

To Waris Shah

by Amrita Pritam

Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu (1948)

Speak from the depths of the grave
to Waris Shah I Say
and add a new page of the saga of love
today.

Once wept a daughter of Punjab,
your pen unleashed a million cries
a million daughters weep today,
to you Waris Shah they turn their eyes.

Awake, decry your Punjab,
O sufferer with those suffering!
Corpses entomb the fields today
the Chenab is flowing with blood.
Mingled with poison by some
are the waters of five rivers,
and this torrent of pollution,
unceasingly covers our earth.
And heavy with venom were the winds,
that blew through the forests
transmuting into a snake,
The reed of each musical branch.
With sting after sting did the serpents
suppress the voice of people.

A moment so brief and the limbs of Punjab turned blue
Threads snapped from their shuttles
and rent the songs at their throats

Silenced was the spinning wheel's hum,
severed from their gatherings, the women.
Branches heavy with swings,
cracked from peepul trees
boats laden with trappings
loosened from anchors to sink.

Despoilers of beauty and love,
each man now turned a Kedu¹
where can we seek for another
like Waris Shah today?

Only you can speak from the grave,
to Waris Shah I say
add another page to your epic of love today.

Translated by Amrita Pritam

¹ Or Qaidon – The uncle of Heer, the villain in Waris Shah's love story who got her to eat the poisoned sweets

Amrita Pritam's interest in writing amplified after she moved from Gujranwala to Lahore along with her father, after the death of her mother, when she was 11 years old. Her father edited a Punjabi literary journal. With a basic knowledge of rhymes and meter provided by him, she began to write, mostly to deal with her loneliness. She wrote in Punjabi, the language in which she spoke and thought. Pritam's father who was rather conservative, wanted her to write religious or mystical poetry. In the years to come, Pritam became one of the most significant figures of Punjabi literature.

The Partition of Punjab saw some of the bloodiest riots resulting in a huge loss of lives, homes, livelihood, communities, and histories of a people who migrated from Lahore across the new geo-political borders. These losses have become part of the histories of innumerable Sikh families. Amrita Pritam, celebrated poet, essayist and novelist, was among those who lived through the Partition riots and fled Lahore, to travel across the new borders to India. She was 28 years old when she undertook the train journey.

Pritam recorded her anguish over the massacres and particularly the rapes – the violation of women and women's bodies in what became her most famous poem, "Ajj Akhaan Waris Shah Nu" ("To Waris Shah"). The poem is representative of the times. It belongs to the genre of partition literature – a most critical period in sub continental history, and reminds us of the plight of people (especially women) during the Partition. It is a deeply emotional poem expressing Pritam's felt thought. There were many who wrote on the Partition and the riots that followed, but this poem had come straight from a woman's heart. It expressed her point of view, and her response to the terrible, bloody order of the day. People recited it and sang it.

Many translations of Amrita Pritam's poems are available, particularly of 'Ajj Akhan Waris Shah Nun'. 'To Waris Shah' is an English translation by Pritam herself. Pritam evokes the spirit of Waris Shah, the well-known Punjabi Sufi saint and poet, venerated by Muslims and Sikhs, and famous for his tragic love story *Heer Ranjha*, that celebrates syncretism and unity. She evokes him to help herself and mankind cope with the devastating pogroms of the Partition. Pritam spreads the word of love and tolerance, like Waris Shah did with his love story of Heer and Ranjha.

'Heer' is a daughter of Punjab and at this juncture, millions of daughters of Punjab are suffering the most gruesome physical and emotional tortures. And so Pritam beseeches the Sufi saint to step out of his grave and hear the cries of

those millions of women who are being tormented for surely, if this aficionado of communal harmony could write a most moving story for one daughter of Punjab, he would speak up for the millions who were being tortured. The poem also references Qaidon (the villainous Uncle), and compares the killings at the time of partition, to the evil perpetrated by him.

In a state of extreme despondency, Amrita Pritam depicts the effects of partition in Punjab and portrays its most bloody chapters. She implores Waris Shah, to appear as he is needed in the moment the most to do something for her beloved homeland where corpses rot in the fields by the millions, and everything has turned red, the verdant lands and the rivers included. She exclaims that the land of Heer-Ranjha is swathed in human blood; humanity is at stake, and the message of love and compassion has fled from Punjab. The poet hopes that the people of Punjab will heed her lament and stop the madness and bloodshed. She laments that the people of Punjab have forgotten about the purity of love, and are now fighting and killing their own countrymen mercilessly.

So many people of Punjab have been slaughtered that the waters of the River Chenab have turned crimson. Communal hatred has impregnated the hearts of men and turned the green pastures of Punjab into a putrefying, open graveyard. Pritam believes that the madness that has taken over is a result of satanic forces that have contaminated the minds and hearts of people. She goes on to say that the water of the river Indus has turned poisonous and it is now irrigating the land with poison. This poison, she says, is the poison of the “Divide and Rule Policy” created by the British and which is now irrigating even the spirit of the people of the Indian subcontinent. As a result, the fertile land of Punjab is now giving birth to poisonous saplings i.e. men whose hatred knows no bounds, and that they have succeeded in dividing the country. Pritam is extremely saddened by the fact that the poison of revenge has intoxicated the ordinary people, and the beautiful natural landscape of Punjab is now turned into a field of mass-slaughter.

This metaphorical snake of hatred has bitten the common men of Punjab and its venom seeps their bodies. The poet is pointing at the political leaders who are selfishly wiping out love, harmony, compassion, and brotherhood from the people’s hearts.

In the middle of all this chaos and destruction, the daughters of Punjab are the most affected. They have stopped singing and their spinning wheel (a metaphor for rural economy and for Gandhi ji with his call for communal harmony) has

stopped functioning. Girls are being abducted, raped, killed and torn away from their families. They fear desperately for their safety. They are unable to sing together, unable to share their sorrows, or to help each other in their worst hours of distress. All happiness has fled and people are fleeing with their lives.

The Partition of India has snapped the invisible thread of love which bound people to one another. The men of Punjab no longer indulge in peaceful activities such as blowing the flute, and instead indulge in fighting and killing. The bloodshed is on such a large-scale that, according to the poet, even the dead will start weeping after seeing this horrid picture of their motherland. She is extremely saddened to see how the peace and harmony of Punjab has been irrevocably destroyed.

The poet is disturbed and desperate. She appeals to Waris Shah as she thinks that he only he can stop this turbulence. The opening and concluding lines of the poem, in particular, emphasizes the sincerity of her prayer to the Sufi saint.