

Love, Amrita

A Tribute

“Marriage is for the birds. Concentrate on finding love...”

One day in August 1997, I found myself outside a nondescript cottage in a leafy bylane of south Delhi’s Hauz Khas. I was 24, a high-strung TV news reporter who’d just been commissioned to make a feature documentary on one of India’s most respected authors. The place looked deserted, the garden a tangled mass of shrubs and weeds, the gate rusty and forbidding. Did I even have the right address for my subject? Where was the bell? There it stuck out – almost hidden by the address plate that read K-25 in a floral script.

Back then, I didn’t know who Amrita Pritam was. I knew even less about Punjabi literature. I was dizzy from the urban Indian English zeitgeist novel of that time, aptly named *English August*. Upamanyú Chatterjee’s displaced, angst-ridden, fantasizing and pot-smoking Agastya was my literary hero and kindred spirit. I didn’t have time or interest in Pritam’s nostalgic stories of a sepia-toned, bygone India. Her autobiography, *Rasidi Ticket* (The Revenue Stamp), lay at the bottom of my grubby backpack, a slim, faded pocketbook that I’d flipped through with minimal interest.

I was determined not to make an uninspired Doordarshan-style film on Amrita’s life but feared that’s what would emerge. Bored, disenchanted, and cursing my decision to take on this project, I sighed and waited for someone – anyone – to open the door.

A slim, white-haired man with bright eyes suddenly leapt out from the garden behind the house. He looked like an artist, and was dressed in a paint-splattered kurta and jeans, a scarf thrown casually over one shoulder. “Hi”, he said good-naturedly in Hindi, “I’m Imroz. Come, Amrita’s waiting, but I’m warning you, today she’s in a cranky mood”.

Imroz, Amrita’s live-in partner of the past 40 or so years, was sweet, funny and clearly protective of the woman who meant the world to him. He led me into the house and up the stairs to Amrita’s bedroom on the first floor. I was nervous of meeting the lady, and fully prepared to be admonished for ruining her afternoon nap. But the petite woman I saw sitting upright on a chair was alert and smiling. Amrita admitted that at 76 years, she no longer did media interviews or thought she was interesting enough to be featured in any kind of film. While saying this, she fished in a desk drawer crammed with notes, pens, writing pads and jumbled medications, and rummaged for her Rothmans. “A smoke is one of the few pleasures of life”, she laughed gently, finding a crumpled packet and lighting up. Her eyes danced. And I fell in love with Amrita at that precise moment.

She offhandedly blamed her smoking habit on Sahir Ludhianvi – a romantic poet who went on to become a famous lyricist in the Bombay movie industry of the 1940s and 50s. This was the eccentric genius who was Amrita’s “first true love”. As a young girl growing up in pre-Partition Lahore, Amrita told me coyly, she remembered Sahir often visiting her family home, and whenever he left, she’d puff on his discarded cigarette butts, just to “touch my lips to the place where he had touched his.” Amrita and Sahir’s youthful romance would end abruptly but they shared a close and very volatile bond right upto his death in 1980.

Amrita's childhood was lonely, and she wrote poetry and stories to fill the void created by her mother's early death. At 16, Amrita had an arranged marriage to a man called Pritam. She soon had children (a son and a daughter) but domestic life – and a passionless union with a husband who could not understand or appreciate her creative temperament – filled Amrita with dull and increasing frustration.

Amrita's outlet was the Progressive Writers Movement, of which she became a member in the early 1940s. Discussions had begun to echo the rumblings of national Independence and the violence that would follow. When bloody communal massacres took place over the division of India and the creation of Pakistan, Amrita expressed her anguish and pain through a long verse that has become a literary classic : ***Aj Aakhaan Waris Shah Nu*** (Ode to Waris Shah).

By 1950, Amrita had moved to Delhi and joined the All India Radio. Within the next decade, much would happen to this extraordinarily strong-willed writer. She would produce a body of work including more than a 100 poems, short stories, novels and folks songs in Hindi and Punjabi, for which she would receive a Fellowship from the Sahitya Akademi, a Padma Shri and a Padma Vibushan. She would become increasingly more feminist, by expressing revolt at violence against women (as in her popular novel ***Pinjar***) and on a personal level, by abandoning her unfulfilling marriage.

