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THE REVENUE STAMP OF SELFHOOD: AMRITA PRITAM'S FEMINIST AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

Amrita Pritam's Rasidi Ticket (The Revenue Stamp) stands as one of the most significant autobiographical works in modern Indian literature. More than a personal life story, it is a literary experiment in selfhood, memory, and feminist resistance. Written in a conversational and fragmentary style, the text deliberately refuses the conventional chronological order of autobiography. Instead, Pritam reconstructs her identity through recollections, relationships, and reflections, blurring the boundaries between life, literature, and history.

KEYWORDS: *Amrita Pritam's Rasidi Ticket*

INTRODUCTION

Amrita Pritam's *Rasidi Ticket* (*The Revenue Stamp*) stands as one of the most significant autobiographical works in modern Indian literature. More than a personal life story, it is a literary experiment in selfhood, memory, and feminist resistance. Written in a conversational and fragmentary style, the text deliberately refuses the conventional chronological order of autobiography. Instead, Pritam reconstructs her identity through recollections, relationships, and reflections, blurring the boundaries between life, literature, and history.

The metaphor of the "revenue stamp" encapsulates her vision: a small, seemingly insignificant space that nonetheless has the power to authenticate and contain immense emotional magnitude. In the same way, her autobiography compresses a complex life into an intimate narrative space, demonstrating that the significance of autobiography lies not in the length of the record but in the intensity of experience it conveys.

At its core, *Rasidi Ticket* is a radical act of self-definition. Pritam refuses to be confined by patriarchal categories—wife, mother, widow, respectable woman—and instead asserts her identity as a poet, lover, intellectual, and autonomous individual. Her openness about contradictions, vulnerabilities, and desires transforms the text into a feminist document, challenging the silence traditionally imposed on women's emotional and sexual autonomy in Indian society.

Equally important is the way Pritam situates her personal narrative within the collective trauma of Partition. Her autobiography shifts from "this is my life" to "this is the history that entered my life," making her voice simultaneously individual and communal. By foregrounding displacement, violence, and the gendered nature of trauma, she transforms Partition from geopolitical history into an intimate history of bodies, homes, and memory.

Thus, *Rasidi Ticket* is not merely an autobiography but a cultural document of resistance and remembrance. It expands the scope of Indian women's life writing, demonstrating that autobiography can be simultaneously personal and political, individual and collective, intimate and historical.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SELF AND FEMINIST ASSERTION

At the heart of *Rasidi Ticket* lies Amrita Pritam's radical construction of herself as an autobiographical subject. Unlike conventional autobiographies that often emphasize social achievements, family lineage, or chronological life events, Pritam's narrative is a deliberate act of self-definition. She refuses to be confined by patriarchal categories—wife, mother, widow, respectable woman—and instead asserts her identity as a poet, lover, intellectual, and autonomous individual. This refusal is particularly significant in the Indian cultural context, where women's emotional and sexual autonomy has historically been regulated by social norms and religious expectations.

Her autobiography becomes a feminist intervention precisely because it foregrounds contradictions, vulnerabilities, and desires that women were traditionally discouraged from articulating. By acknowledging her own emotional conflicts, disappointments, and longings, Pritam destabilizes the idealized image of the "self-sacrificing woman" and replaces it with a multidimensional female subject. This openness transforms her narrative into a text of resistance, challenging the silence imposed on women's personal lives.

As the text itself notes, she presents herself as "an individual with desire, intellectual independence, emotional agency, artistic ambition, and the right to make choices." This insistence on female subjectivity is not merely personal but political: it asserts that women's lives, emotions, and creative ambitions are worthy of literary representation. In doing so, Pritam aligns with feminist theorists such as Elaine Showalter, whose concept of *gynocriticism* emphasizes the importance of women writing themselves into literary history.

Moreover, Pritam's autobiographical self is not static but fluid and evolving. She negotiates multiple identities—lover, mother, writer, cultural witness—without allowing any single role to define her completely. This multiplicity reflects Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's idea that autobiography is constructed through the interplay of the experiencing self, the remembering self, and the narrating self. Pritam's narrative voice moves between these selves, reconstructing her identity in ways that resist closure and celebrate complexity.

In essence, *Rasidi Ticket* becomes a feminist act of self-inscription. By narrating her life on her own terms, Pritam challenges patriarchal definitions of femininity and asserts the legitimacy of women's emotional and intellectual autonomy. Her autobiography is not simply a record of personal experience but a cultural document that redefines what it means for a woman to speak, write, and exist in modern Indian society.

