
PATHWAYS OF THE SKY: "HALF-CRACKED" LITERARY WOMEN

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A woman with snakes in her hair. Or with the wings of a swallow. Or the flight of a queen bee.

An Amazon with the claws of a lioness. Or a knife in hand. Or a poison dart.

A phoenix rising from the ashes. Venus ascending to the skies from the tempestuous foam.

Woman unbounded, unleashed, unfettered....

Such images hit us in the face when we read women's writing, particularly that written in the last century or so. Challenging the authority of the father enters a new woman shedding the old self, taking on a new avatar, flying free, soaring high. Repeatedly, in women's writing such metaphors jolt us out of our complacencies and force us to acknowledge the fact that a woman writer is not necessarily the conventional goody two-shoes, the docile creature she was expected to be. Enough is enough, she seems to cry as she embarks on a journey she charts out for herself, a route not mapped for her by the forces of patriarchy.

Take as an example the legendary Amrita Pritam, a frail woman born in Lahore in the undivided Punjab of 1919, destined to blaze a trail in the literary world, a trail that many would follow. She was a girl like any other, the girl next door, perhaps, who could have led a humdrum, conventional life with no ups and downs, no surprises, no radical upheavals. But this was not to be. She had to play a major role in literary history so the conventional and the commonplace had to be discarded. But, was Amrita the only one to subvert phallographic traditions? We realize that her story is not unique when we surf the pages of literary history and find any number of women who opted to pick up the pen – the traditional phallic symbol of masculinity – and give expression to the turbulence of their

emotions against forces that bind and oppress. They dared to dream of another life, they dared to write of their inner selves, the fires that ignite their passions and desires.

Numberless women writers have been doomed to anonymity because women's writing was not taken seriously by men. Emily Dickinson, for example, wrote in times when women were expected to simply make babies, not poems. She chose to write poems and was considered to be crazy, or "partially cracked" as one critic put it. Emily was to respond with a tongue in the cheek, "You think my gait 'spasmodic' – I'm in danger – Sir – You think me 'uncontrolled' – I have no Tribunal," and the exchange has by now become an oft-quoted segment of literary history. It is the subject of Adrienne Rich's poem with the title "I am in Danger—Sir—" where Emily is referred to as "half-cracked".

Indeed, in the eyes of the patriarchal world, any woman who opts for a life other than the one prescribed by 'man'-made laws would be an aberration. A woman writer thus finds herself in an unfortunate double bind: on the one hand she has the urge to fly forth freely but on the other she must survive in a hostile world. What are the options before her? Sandra Gilbert's *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, tells us how a woman is compelled to wear a mask of conformity in a male-dominated society, a society in which women are not living, pulsating human individuals but genderless, sexless beings – well-behaved, self-sacrificing, loving, caring, domesticated creatures, Goddesses of the hearth chained to a pedestal. Traditionally, sexuality belongs to the private, not the public sphere of life. It remains a taboo subject in polite company. There are even more inhibitions for female sexuality. In fact the idea of libido in women seems absurd in a patriarchal set-up; women are like goddesses, so how can they possibly ... Well! Women remain marginalized in our very kind, very benevolent, protective, patriarchal system and in this marginalized space there is no scope for the existence of any sexuality. "Humankind cannot bear too much reality," said a poet once. The reality of female sexuality is a dark frightening continent that intimidates the phallogocentric world to such an extent that it would rather deny its existence altogether.

As far as men are concerned, the story is altogether different. Lord Krishna's antics with the gopis on the banks of the Yamuna are part of the Indian folk lore, accepted uncritically, even indulgently. Don Juan's exploits become legendary. So do Casanova's. So do Lord Byron's.

