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Amrita Pritam's Revenue Stamp: A Feminist Autobiography of Partition Trauma and Embodied Memory

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Abstract

Amrita Pritam's Revenue Stamp (1976) redefines autobiographical writing by merging personal narrative with feminist historiography and postcolonial testimony. This study examines how Pritam's memoir deconstructs patriarchal autobiography through its experimental form—interweaving poetry, fragmented memories, and epistolary passages to reclaim female subjectivity. Analysing the text through the dual lenses of feminist life-writing (Smith & Watson, 2001) and Partition trauma studies (Butalia, 1998), the paper demonstrates how Pritam transforms her personal story into a counter-archive of gendered Partition experiences. Particular focus is given to the metaphor of the "revenue stamp" as a symbol of women's marginalized yet indispensable role in history. The paper argues that Pritam's narrative strategies—non-linearity, embodied memory, and intertextuality—create a distinctly feminist mode of witnessing those challenges both colonial and nationalist historiographies. Ultimately, Revenue Stamp emerges as a literary act of resistance that compels us to reconsider autobiography as a site for feminist knowledge production and historical revisionism.

Keywords: Amrita Pritam, Revenue Stamp, feminist autobiography, Partition literature, women's writing, postcolonial feminism, trauma narratives, life-writing, Indian literature, gendered memory.

Introduction

The Amrita Pritam (1919–2005), a formidable literary voice in twentieth-century India, challenged both literary and societal conventions through her bold and introspective writings. As the first prominent female poet of Punjabi literature and a prolific writer in Hindi, her work spans poetry, fiction, and autobiography, often foregrounding the emotional and psychological landscapes of women within rigid patriarchal structures. Among her most compelling works is her autobiography *Revenue Stamp* (*Rasidi Ticket*), a text that defies traditional autobiographical form and instead emerges as a radical articulation of female subjectivity and creative autonomy.

In *Revenue Stamp*, Pritam does not merely recount the chronology of her life; she excavates it. Her narrative unfolds in fragments, weaving together memory, emotion, and reflection to reveal the multifaceted dimensions of her identity—as a woman, a lover, a mother, and a writer. She writes with unflinching honesty about her failed marriage, her unfulfilled yet spiritually resonant relationship with Sahir Ludhianvi, her enduring companionship with Imroz, and the personal trauma shaped by the violence and dislocation of Partition. In doing so, she refuses the silence traditionally imposed on women's emotional and sexual lives, reclaiming her experiences as valid and worthy of literary articulation.

This paper examines *Revenue Stamp* through a feminist lens, situating Pritam's autobiography as an act of resistance against both the conventions of male-centric life writing and the cultural mores that restrict women's agency. It argues that Pritam's use of the autobiographical form becomes a political tool—a means to rewrite not only her own narrative but also the broader story of womanhood in a patriarchal, postcolonial nation. Through an intimate and unapologetic portrayal of selfhood, Pritam aligns personal truth with political subversion, making *Revenue Stamp* a cornerstone of feminist literary discourse in South Asia.

Feminist Autobiography and the Reclamation of Voice

Autobiography, as a literary form, has long been dominated by male voices, often privileging linear narratives of public achievement and rational selfhood. In contrast, feminist autobiographies disrupt this tradition by foregrounding emotion, relational identity, and personal memory as legitimate sites of knowledge. Amrita Pritam's *Revenue Stamp* exemplifies this rupture, offering not a conventional life story but a fragmented, introspective meditation on selfhood, love, and societal constraints. Through her unapologetic articulation of personal experiences, Pritam reclaims narrative space traditionally denied to

women, transforming her autobiography into a site of feminist resistance.

In *Revenue Stamp*, Pritam resists the pressures to conform to social expectations of womanhood—docility, silence, and emotional containment. Her writing is marked by a fierce authenticity that refuses to mask vulnerability or obscure desire. She speaks openly about her emotional entanglements, spiritual inquiries, and creative impulses, defying the cultural taboos surrounding female subjectivity and sexuality. In doing so, Pritam destabilizes the binary between public and private, asserting that the personal is, indeed, political—a foundational tenet of feminist thought articulated by scholars such as Hanisch (1970) and later expanded by theorists like Mohanty (2003).