LOVE AS SELF-DISCOVERY: SAHIR LUDHIANVI AND IMROZ

Amrita Pritam's *Rasidi Ticket* places her relationships at the centre of her autobiographical self, not as conventional romantic episodes but as **sites of self-discovery and creative transformation**. Her bond with Sahir Ludhianvi, the celebrated Urdu poet, is remembered less as a fulfilled romance and more as a poetics of longing. Absence itself becomes a generative force: the distance, silences, and unfulfilled desires are transmuted into poetry, shaping her literary voice. In this sense, love is not domesticated into marriage or social conformity but articulated as **female agency—the right to desire, to remember, and to narrate on her own terms**. By refusing to reduce her relationship with Sahir to societal categories,

Pritam asserts that longing and memory can themselves be forms of creative power.

Her companionship with Imroz, the painter and lifelong partner, represents an alternative model of intimacy. Unlike Sahir, Imroz shared her daily life, offering mutual affection, artistic collaboration, and respect for individuality. Their relationship challenges the assumption that a woman's identity must be organized around marriage or domestic duty. Instead, it embodies a vision of **companionship based on equality, creativity, and freedom**. Imroz's presence in her life demonstrates that love can be a space of affirmation rather than constraint, where two individuals nurture each other's artistic and emotional growth without subsuming one identity into another.

Together, these relationships illustrate Pritam's radical redefinition of love in autobiographical writing. Love is not portrayed as a passive condition or a socially sanctioned institution but as a **dynamic process of self-realisation**. Sahir represents the transformative power of longing and absence, while Imroz embodies the possibility of companionship rooted in respect and creativity. In narrating both, Pritam challenges patriarchal expectations of women's emotional lives and asserts that love, in its varied forms, can be a pathway to autonomy, artistic expression, and feminist resistance.

PARTITION AND COLLECTIVE TRAUMA

Partition is the historical event that most profoundly shapes *Rasidi Ticket*. For Amrita Pritam, autobiography becomes inseparable from history, as her narrative shifts from "this is my life" to "this is the history that entered my life." In doing so, she transforms her personal story into a testimony of **collective trauma**, foregrounding displacement, migration, and violence as defining experiences of her generation.

What makes Pritam's account particularly powerful is her emphasis on the **gendered nature of Partition violence**. Women's bodies became symbolic sites of communal conflict, subjected to sexual violence, abduction, and forced conversion. In patriarchal societies, women were often reduced to markers of community honour, and their violation was used as a weapon of war. By narrating these experiences, Pritam restores individuality to women who were otherwise silenced or erased in official histories. Her writing insists that Partition must be remembered not only as a geopolitical event but as an **intimate history of bodies, homes, and trauma**.

This perspective aligns with postcolonial theorists such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who argue that marginalized voices—particularly women—are often excluded from dominant historical narratives. Pritam's autobiography functions as a **counter-archive**, preserving experiences that official accounts overlook. Her testimony demonstrates that history is not only about political leaders and territorial divisions but also about the everyday suffering of ordinary people, especially women.

Equally significant is the way Pritam represents memory itself. Trauma complicates recollection, returning in fragments, silences, and repetitions. Her narrative does not present Partition as a linear story but as a series of emotional ruptures, reflecting the difficulty of narrating violence. This fragmented style mirrors the psychological reality of trauma, where memory is often incomplete and haunted by absence. In this sense, *Rasidi Ticket* participates in the larger process of **remembering historical trauma through personal narrative**, bridging the gap between individual memory and collective history.

By situating Partition within her autobiography, Pritam demonstrates that the personal is inseparable from the political. Her narrative transforms private pain into public testimony, ensuring that the voices of women and displaced communities remain part of cultural memory. In doing so, she redefines autobiography as not only a record of selfhood but also a **literary act of resistance and remembrance**.

MEMORY, TRAUMA, AND RECONSTRUCTION

Amrita Pritam's *Rasidi Ticket* demonstrates that memory is not an objective archive of past events but a **reconstruction shaped by emotion, retrospection, and narrative choice**. Autobiography, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue, is constructed through the interplay of the *experiencing self*, the *remembering self*, and the *narrating self*. Pritam's recollections of Partition and her personal relationships illustrate this dynamic vividly. The woman who lived through Partition is not identical to the woman who remembers it decades later, nor to the writer who shapes those memories into a literary text. Each layer of selfhood interacts, producing a narrative that is at once personal testimony and cultural reflection.