But what happens to their female counterparts who follow their passions? What happens to Kunti in the *Mahabharata* when the truth about Karan being her son is revealed to her other sons? What happens to Anna Karenina who chooses passion over reason? Or to Emma Bovary who turns her back on the humdrum, seeking romance and adventure? Or to Ammu of *The God of Small Things* who decides to break the social code and follow the dictates of her heart? These women have to pay a price for not conforming, for being different, for transgressing social norms. They have to die. "Vengeance is mine, I shall repay," says the epigraph to *Anna Karenina*, quoting the Bible. The idea hammered home is as inexorable as the God of the Old Testament, that if you live within certain prescribed rules you pass muster. But if you break those rules a price will be exacted. The options are clear: toe the line and be one of us or – the other alternative – step out of line and be hounded.

Celibacy, chastity, purity – these are norms imposed on the female of the species. *Agnipareeksha* is a chastity test that Sita, and not Lord Rama, has to face. Why, one may ask, are these laws made only for women? The answer, again, is not far to seek – because it is the male of the species who have made the laws! Laws made to subjugate and keep in its rightful place that supposedly inferior species called woman. Simone de Beauvoir tells us that "Patriarchal civilization dedicated woman to chastity: it recognized more or less openly the right of the male to sexual freedom, while woman was restricted to marriage." (Beauvoir 102)

Among other myths perpetuated by patriarchy is the belief that the female body is unclean and its functioning something to be ashamed of. And so the female body, its desires, its hungers, its human cravings are all studiously kept out of public view. Yes, there is a handful of women thinkers like Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and other French feminists who urge women to wake from their slumber, be aware of their potential, and bring their bodies back into their writings – for the body is beautiful, its needs are human. The body and its needs, both need attention, both need expression. The 'false' woman who has been conditioned to please patriarchy has to be killed by the 'true' woman who must rise one day.

But – alas! – These solitary voices are drowned in the cacophony of patriarchal dos and don'ts.

How, then, does the woman writer compromise between the outer demands of an oppressive society and the inner urges of the true self? Between the real person within and the false person that the world expects to see? On the one hand is the Goddess of the hearth, her hands demurely folded in supplication, on the other the Medusa with her mass of unruly, snaky tendrils reaching out into the world in every which way. The compromise is effected by wearing the mask of conformity, by being clever and duplicitous, by telling the truth but telling it slant, by creating a persona who voices the innermost thoughts of the writer but in a veiled manner, through a subterfuge, a camouflage. Thus is the woman writer true to her own passions while at the same time staying within social conventions. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar tell us how in the nineteenth century the patriarchal ideology that dominated saw artistic activity as a male quality – the writer fathers his text, like the Divine Creator. Women writers, in order to conform to the standards imposed on them, put on the façade of being selfless, noble and docile. But behind the angel lurked the monster, raging to be free. The monster woman that Gilbert and Gubar speak of is the true woman who has to conform to patriarchal terms, and simultaneously subvert them. So, she is complicated and duplicitous. But hers is the true voice and invariably she represents the female author. The creation of the mad woman, then, is a strategy, an artifice that enables the writer to tell the truth. It is a mask – like the mask of conformity or the mask of asexuality – that is assumed by the author.

Traditional views on women are enmeshed in the binary opposition of Goddess and whore, or the lily and the rose. An ideal woman is a Goddess, a *griha-lakshmi*, a good mother, an ideal wife, an *adarshnari*. Or else, if she does not fit into the required role, she is a bitch, a slut, a whore. Germaine Greer has something else to say about the asexuality that patriarchy desires in women. She argues that passivity in women is a characteristic associated with a castrate; it is a role foisted on women by history and by women themselves. So, in desiring women without a sexual drive the society is actually making a case for eunuchs. But – and, again, this is a big but – defying the laws of the autocratic father means blowing against the

wind. Kamala Das, in agreement with Cixous and others, speaks of unbridled desire in her works – and gets censured. She wishes to soar in the uncharted blue skies but there are man-made hurdles pulling her back. Yet the struggle goes on.