In the early 1960s, Amrita found her soulmate, the painter Imroz, and they began a life together. "We've been here at K-25, for all these years, no one understands me like Imroz does", murmured Amrita, gazing out the window through her misty spectacles.

“See...marriage and all its...you know, false conventions...forget all that, concentrate on finding love”.

It was evening already. Amrita was tired, and Imroz appeared to gently shoo me off.

Over the next few weeks, I read all that I could of Amrita’s work. The autobiographical ***Rasidi Ticket*** was a revelation, bursting with anecdotes of a moody young Sahir, the colours of Gujranwala, Punjab (where Amrita was born in 1919), her eventual disillusionment with the state of matrimony, and the political and personal influences that would shape her best writing. I then devoured the love letters she and Imroz had exchanged throughout their relationship, most of which are published in ***Amrita – Imroz : A Love Story***.

I felt right then that Amrita Pritam was the writer – and the woman – I wanted to be. Her work was bold, revolutionary, compassionate and emotionally honest; and her personal life showed a courage and conviction rare for women of her time. But that was the beauty of Amrita. There was no hypocrisy in her, no duality whatsoever, just a pure truth that she owed to her own self. The views she expressed in her writing were the same beliefs by which she lived and loved.

Amrita – to my joyful discovery – was in no mood herself for a staid documentary on her life. Together we came up with something new. Amrita would be filmed reading select poems (including ***Waris Shah***) in a spot-lit studio. This would be intercut with languid, abstract visuals photographed by Anil Senior and set to haunting vocals by the legendary Madan Bala Sidhu. The 30-minute film would be titled ***The Red Thread Zens***, in homage to one of Amrita’s early philosophical essays.

A day after I sent a copy of the edited film to Amrita, Imroz called. "Come for tea!" he yelled cheerfully. I was trembling. I wasn't concerned whether the film would air on commercial television – I didn't expect it to and Amrita couldn't have cared less either. All I wanted was to have done justice to Amrita's vision and persona. I desperately craved her approval.

And so I found myself at K-25, this time in the garden, sitting opposite Amrita. She was very quiet. I was school-girlishly anxious as hell. Imroz brought out the tea. He beamed at me. And then Amrita stood, small and fragile as always, walked over to me, asked me to stand, and reached up like a child to hug me tightly.

"You are an artiste", she whispered. "A true artiste. I am so glad we met and made this film. I wanted to call you yesterday after watching it but I was so moved I couldn't speak".

Amrita's words have stayed with me. And they've given me hope and sustenance through a writing career of my own and across many of life's absurdities.

And yet that magical October afternoon would be the last time I saw Amrita. She became seriously ill over the next few years and couldn't have visitors. When she died in 2005, at the age of 86, I was living and working in Mumbai. I called Imroz to offer my condolences but he was heartbroken and we only spoke for a few seconds. "There can never be another Amrita," he said, choking back tears.

While researching this piece, I found myself thinking of Imroz. It has been a decade since Amrita's death. K-25 Hauz Khas no longer exists. Despite Amrita willing it to Imroz, and wanting their home to be converted into a memorial of her life and works, the

house was demolished after a legal battle amongst Amrita's grown-up children and grandchildren. It is a cruel irony, given Amrita's famed poem ***Mera Pataa*** (My Address). Or perhaps her lines are prophetic, for the verse ends with "...wherever the glimpse of a free spirit exists, that will be my home".

Last week, I came across a news clipping of Imroz on the internet. He is in his late seventies today. He lives by himself in a small flat in central Delhi, with nothing but memories of the Amrita he knew and worshipped for most of his life. But he is as brave and devoted a lover as ever. Imroz, his eyes still twinkling, is pictured holding up a faded address plate. It reads K-25, in floral script, and I recognized it immediately. Good for you, Imroz, I said to myself, and I sensed Amrita was somewhere around, looking on and grinning. ***Mai Tenu Phir Milangi***, she softly says with conviction. I will meet you yet again.

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Amrita Pritam : The Red Thread Zens can be viewed at

www.selinasheth.com/amrita-pritam.html