

WOMEN WRITING IN INDIA

600 B.C. TO THE PRESENT

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shrunk. Were wrinkles appearing on her smooth skin, and gnarled veins jutting out of her arms? Were her cheeks growing hollow? Her strong clean teeth falling out? Was her black, gleaming hair turning a little gray? Was her straight spine slowly bending? These thoughts flashed through her mind one after another. Her hands gave way, and the medicine bottle fell crashing to the floor.

Hearing the crash, her daughter and son-in-law rushed into the room. Seeing her trembling, her daughter led her out of the room.

Two days later, the boy showed signs of improvement. One morning his parents were sitting by his bed, chatting casually. The daughter was waiting for her mother to fetch the coffee. It was past eight, but there were no signs of her having awakened. The daughter went round the house, calling out to her mother. Then she noticed a letter on the bed in her mother's room.

Dear Daughter,

I didn't want to disturb your sleep. So I am leaving without telling you. I have grown weary of the bonds of the family. For a long time now I have been thinking of serving as a nurse in a hospital. I don't have to execute a separate will and testament. Your son will inherit all my property.

Bangaramma

She read the note. And wiping her tears, she said to her husband, "Really, my mother has no courage at all."

Translated by Adapa Ramakrishna Rao.

AMRITA PRITAM

(b. 1919)

Hindi

"Society attacks anyone who dares to say its coins are counterfeit, but when it is a woman who says this, 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," writes Amrita Pritam.* Running through both of her autobiographical works—*Kala Gulab* (Black Rose), 1968, and *Rasidi Ticket*

*All the quotations in this headnote were translated by Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita.

(Revenue Stamp), 1976—as well as her account of the experiences of women writers the world over, *Kari Dhup Ka Safar* (Journey through Burning Heat), 1983, is the theme of a woman writer's battle against persecution and her determination to "dare to live the life she imagines." Her writing is celebrated for its sensuous imagery and evocative rhythm and is widely read and appreciated, though it has also been criticized as vacuous and sentimental.

Born in Gujranwala, in what is now Pakistan, Amrita was the only child of her school-teacher mother and the devotional poet Kartar Singh (Pi-yush), who edited a literary journal. With her father she shared a love of language, and from her mother she inherited the rebel spirit that has marked her life. Her mother, she writes, "never failed in the slightest degree to honor and obey my father's male will . . . [but] collected all the anger from her mind and poured it into my infant being." Her mother died when Amrita was eleven. Perhaps overawed by the responsibility, her father did not allow young Amrita to mix with other children, and she grew up an intensely solitary person. She began to write poems at a very early age, and her first collection, *Thandiyan Kirnan* (Cool Rays), came out in 1935, when she was sixteen. "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 is still present somewhere in every year of my life," she wrote in *Rasidi Ticket*.

Also at sixteen, she married Gurbaksh Singh, editor of the Punjabi magazine *Preetlari*, to whom she had been engaged at the age of four and with whom she had two children, Navraj and Kandia. Her husband's family was disturbed by the adverse publicity she often received, and wanted her to stop writing. And over a period of time, she has said in an interview with Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita of the feminist journal *Manushi*, she realized that this marriage had not provided the companionship she had imagined and wanted. When her father died in 1940, she felt "absolutely alone."

In 1944 Amrita met the poet Sahir Ludhianvi. She describes the meeting in "Akhri Kat" (Last Letter), which, she says, was written as a story only because it could not be posted as a letter to Sahir. "My beloved," it ends, "this is the last letter I shall write to you . . . now with these hands kissed by you I will write songs not of silk but of iron. . . . When you read these battle songs remember I am writing them with the hands you have kissed." They enjoyed a long and mutually supportive friendship, but Amrita declared her love for him only in her poetry. The long poem "Sunhare" (Message), for which she won the Sahitya Academy Award in 1953, and many other poems in her early collections were inspired by their friendship.

In 1947, at the time of the partition of India, Amrita Pritam moved to Delhi. She was witness to the terrible atrocities that took place, and that trauma haunts several poems, including the much anthologized "Ai Akan Waris Shah Nu" (To Waris Shah I Say) and other poems in *Lamian Vatan* (Long Distances), 1945. It is also the theme of the powerful novel *Pinjar* (Skeleton), 1950. "I felt as though the whole of womankind had gathered together its mental anguish and molded my soul from it," she writes in *Kala Gulab*. After moving to Delhi she began to write in Hindi. Today Amrita Pritam is best known as a poet in her mother tongue, Punjabi, and as a prose artist in Hindi, the language that brought her a wider readership and the economic independence she has today. From 1949 to 1961 she worked with All India Radio. In 1960 she and Gurbaksh Singh were divorced, and since 1966 she has lived with the artist Imroz.

Her writings after 1960 deal more and more with women who acknowledge their desires and their independence and accept responsibility for their lives even at the cost, as in the celebrated novel *Erial* (Aerial), 1968, of love. Among her explicitly feminist fiction we might also include *Ik Sit Anita* (Once There Was an Anita), 1964, and *Cak Nambar Chatti* (Village Number 36), 1964. She won the Jnanpith Award in 1973 for *Kagaz te Kanvas* (Paper Was [My] Canvas). In the sensational *Aksharon ki Chaya Mein* (In the Shadow of the Alphabet), 1977, she acknowledges the autobiographical core in each of her stories that deal with husband-wife relationships and the loneliness of married women. In 1980, she published *Kacche Akshar* (Raw Letters). But as she explains in *Kala Gulab*, "My story is the story of women in every country, and many more in number are those stories which are not written on paper, but are written on the bodies and minds of women. . . ." Four of Amrita's books—*Black Rose*, *The Skeleton and Other Stories*, *Existence* and *Revenue Stamp*—as well as several poems, have been published in English translation.