Patriarchy. That is the origin of all woes. A system that ensures the subservient status of woman in society, patriarchy is what women seethe, protest, rebel against. Women's writing is an irrefutable record of this hostility towards patriarchy, particularly towards the male parent. It surfaces repeatedly, whether the female writer belongs to India or elsewhere. Women who write are creatures who, in the first place, have decided to cast off the veil of submission. The mask of conformity is abandoned. Turning their backs defiantly on father figures, they tend to be autobiographical, even narcissistic, flaunting themselves for all to see. They dare to challenge the father and all the social trappings that represent his authority. Take at random a poet like Sylvia Plath who stomps on her father's grave, shrieking all the while:

If I've killed one man, I've killed two ---
There's a stake in your fat black heart and
And the villagers never liked you
They are dancing and stamping on you
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

The shrieking woman, the woman screaming like a banshee, flying out in rage, ready to kill: this is the image that is evoked by the woman writer while in the paroxysm of a helpless rage. Conversely, there is the flying image: the symbol of the bird that women writers adopt to represent the true self that yearns for liberation. Flying, as French feminists – Cixous, Irigary, et al – tell us, is an appropriate metaphor for the woman writer (*voler* – to fly). Sylvia Plath would fly like the queen bee, up, up and away. Away from all the hooks that would pin her down to the world of men, the world of domesticity dominated by the male of the species. Or else she would suddenly emerge out of the purdah, like the lioness, and attack her oppressor.

Beware

Beware.

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air. (Plath, "Lady Lazarus")

The bid for liberation takes many forms. Sometimes it leads to madness. Sylvia Plath suffered a mental breakdown, was hospitalized and had to undergo electro-convulsive therapy. It did not cure her completely, as she describes in her autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*. Relief was temporary and with time she again lapsed into a self-destructive frame of mind from which there was no return.

In the case of Anne Sexton the revolt manifested itself in an "untamable, eternal, gut-driven ha-ha," a raucous laughter in the face of all oppressive forces. The ire was especially directed against a dominating father. If Sylvia Plath's heroine has an Electra-like attachment to her father, Anne Sexton speaks of a father-daughter relationship that borders on the incestuous:

. . . my father,

Drunkenly, bent over my bed,

Circling the abyss like a shark

My father thick upon me

Like some sleeping jelly-fish.' ("The Sleeping Beauty," *Transformations*)

Daddy's little girl has been submissive too long. When enough is enough she will rise in revolt, whether she is Anne Sexton or Sylvia Plath or Kamla Das or Amrita Pritam.

Chafing under the autocratic shadow of first the father and then her husband, Kamala Das decided to break free:

Dress in Sarees, be girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quareller with servants. Fit in, oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers . . . ("Introduction")

Required to "fit" into a certain mould, Kamala Das revolted and went her own way. She talked about female desire: the "endless female hungers," of the "hungry haste of rivers" in her, of the "Skin's lazy hungers," and of suffering under the yoke of an insensitive husband. Her rejection of the traditional mould, her focus on the body and her unabashed accounts of her extra-marital affairs are all acts of rebellion.

Das "extrudes" autobiography, going against the patriarchal convention that sees its women as self-effacing, self-sacrificing, and totally dedicated to the home and family. The focus on the self is an integral part of women's writing which sometimes seems so confessional that it appears exhibitionistic with the reader taking on the role of a voyeur. Kamala Das has been criticized for this by critics who feel that she indulges in "pathetic exhibitionism and subtle eroticism." (Rao 154) She professes to hate the institution of marriage: "I hate to show myself naked to anyone," she says (Das, *My Story* 72). Ironically, in her writings she bares herself completely. That too, with a vengeance, or so it appears. It is hard to miss the 'performance' element in her writing. It is as though Das loves to perform before an applauding audience. This is what critics find exhibitionistic in her work. Says Das:

I needed to disturb society out of its complacency. I found the complacency a very ugly state. I wanted women of my generation to feel that if men could do something wrong they could do it themselves too. I wanted to remove gender difference. I wanted to see that something happened to society which had such strong inhibitions and which only told lies in public." ("I Needed to Disturb Society")

From the shy, timid girl in awe of the father / father surrogate, she evolves into a fiery woman like the goddess Kali with whom she felt a special affinity: "When Kali danced [I] felt in the region of the heart an unease and a leap of recognition." (Das, *My Story* 29)