Moreover, Pritam's non-linear narrative structure reflects a deliberate feminist aesthetic. Rather than adhering to a chronological account of events, she constructs her autobiography through memory, emotion, and reflection—modes of expression often associated with feminine narrative strategies. This form becomes a subversive tool, challenging dominant patriarchal forms of storytelling that privilege logic and linearity over introspection and complexity.

Pritam's reclamation of voice is also deeply political. As a woman who witnessed the horrors of Partition and endured the constraints of a patriarchal literary culture, her writing becomes both testimonial and transformative. She not only documents her lived experiences but also reconfigures them, asserting her right to speak, to desire, and to define herself outside of male-authored scripts. In doing so, she joins a lineage of feminist writers who have used life writing to resist erasure and assert agency, including Kamala Das, Maya Angelou, and Virginia Woolf (1929).

Thus, *Revenue Stamp* functions not just as an autobiography but as a feminist manifesto—a bold reclamation of voice in a society that sought to silence it. Through her writing, Amrita Pritam affirms that a woman's life, in all its contradictions and complexities, is worthy of being told in her own words, on her own terms.

Partition, Trauma, and the Embodied Archive of Violence

In *Revenue Stamp*, Amrita Pritam powerfully embodies the trauma of Partition through the female body, transforming personal pain into a living archive of collective violence. She vividly portrays how women's bodies became sites of brutal physical and psychological violence—rape, forced displacement, and loss—that official histories often silence or marginalize (Butalia, 1998; Das, 2007). Through visceral metaphors and sensory details, Pritam makes abstract historical violence palpable: the "womb

remembering the other side" or "scars as legal documents" foreground women's corporeal experience as central to understanding Partition's human cost.

By centering embodied memory, Pritam challenges state-centric, male-dominated narratives that reduce women to passive victims or statistics. Her fragmented narrative structure and corporeal imagery create a counter-archive—an alternative history written on and through the body—that preserves trauma as a source of resistance and testimony (Puar, 2007; Van der Kolk, 2014). Moreover, her use of menstrual cycles and bodily rhythms offers a feminist temporal framework that disrupts linear historical time (Grosz, 1994).

Ultimately, *Revenue Stamp* insists that women's bodies and memories are crucial archives of Partition trauma, expanding the scope of historical witness and feminist testimony beyond textual records to embodied experience.

Conclusion

Amrita Pritam's *Revenue Stamp* stands as a landmark in feminist life-writing, not only for its formal innovation but for its unwavering commitment to reclaiming the silenced voices of women within both personal and national histories. By merging the autobiographical with the poetic, the corporeal with the political, and the fragmented with the deeply embodied, Pritam resists the conventions of patriarchal historiography and male-authored autobiography. Her nonlinear, emotionally charged narrative becomes an act of defiance—refusing the erasure of women lived realities during and after the cataclysmic events of Partition.

Through a deeply feminist lens, Pritam reframes the autobiography as a counter-archive—where scars, silences, menstruation, and maternal pain become legitimate historical evidence. Her reclamation of voice, memory, and bodily experience destabilizes dominant historical narratives that have long rendered women passive victims or absent altogether. Instead, she presents the female body as an active archive of trauma, resistance, and survival—one that inscribes its testimony in blood, breath, and bone.

In this way, *Revenue Stamp* is not merely the memoir of a celebrated literary figure; it is a revolutionary feminist document. It urges us to rethink the genre of autobiography as a political space, where personal history intersects with collective memory and where suppressed truths find articulation through the aesthetics of pain and resilience. Pritam's pen becomes a moral compass, a nation's conscience, and a powerful tool of feminist historiography—insisting that women's stories are not footnotes to history, but its vital pulse.

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