

War, Women, and Trauma in Indian Poetry: A Critical Study of *Amrita Pritam's Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu*

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Introduction

Poetry has been one of the most substantial modes of human expression for centuries, combining the political and the personal, the historical and the emotional. Poetry is a powerful tool of resistance, memory, and rebirth on the Indian subcontinent rather than an artistic endeavour. The themes of battle, displacement, identity, and suffering have been employed by Indian poets for ages to weave compelling narratives that transcend time and location.

Arguably, the saddest chapter in recent South Asian history—the Partition of India in 1947—has created a distinctive corpus of writing characterised by political analysis and passionate emotional appeal. In this period of chaos, 14 million people were uprooted and more than a million were massacred in the name of communal violence. One of the most repulsive features of Partition was the institutionalized sexual violence against women. Moving poets like Amrita Pritam gave voice to these incidents, which are often outside the purview of conventional historians.

Amrita Pritam's *Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu* (Today, I Call Upon Waris Shah) is likely one of the best-known poetic lamentations of the Partition period. The poem, which was written in Punjabi, bemoans the abuse of women's bodies and souls in addition to the loss of land and people. With its namesake invocation of the poet Waris Shah from the 18th century, it stands as an ardent gendered historical representation of trauma, bringing Punjab's literary and cultural legacy to life.

Amrita Pritam recaptures poetic ground on behalf of women by presenting a counter-gender reinterpretation of the widely patriarchal literary record.

This article attempts to make a close reading of Pritam's poem and place it against larger Indian poetry traditions, Partition history studies, feminist theory of literature, and trauma theory of psychology. This article validates how Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu is more than a literary elegy. Rather, it is a work that relates to politics and is relevant to the present.

Historical Perspective: Women as War's Invisible Casualties

Historiography has long been characterized by the dominance of victors, warriors, and statesmen's perspectives. Women's lives, typically reserved in the private domain, have traditionally been absent from the history of war and nation-building. In the Indian epics, such as the Mahabharata, women's pain is symbolised metaphorically through characters such as Draupadi, whose stripping symbolizes the dishonour of a kingdom. Despite being at the heart of the epic, her suffering is overshadowed by the glorification of bravery and conflict within the purview of the epic. In the same way, Tamil Sangam poetry, particularly the Purananuru poem, evokes the suffering of widows mourning their dead husbands who died on the war front. Such eulogies are a testimony to a well-refined tradition of poetic lament in Indian poetry, where the feminine voice finds expression only in terms of loss and adversity. But such voices hardly ever challenged the structural causes of such violence and the gendered character of war.

It is in the colonial and postcolonial periods that Indian woman poets came to voice their emotions and opinions more aggressively. Even the "Nightingale of India", Sarojini Naidu, used poetic forms to argue about themes of filial sadness and patriotism. For example, in her poem *The Gift of India* (1917), she bemoans the Indian soldiers who were sent to the British Empire during World War I.

Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, another militant nationalist poet, was an icon of women's bravery in resistance movements, but predominantly within the nationalist patriarchal order.

Partition literature marked a shift in the magnitude of communal violence and the sheer number of sexual crimes. It dazed the majority of women writers into breaking the gendered silence of nationalistic narratives. As Urvashi Butalia (2000) and Ritu Menon & Kamla Bhasin (1998) have argued, the violence against women during the Partition was not the aftermath of a mere accident—it was symbolic, strategic, and communally deep. Women's bodies turned into sites of honour, revenge, and humiliation. This violence against women, unlike other war stories, was not just perpetrated by soldiers in uniforms but also by neighbours, relatives, and people within the community, thus building layered complexities of betrayal and trauma.

Amrita Pritam's reaction as a poet was trailblazing in this regard. Few other male poets opted to centre their narratives around the actual trauma endured by women, even as all the others defended the killings and devastation caused by Partition. Simply put, Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu did not speak out against sexual abuse or give a moving account of the agony endured by women.

