, and he transformed the lyrical voice into the voice of morality. The poem shows that voice can be used as a healing power, bringing back some of the repressed histories and humanizing storyless victims of violence.

In comparison, the song, "*Main Tenun Phir Milangi*" provides a closer touch of feminine voice. In this case, the I that is used by the speaker is flowing, changing between metaphors which include wind, smell, and touch. The line:

Main tenu phir milangi... ik hawa da jhoka ban ke

(I will see thee again... as the wind of a gust)

implicates a feminine need which surpasses physical boundaries. This voice of becoming is consistent with the conception of Cixous, of *écriture féminine*, in which the female subject does not accept set boundaries. Pritam is demanding emotional and erotic independence through this metamorphic self-expression.

Table 1 is a summary of the way the voice works in the poetic works of Pritam:

Table 1: Modes of Voice in Key Poems of Amrita Pritam

Poem Title	Mode of Voice	Function	Feminine Subjectivity Revealed
<i>Ajj Aakhaan</i> <i>Waris Shah Nu</i>	Collective, testimonial	Public mourning; reviving silenced histories	Women as historical witnesses and victims of trauma
<i>Main Tenun</i> <i>Phir Milangi</i>	Intimate, lyrical	Expressing desire and emotional autonomy	Self in motion—fluid, empowered, sensuous
Other lyric poems	Symbolic, metaphorical	Blending emotion with nature imagery	Woman as creator of her own language

4.2. Silence as Resistance

Whereas voice stands out in the poems of Pritam and is rather strident and assertive, silence is equally important. Silence does not work as absence, it is a considered tactic of resistance, usually creating emotional terrain which language cannot quite enclose. Pritam makes use of restrained color imagery, empty spaces and incomplete metaphors in poems such as *Kagaz Te Canvas* to create inner sceneries of desire, displacement and repressed agony.

The silence in the work by Pritam tends to protect the self against patriarchal invasions. The female speaker preserves the interpretive control by not fully disclosing. This is in line with the idea of the subaltern woman by Spivak who expresses herself by gestures, absence, or symbolic withdrawal. The poetic silences of Pritam therefore are:

- a non-cooperation in being deciphered.
- a defense of interiority of emotion.
- some mute criticism of patriarchal demands.

Silence is then not passivity, it is a kind of rebellion, a grammatical place through which women are reasserting their power by not giving what they will not give freely by the patriarchy.

4.3. Feminine Subjectivity in *Pinjar*

The novel *Pinjar* by Pritam is one of the most intensive literary explorations of silence of women during Partition. The main character, Puro, represents a tricky association between voice and lack of voice. This is an imposed silence upon Puro after she is kidnapped and disowned by her own family. But gradually her silence becomes the place of self-exploration and strength.

One of the most crucial instances of agency in the text is the fact that Puro refuses to go home to her place of birth when she is rejected. Her silence is turned into a moral attitude- a statement of dignity instead of a statement of defeat. She makes a life choice that is determined by her moral compass even in the oppressing situations.

The fact that she stands still testifies to a spiritual change:

Usdi khamoshi vich ike ajehi vechh cheekh to bhi parayi si.

(The silence that was there in her was more than a scream.)

Pritam therefore subverts traditional victimization story by transforming silence into a spiritual power. The subjectivity of Puro is revealed not in the vocality but in the morally charged silence and establishing self-definition.

4.4. Autobiographical Silence in *Rasidi Ticket*

Pritam, in her memoir *Rasidi Ticket* brings about an inward aspect of silence, which is connected to personal ethics, creative discipline and emotional complexity. Instead of defying the societal expectations and condemnation, or expressing all the aspects of her love life, Pritam frequently resorts to the symbolic articulation and contemplative silence.

Her well known verse to Sahir Ludhianvi--

Mere dil likhat si sirf ek rasdi ticket si.

(I could write everything I wanted to on the reverse of a revenue stamp.)

--sums up the melding of the inarticulate and the articulate. The metaphor implies that a huge amount of emotional material may be held in very little articulation. Silence in this case is a



form of art: Pritam writes whatever she should and remains silent about what requires a privacy or transcendence.

Her non-disclosures in the memoir are intentional. They function as:

- ethical scruppling of personal accounts of relationships.
- creative condensation in which emotion is condensed as opposed to expounded.
- feminine agency which mitigates confessional overexposure.

So, by turning silence into literary aesthetics and an autobiographical attitude, Pritam turns silence into a literary aesthetics and an autobiographical stance.

5. CONCLUSION

The paper has shown that poetry and prose by Amrita Pritam positively form a feminist paradigm, where voice and silence are complementary and not opposing to the formation of feminine subjectivity. In some poems such as Ajj Aakhaan Waris Shah Nu and Main Tenun Phir Milangi, Pritam reappropriated the emotional, historical, erotic agency of women, and even in such poems as Pinjar and Rasdi Ticket she turned silence into a subtle mode of moral struggle, self-evaluation and self-survival. In the case of testimonial outcry or intentional silence, the female subjects of Pritam express the experiences that are supposed to be repressed by the patriarchal order and demonstrate that empowerment may be gained through words as well as significant silence. Finally, the weight of voice and silence bargained by Pritam, in addition to altering the boundaries between feminine subjectivity in South Asian literature, also disrupts the traditional narrative, providing other ways of expressing trauma, desire, memory, and resilience.

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