The change is not sudden. There is no doubt that in order to evolve and come into her own a woman has to go through several phases. The feminist critic Elaine Showalter mentions three distinct phases of feminism: feminine, feminist, and female. In the first phase, a woman is unaware of the oppression for she internalizes all patriarchal rules, in the second, she begins to interrogate the norms that have been handed down to her, protesting against the dominant male tradition. In the final, i.e., the female phase, she breaks out of the traditional mould, seeks and discovers her individual identity. In the growth and development of a woman writer, as she charts her journey from a young adolescent to a mature, self-assured creative being, one may discern such an evolution.

Take the story of Amrita Pritam: the daughter of a school-teacher mother and a poet-editor father (who, incidentally, was not happy at the birth of a daughter), Amrita's literary leanings manifested themselves early. By the age of sixteen, she had written her first book of poems, *Thandiyan Kirnan* (*Cool Beams*). This was a crucial point in her life, as she later described it in her autobiography *Raseedi Ticket* (*Revenue Stamp*): "In this, my sixteenth year, a question mark seemed to have erected itself against everything . . . There were so many refusals, so many restrictions, so many denials in the air I breathed that a fire seemed to be smoldering in every breath I drew." That sixteenth year was to remain with her for the rest of her life.

It was at the early age of four that Amrita was engaged to a Gurbaksh Singh who later became the editor of the Punjabi magazine *Preetlari*. At sixteen she married him, a marriage that resulted in two children. Amrita continued to write and publish but, unhappy with the adverse publicity her writings received, her family wanted her to discontinue writing. Her husband apparently did not give her the support and companionship she needed and she continued to be alone in the relationship. The poet within kept smoldering. Formally, the marriage lasted until their divorce in 1960 but there were upheavals in between.

In 1944 came a turning point in her life when fate brought her face to face with the poet Sahir Ludhianvi, a flame she would continue to nurture for the rest of her life. The passion he evoked is commemorated in Amrita's long poem *Sunehe* (Messages) which got her the Sahitya Akademi Award. In 1947, with the partition of India and the resultant bloodbath, Amrita was a witness to the atrocities that took place. She wrote her best-known poem, "Aj Aakha Waris Shah Nu" ("Today I Say to Waris Shah") and her novel *Pinjar* (Skeleton) on the subject. In particular, it was the fate of women that moved her: the manner in which women were violated, raped, mutilated, or killed in times of political upheaval. Her writings came to focus on women, on the fires that burn within, the passions that drive them, the loneliness and alienation they face in the struggle to be true to themselves. Her poems, and also her stories, are steeped in autobiography but they have a relevance across time and space: "My story is the story of women in every country," she says in *Kala Gulab* (Black Rose), ". . . and many more in number are those that are not written on paper, but are written on the bodies and minds of women."

Amrita was first and foremost a rebel, and for this reason she was targeted by society. She openly defied the norms of the Sikh community she belonged to, cutting her hair, drinking and smoking in public. "Society attacks anyone who dares to say its coins are counterfeit, but when it is a woman who says this, then society begins to foam at the mouth. It puts aside all its theories and arguments and picks up the weapon of filth to fling at her," says Amrita Pritam in *Black Rose*.

At a point when she was still thinking of writing her autobiography, it is believed that Khushwant Singh made a cynical comment that her life story could well be contained on the back of a revenue stamp. This acted as a spur and Amrita Pritam brought out her autobiography titled *Raseedi Ticket* (Revenue Stamp) which became very popular and has by now been translated into many languages.

When Sahir Ludhianvi came into her life, Amrita was completely swept off her feet. She first met him during a politically volatile decade of the 1940s when she anchored a talk show. The country was in the throes of a revolution and the youth of Lahore had taken to agitation and public protests in a big way. Sahir Ludhianvi was a fiery poet who lent his poetry to the

cause. Amrita, as she heard his verses, fell irrevocably in love with him, a love that would make her question the very basis of her marriage and social standing as a conventional wife and mother.