Amrita Pritam's Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu: Placing the Cry

Amrita Pritam's timeless poem *Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu* was written from the ashes of a destroyed nation. Composed shortly after Partition in 1947, it was a groundbreaking literary classic not just for its exquisite poetry but also because it addressed the unrestrained suffering of women, a topic that most male poets of the era tended to avoid. Pritam's turn to Waris Shah, the 18th-century Sufi poet, the composer of the epic Punjabi love tragedy *Heer Ranjha*, is a cultural and literary nod. Waris Shah, in his era, has shown *Heer* as a woman of resistance and emotional strength. By turning toward Waris Shah, Pritam not only critiques the silence of the modern poets but also the function of poetry itself as a historian and a witness to women's suffering. Her words:

“Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah nu, kition kabraan vichon bol”

(Today, I call upon Waris Shah—speak from your grave!) It is not just a poetic lament but a scathing arraignment of history for the erasure of women. This symbolic rebirth of a cultural icon addresses what Menon and Bhasin (1998) have called a “gendered call for memory.” By using the poetic device of apostrophe, Pritam transforms a historical icon into a moral witness, and compels us to document the tragedy that Punjab had endured, not anymore by sword and statecraft, but by the blood and broken pride of women.

Also, her representation of Punjab as a symbolic woman—a raped body, a mother, a daughter—invites a reading that places the land itself in feminine terms.

This is a significant metaphor, for women and land were both treated as property at the time of Partition—subject to exchange, conquest, and mutilation. Secondly, in addition to being symbolic, the association of the female body with the land also brings back to life the patriarchal logics that were embedded in the body and that constructed both gender and territory.

Literary Analysis of Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu Apostrophe as Protest

The literary apostrophe to address an absent or a dead individual is a symbolic yet powerful form of poetic protest. In addressing Waris Shah, Pritam not only laments the loss of innocence but also accuses the lack of poets who could address and etch out gendered suffering. The dead poet himself is used as a metaphor for the sleeping conscience of society. Apostrophes in this traditionally manner are usually employed to create pathos and moral tension, and Pritam uses it adeptly.

Gendered Imagery and Poetic Symbolology

The imagery of the poem is bodily gendered without inhibitions. Pritam does not cover rape, kidnapping, and mutilation with dense symbolism. Rather, her language uncovers the wounds on the bodies and psyches of women. The line:

“Aj lakh diyaan ro rahiyaan”

(Today, hundreds of thousands of daughters weep)

provokes not individual sorrow but communal mourning. It is a wail that resounds in homes, villages, and national borders.

Apart from the interruption of the Heer Ranjha story—where love and passion formerly reigned supreme—is representative of the interruption of cultural continuity. Pritam is grieving not just for the women but for a society that formerly honored love and now honors hate and bloodshed. Her words:

“Ajj sabhe Qissa Heer diyaan, Ranjha koi na rove”

(Today, all tales of Heer are silent; no Ranjha weeps for her.)

It is a metaphorical death notice for a cultural space in which women were given poetic space as objects of love, instead of objects of violence and trauma.

Poetic Subversion and Political Resistance

Pritam’s poem is a feminine reorientation of the purpose of poetry, in contrast to a lot of male poetry from the Partition that focuses on nationalistic grief or communal rejection. She sentimentalises not the loss; she politicises it. Her poem acts on two planes—literary and political. It employs words not only to mourn but to blame, to awaken social remembrance, and to condemn regimes of silence.

As Skjelsbæk (2001) contends in her account of war and sexual violence, poetry that focuses on feminine bodies dislocates the power axis from the war site to the human field. Pritam’s poetry is poetry, but it is a resistance.