EK BATH (A Story)

Like purc milk is my love,
Like old rice of many years.
Scrubbed and washed the earthen pot of my heart.

The world is like wet firewood,
Everything dim with smoke.
The night is like a brass bowl,
The moon's silver coating worn,
Imagination's faded,

Dreams gone rancid,
And sleep turned bitter.

On the finger of life
Memories tighten like a troublesome ring.
As if from the goldsmith of time
Grains of sand have slipped between.

Love's body is shrinking
How do I sew a shirt of song?
The thread of my thoughts is all tangled,
The needle of my pen broken,
The whole story—lost.

Translated by Keshav Rao Jadhav and Vasantha Kannabiran.

JADA (Winter)

My life shivers,
And lips turn blue.
From my soul's feet
The trembling begins.

Across the sky of this life,
The clouds of past years thunder.
Hailstones cold as law
Fill my courtyard.

Across lanes deep in mire
If you were to come to me,
I would wash your feet
And raising the hem
Under your whole filled blanket
Perhaps warm my hands and feet.

A cup of sunshine
Let me drain in a breath;
A piece of the same sunshine

I shall tuck into my womb;
And in this manner perhaps
The winters of my lives will pass.

Translated by Keshav Rao Jadhav and Vasantha Kannabiran.

K. SARASWATHI AMMA

(1919–1975)

Malayalam

“In the entire history of women’s writing in Kerala,” the critic Jancy James writes, “Saraswathi Amma’s is the most tragic case of the deliberate neglect of female genius.” This self-confident and outspoken feminist writer published, in the two decades after her first short story appeared in 1938, twelve volumes of short stories, one novel, a play, and in 1958, a book of essays significantly titled *Purushanmarillatha Lokam* (A World in Which There Are No Men).

Her achievement is all the more remarkable when we consider that she wrote, long before the resurgence in the seventies of the women’s movement, without much support from other women, and in the face of a derogatory and dismissive critical reception. Her own extroverted nature, her bold opinions, and her free interactions with men were unusual in her society, especially for a single woman, and caused much resentment. Though K. Saraswathi Amma seemed initially to have weathered it all with a verve diminished in no way by the hostility, she stopped writing after the early sixties and lived the last years of her life as a recluse.

K. Saraswathi Amma was born in Kunnappuzha, a village near Trivandrum, the third and youngest of three daughters of an upper-class family. She received a bachelor’s degree in Malayalam in 1941. In a move that was uncommon for a woman of aristocratic parentage, she decided to remain single and earn her own living. She worked as a teacher for two years before securing a job in the government accounts office. People who knew Saraswathi Amma well say that she carried enormous emotional tensions within her, but that her own independent temperament did not allow her to share her problems with others. She always maintained a “spiritual untouchability.” Some accounts hint at a love affair in which she was harshly betrayed and suggest that the woman’s revenge in the powerful but macabre story “Premabhalam” (The Fruit of Love), 1951, is an account of the author’s own anger. All her life she suffered from psoriasis, though it was never conspicuous and seems not to have restricted her.

K. Saraswathi Amma’s strained relationships with her family were com-

plicated by her deep attachment to her elder sister’s son, Suku, whom she brought up as her own child. Under her guardianship he graduated from college and became a sub-inspector in the reserve police force. When he moved out of her life, seeking professional transfer away from Trivandrum, K. Saraswathi Amma began to withdraw from public life and all but stopped writing. She did not bother to take departmental tests, was not promoted, and retired early. She died in the house she had built for herself, unmourned, and misunderstood by her family and her readers.

K. Saraswathi Amma’s stories, as well as her essays and speeches, were marked by humor and a certain lightness of touch with which she analyzes the relationship between men and women. Though the loud defensive reactions from the predominantly male critical establishment would perhaps lead one to think otherwise, her writing is not a tirade against men. Rather, it is directed at women in an attempt to shatter the illusions they nurture about love and about men, and to instill in women a new, independent self-confidence. In a biting attack on female subservience she observes, “Woman does not worship her husband as a person, but as an ideal; the basis of woman’s devotion to the husband is not her love for that man but an attempt to boost her own self-importance.” The text of the radio talk “Purushanmarillatha Lokam” warns women that a life of equality will require them to give up the pleasures of dependency and coyness. Many of her stories illustrate different aspects of a well-developed feminist thesis. She has been criticized for appealing more to the intellect than to emotion.

K. Saraswathi Amma’s novel *Premabhajanam* (Darling) was published in 1944, and the play *Devaduthi* (Messenger of God) in 1945. Then followed a series of short-story collections among them: *Ponnumkudam* (Pot of Gold), 1945; *Strijanmam* (Born as Woman), 1946; *Kizhjivanakkari* (The Subjugated Woman), 1949; *Kalamandiram* (Temple of Art), 1949; *Pennbuddi* (Woman’s Wit), 1951; *Kanatta Madil* (Thick Walls), 1953; *Premaparikshanam* (The Experiment of Love), 1955; *Chuvanna Pukkal* (Red Flowers) from which the story translated here is taken, 1955; and *Cholamarangal* (Shady Trees), 1958.

VIVAHANGAL SWARGATIL VECCHU NADATTAPEDUNNU (Marriages Are Made in Heaven)

Madhavi’s parents had resolved that in no case would they use money to buy her a husband. Her father said, “I didn’t take a single paisa when I brought a wife home. Just think, we have eleven children. If we begin to buy sons-in-law, we will end up with the beggar’s bowl.”

Her mother said, “Times have changed indeed! They stood in line