There was no denying it: she was possessed by Sahir. She would idly doodle his name over and over again. She would smoke his leftover cigarettes, fantasize endlessly and create fictional characters based on his personality. But it appears as though Amrita's stormy relationship with Sahir Ludhianvi was one-sided. Or perhaps he cared for her but just not the same way. The affair came to an end when the latter was linked with another woman. Broken-hearted, Amrita Pritam floundered a while and then met the artist and writer Imroz who was to give her unconditional support and companionship for the later part of her life, remaining with her constantly for four decades and more.

Together, Imroz and Amrita brought out a monthly magazine, *Nagmani*, illustrated by Imroz. Love letters exchanged between them during the years they stayed apart have been collected in *In Times of Love and Longing* (2010). *Amrita Imroz: A Love Story* (2006) by Uma Trilok gives an insight into the unique relationship they shared, their love and understanding which was totally unconventional and unacceptable in the eyes of the society. This was Amrita Pritam living on her own terms. If Amrita loved Sahir passionately, she in turn was loved by Imroz. If she was earlier unabashed about her passion for Sahir Ludhianvi, with Imroz she was equally candid and made an honest statement of their relationship by defying social norms and sharing her life with him. She was convinced that the long years she spent pining for Sahir's love were simply a prelude to her deeper passion for Imroz. Admitted Amrita, "[Imroz] accepted me and my madness."

Such madness. This is the kind of madness we see in other women writers too, for example Sylvia Plath, or Anne Sexton, who were possessed, not with the idea of love but with thoughts of self-destruction. Amrita's madness was the result of an uncontrollable passion:

The blood in hot veins is rebellious

I want to see a storm

Passionate as my blood. ("Not Today")

Amrita dared to write about her most intimate relationships, her love for men other than those sanctioned by social mores. The result was that she was charged with obscenity. Torrents of abuse were unleashed against her in leading magazines and newspapers. The awards and honors she had received were dubbed as rewards for her physical beauty and probably favors she had freely given to the opposite sex. All because, as Tharu and Lalitha put it, she dared to live the life she imagined. She dared to write and her writing is a testimony to her long-drawn strife for space in the literary sphere.

The daring, the resort to madness may be termed as neurosis. As Sylvia Plath put it, "If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell. I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days." In this sense not only Plath but also Amrita and all other women writers who defied the traditional mould, are neurotic in the eyes of the world.

Finally, it is the nameless, immeasurable power of the pen that intimidates. "A woman who writes has power, and a woman with power is feared," so said Gloria E. Anzaldúa. Men hate her for her guts. They hate her for speaking up. But speak she must. A woman who writes breaks out of the silence that the rule of the father condemns her to. She flies free in the open skies.

You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her
In the long summer of your love, so that she would forget
Not the raw seasons alone, and the home left behind, but
Also her nature, the urge to fly and the endless
Pathways of the sky. (Das, "The Old Playhouse")

For Kamla Das, the pathways of the sky first opened up when she decided to bare it all in her autobiography, and finally when she – of her own choice – converted to Islam and donned the *hijab*. It was the anonymity of the burqa that gave her solace. Symbolically, it was an act of withdrawal from the world, retreating behind the veil, turning her back on

oppressive forces she had struggled against all along. Similarly, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, defiantly singing of their madness and their obsession with darker forces, deliberately trod on the razor's edge of self-destruction, culminating in suicide and death. Amrita Pritam's choices were different: once she broke out of the shackles of patriarchy represented by her father and then her husband, she boldly spent the rest of her life with the much younger Imroz, sharing her twilight years with him in a special, unnamed bond of love and intellectual companionship.

These are just a handful of women who stand out because they lived (and died) on their own terms, because they dared to write, because they wielded the pen and actually produced enduring literature. In the eyes of the male-dominated world, however, their efforts would be of little consequence and they would be dismissed as strange, abnormal, or "half-cracked," or simply, simply unsuitable.

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