Feminist Literary Theory and Partition Poetry

There is a more subtle interpretation of Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu offered by feminist literary theory. For feminist theorists, literature does not merely mirror reality but resists patriarchal histories and challenges gendered accounts. Here, then, Pritam's poem is a counter-narrative resisting the masculinist history of Partition and hence a site of resistance in literature. The "subaltern woman"—an oppressed female subject whose voice is silenced by nationalist and colonial narratives—is repressed, feminist philosophers such as Gayatri Spivak argue. In her poetry, Pritam retrieves that voice. Speaking on behalf of the unnameable, she deflects the lyrical eye away from nationalist hubris and towards the struggle and resilience of women. Moreover, her poem also represents Judith Butler's "performativity of mourning"—the notion that grieving is political in action when it is made social. While individual elegies privilege the personal and political division, she writes a chorus of grieving, dissolving this divide between the two. As feminist historians such as Butalia (2000) have noted, women's Partition histories were relegated to the realm of anecdote or emotion and men's were put on the pedestal of fact and politics. Pritam bridges the divide between activism and aesthetics by offering historically relevant and emotionally evocative poetry.

Psychological Trauma and Collective Memory

Along with bodily wounds, women's agony throughout Partition involved psychological breakdowns that are presently being experienced in the following generations. Political violence-induced trauma does not merely affect individual identity but social consciousness as well, as Judith Herman (1992) forcefully highlights in *Trauma and Recovery*. To that degree, Pritam's poem is both a lament of sorrow and a cleansing of shared memory, keeping memories at bay from getting lost in mainstream nationalistic discourses. Partition survivors, particularly women, frequently experienced long-term mental illness: post-traumatic stress, anxiety, depression, and identity crises. As Summerfield (1995) has noted, post-war societies pay attention to physical reconstruction and reinstating political harmony or stability, all the while paying little or no attention to the mental health of their subjects. Here, Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu is a textual bridge between suppressed trauma and a site of emotional recognition and catharsis. In addition, social exclusion also added to the trauma for Partition women. When they returned, rape victims, abductees, or forced converts were generally excluded. They were excluded by their families and communities, and silenced. For Menon and Bhasin (1998), "the woman's body became both a battleground and a burden." The state policies also "repatriated" abducted women without regard to their will, further denying their agency and increasing their psychic wound.

Pritam's poetry metaphorically encapsulates the silencing she addresses. The wailing of hundreds of women is an effective condemnation of the failed post-Partition rehabilitation that disallowed women's subjectivity and not a spontaneous act of grief. The voice of the poem is that of historical justice, affirmation of female memory, and more than just record. In addition to enduring the ages, Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu has influenced a number of feminist thinkers, postcolonial critics, and female writers. It is among the very first South Asian texts to situate the voice of the woman not as just a victim, but as a narrator agent of cultural history.

It is one of the first South Asian works to position the woman's voice not merely as a victim, but as an agent of narrator of cultural history. Other South Asian authors such as Kishwar Naheed, Kamla Das, and Meena Kandasamy were shaped by Pritam's lyrical imagination; their work continues to struggle with problems of body, self, and institutional violence. The effect of the poem has spilled over into theatrical plays, scholarly courses, art gallery shows, and scholarly articles on gender and remembrance. The poem is read by literary scholars to be a deconstructionist feminist

reworking of mythologized Punjab of Heer- Ranjha and replacing it with a weeping and wounded Punjab. Pritam's work also significantly contributes to diaspora scholarship, particularly South Asian immigrant community debates over memory and identity. Authors like Elleke Boehmer and Leela Gandhi have written about how novels like Pritam's maintain transnational and intergenerational cultural memory. A noteworthy fact is that Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu has been translated into various languages and hence achieved readership globally, belonging to one of the strongest worldwide anti-war and feminist poetry books.

Relevance Today: Worldwide Resonances of Gendered War Violence Waris, Ajj Aakhan

While Shah Nu is rooted in the pain of the Partition, its concerns are terrifyingly modern. In each war that is fought today—Rwanda to Yugoslavia, Syria to Ukraine—women are targeted specifically for a variety of reasons. Rape as a weapon is employed to terrorize and ethnically cleanse populations as well as humiliate them, as per Dara Kay Cohen's study (2016). Moser & Clark contend that such violence (2001) is patriarchal and political and is employed as a vehicle to express male control in post-conflict dynamics of power. Women are exposed to numerous vulnerabilities like rape, exploitation, and cultural exclusion in the war zones. And, as seen during Partition, survivors become the subject of stigmatization but are not assisted. Outside the so-called war zones, heart-wrenching events such as the 2012 Delhi gang rape (Nirbhaya case) and Kolkata rape and murder case (2024) of India have raised public outcry such as Pritam's protest. Poetry and public marches still utilize rhetorical strategies such as Pritam's protest against injustice. Her poem is thus a classic of feminist resistance—a criticism that gendered trauma can and should be recognized not just as a war tragedy but as a strategy of calculated oppression. Waris Shah's words today are a reminder to poets, writers, and citizens everywhere to resist in silence and keep recording the persistent pain that goes on around us.