Trauma complicates this process of remembering. As scholars of trauma studies note, traumatic experiences often resist linear narration, returning instead in **fragments, silences, and repetitions**. Pritam's autobiography reflects this reality: her memories of Partition are not presented as a continuous chronology but as ruptured recollections, haunted by absence and emotional intensity. This fragmented style mirrors the psychological truth of trauma, where memory is partial, unstable, and shaped by the struggle to articulate pain.

Her narrative also resonates with Marianne Hirsch's concept of *postmemory*, which describes how traumatic experiences extend beyond direct witnesses to shape subsequent generations. Although Pritam herself lived through Partition, her writing demonstrates how trauma becomes **collective memory**, transmitted through stories, silences, and cultural practices. In this way, her autobiography participates in the larger process of remembering historical trauma, ensuring that the violence of Partition is not confined to official archives but preserved in intimate, personal testimony.

By foregrounding memory as reconstruction, Pritam challenges the assumption that autobiography is a transparent record of truth. Instead, she shows that memory is selective, interpretive, and deeply emotional. Her narrative transforms autobiography into a **dialogue between past and present**, between personal experience and collective history. In doing so, *Rasidi Ticket* becomes not only a record of her life but also a **literary act of remembrance and resistance**, preserving the voices of those silenced by trauma and asserting the importance of memory in shaping identity.

LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, AND CULTURAL BELONGING

By choosing to write *Rasidi Ticket* in Punjabi, Amrita Pritam situates her autobiography within a **specific cultural and linguistic identity**. Language here is not merely a medium of communication but a **repository of memory, belonging, and resistance**. In the aftermath of Partition, Punjab was divided geographically, politically, and religiously, yet Punjabi as a language remained a shared cultural thread. Pritam's decision to narrate her life in Punjabi is therefore profoundly symbolic: it affirms her rootedness in a cultural tradition that transcends political boundaries and asserts the continuity of identity despite displacement.

Language becomes a **vehicle of cultural memory**, preserving the rhythms, idioms, and sensibilities of a community fractured by Partition. Writing in Punjabi allows Pritam to capture the emotional nuances of her experiences—longing, trauma, love, and resistance—in a voice that resonates with her cultural heritage. It also situates her autobiography within a literary tradition that values oral storytelling, folk songs, and regional expression, thereby linking her personal narrative to collective cultural practices.

From a feminist perspective, her linguistic choice is equally significant. In a literary landscape often dominated by Hindi and English, Pritam's use of Punjabi challenges hierarchies of language and asserts the legitimacy of regional voices. It becomes an act of **cultural self-assertion**, reclaiming space for women's writing in a language historically marginalized in national discourse. This aligns with postcolonial theorists who argue that language is central to identity formation and resistance against cultural homogenization.

Moreover, Pritam's autobiography demonstrates how language itself can be a form of **belonging and healing**. For communities displaced by Partition, Punjabi remained a marker of shared identity, even when geography and politics divided them. By writing in Punjabi, Pritam not only preserves her own cultural belonging but also offers her readers a sense of continuity, reminding them that identity is sustained through language as much as through territory.

Thus, *Rasidi Ticket* is both a personal and cultural document. It affirms that autobiography is not only about narrating individual experiences but also about **preserving linguistic and cultural heritage**. In situating her life story within Punjabi, Pritam transforms her autobiography into a text of resistance, remembrance, and belonging, ensuring that the fractured memory of Partition is anchored in the enduring voice of her mother tongue.

THE PERSONAL AS POLITICAL

One of the most striking aspects of *Rasidi Ticket* is its transformation of personal experience into political discourse. Amrita Pritam demonstrates that autobiography is not merely a record of private life but a **cultural intervention** in which the intimate becomes inseparable from the collective. Love, displacement, trauma, and memory are not presented as isolated experiences but as **sites of resistance and testimony**.

Her articulation of love becomes a statement of female agency, challenging patriarchal norms that sought to regulate women's emotional and sexual autonomy. By narrating her relationships with Sahir Ludhianvi and Imroz, she asserts the right to desire, to remember, and to define companionship outside the institution of marriage. In this way, love itself becomes political, a declaration of autonomy in a society where women's identities were often subsumed under familial or communal expectations.

Displacement, meanwhile, becomes testimony to Partition. Pritam's narrative shifts from "this is my life" to "this is the history that entered my life," situating her autobiography within the collective trauma of migration and violence. By foregrounding the gendered nature of Partition, she transforms geopolitical history into an **intimate history of bodies and homes**, ensuring that women's experiences are not erased from cultural memory.