Poetic Memory as Political Resistance

Recovering Women's Voices in Verse In postcolonial cultures, poetry is not merely an art form; it is also a means to resist the past and reclaim things otherwise. In a society such as India, where hegemonic historiography operates to marginalize the feminine voice, poetry can be a means of emancipation to retrieve the "subjugated fragments of knowledge" of Philosopher Michel Foucault, whose individual experiences have traditionally been subordinated by the machinery of hegemonic power. Amrita Pritam's Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu is an instance of such poetic intervention. Her words don't just mark what happened; they take up space, fight off forgetting, and re-establish a shared memory. Poetry like that of Pritam translates trauma as political act, reminding the suffering publically in societies which generally keep it private.

This transformation of "private" pain to "public" protest is "analogous" to the labor of innumerable feminist writers everywhere—Adrienne Rich in her own country, Nawal El Saadawi in Egypt, or Forugh Farrokhzad in Iran. Each illustrated "systems" that oppressed or undervalued women via poetry. What is unusual about Pritam's intervention is that she does so in the context of a major geopolitical event like Partition—one normally comprehensible only through masculine narratives of nation, border, and politics. Her poetic sadness thereby becomes an act of feminist history writing. The poem doesn't narrate a loss so much as suggest that loss is not something that is exclusively the doing of political masters or soldiers to make history. Rather, by redefining the woman as a witness and historian, she adds gendered trauma to the cultural record. Literary theorist Marianne Hirsch expounds in her theory of "post-memory" that poetry derived from inherited trauma has the function of transferring affective memory from one generation to the next, to prevent such histories from being lost over time.

Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu in Global Academia and Curricula

The global popularity of Amrita Pritam's *Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu* also has a lot to do with its popularity in university course lists, anthologies of feminist literature, and comparative literature study programs around the world. At some South Asian Studies departments within universities in the UK, US, and Canada, this poem is not taught only for the sake of literature, but due to its interdisciplinarity—it is considered a site of intersection of literature, gender studies, political science, and history.

In today's university classroom, students might be asked to read the poem in conjunction with other texts of postcolonial literature, such as Saadat Hasan Manto's *Toba Tek Singh* or Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*. What is peculiar about Pritam's poem is its conjuring of affect—the raw, visceral feeling that conjoins historical record and emotional truth.

Academic reading will highlight her use of apostrophe, symbolic violence, imagery, and intertextuality with Waris Shah's *Heer-Ranjha* tale.

This modern academic environment places Pritam within the world's canon of feminist resistance literature alongside authors such as Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie—novelist women who also reclaim the social record. Also, some of the translated copies of *Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu* are already in use for cross-cultural literary studies. Translation in this context involves both language and cultural transfer. As the poem crosses the borders, it continues to bear the voice of thousands of women who, though silenced by history, speak through Pritam's pen.

Extended Conclusion

"*Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu*" by Amrita Pritam is a standout piece in Indian literature. It not only shows incredible poetic talent but also displays a lot of moral strength. It does what histories tend to do poorly: it prioritizes the voice of the woman, recognizes loss, and prevents pain from being erased. It serves as one of the most powerful feminist responses to Partition, both as a witness and a critique. Pritam used her voice to ensure that the gendered scars of Partition would not be forgotten in patriarchal history. Instead, they would echo down the generations—as warning and remembrance.

Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu remains painfully relevant in a world where women are still displaced by war and bodies are still used as battlefields. It calls on us to remember, fight back, and reclaim—not just to grieve.

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