Trauma becomes collective memory, as her fragmented recollections mirror the ruptures of historical violence. In narrating silences, absences, and repetitions, Pritam participates in the larger process of remembering trauma, bridging personal pain with communal remembrance. Her autobiography thus functions as a **counter-archive**, preserving voices excluded from official histories.

Finally, writing itself becomes resistance. By inscribing her life in Punjabi, Pritam asserts cultural belonging and challenges linguistic hierarchies. Her autobiography embodies the feminist dictum that "the personal is political," demonstrating that private experiences—love, desire, displacement, trauma—are inseparable from public meaning. In doing so, she redefines autobiography as a **literary act of feminist self-inscription and cultural testimony**, situating women's voices at the centre of historical and political discourse.

CONTRIBUTION TO WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING

Amrita Pritam's *Rasidi Ticket* expands the scope of Indian women's autobiography by breaking away from conventional models of life writing. Traditionally, autobiographies by women in India tended to emphasise family lineage, social achievement, or religious devotion, often conforming to patriarchal expectations of modesty and silence. Pritam disrupts this tradition by creating a space for **emotional confession, political reflection, historical testimony, and feminist self-fashioning**. Her narrative demonstrates that women's life writing can be simultaneously intimate and political, personal and historical, individual and collective.

Her autobiography foregrounds **female subjectivity** in ways that were unprecedented in Indian literature. By openly narrating her desires, vulnerabilities, and contradictions, she challenges the cultural silencing of women's emotional and sexual autonomy. This act of self-inscription aligns her with global feminist traditions, in which autobiography serves as a tool for reclaiming agency and resisting patriarchal definitions of womanhood.

In doing so, Pritam also situates herself alongside other pioneering Indian women writers such as Kamala Das (*My Story*), Indira Goswami (*The Unfinished Autobiography*), and Prabha Khaitan (*Anya se Ananya*). While Das foregrounded female sexuality, Goswami emphasised widowhood and social activism, and Khaitan narrated loneliness and marginalisation, Pritam's contribution lies in weaving together **love, trauma, displacement, and creativity** into a narrative that is both deeply personal and profoundly collective. Together, these writers redefine autobiography as a genre capable of articulating women's voices in diverse and radical ways.

Moreover, Pritam's work demonstrates that autobiography can function as a **cultural document of resistance and remembrance**. By situating her personal experiences within the collective trauma of Partition, she expands the genre beyond individual life stories to encompass historical testimony. Her narrative thus bridges the gap between private memory and public history, showing that women's autobiographies can contribute to national and cultural discourse.

Ultimately, *Rasidi Ticket* establishes Amrita Pritam as a central voice in the tradition of Indian women's autobiographical writing. Her greatest contribution lies in transforming the private materials of a woman's life—love, desire, displacement, trauma—into a powerful literary discourse on freedom, identity, and resistance. In doing so, she not only redefines autobiography as a feminist genre but also ensures that women's voices are inscribed into the broader canon of Indian literature and cultural memory.

CRITICAL CONCLUSION

Rasidi Ticket is far more than the autobiography of Amrita Pritam; it is a **feminist act of self-inscription and a cultural memory of Partition**. By refusing to separate the personal from the political, the woman from the writer, or memory from history, Pritam creates a narrative that is both deeply individual and profoundly collective. Her life story becomes a lens through which broader historical and cultural realities are refracted, demonstrating that autobiography can function as both

personal testimony and cultural archive.

Her greatest contribution lies in transforming the private materials of a woman's life—love, desire, displacement, trauma—into a powerful literary discourse on freedom and identity. In narrating her relationships, she asserts female agency; in recounting Partition, she testifies to collective trauma; in writing in Punjabi, she affirms cultural belonging. Each of these choices challenges patriarchal, colonial, and linguistic hierarchies, situating her autobiography as a text of resistance as much as remembrance.

By doing so, Pritam establishes herself as a central voice in the tradition of Indian women's autobiographical and Partition literature. She expands the genre beyond conventional records of family or social achievement, creating a space for emotional confession, political reflection, and feminist self-fashioning instead. Her narrative demonstrates that women's life writing can be simultaneously intimate and political, personal and historical, individual and collective.

Ultimately, *Rasidi Ticket* exemplifies the feminist dictum that "the personal is political." It affirms that women's voices, when inscribed into literature, can reshape cultural memory and challenge dominant narratives. Pritam's autobiography is not only a record of her life but also a **literary act of freedom**, ensuring that the experiences of women and marginalised communities remain alive in cultural consciousness. In this way, she transforms autobiography into a genre of resistance, remembrance, and identity, securing her place as one of the most influential voices in modern Indian literature.

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