



Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596

An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

Indexed in: ROAD & Google Scholar

Exploring the Self and the City in Amrita Pritam's "Death of a City"

Vinay Patel



Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596

An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

Indexed in: ROAD & Google Scholar

Abstract:

This research article proposes to delve into the intricate tapestry of urban life through the lens of short stories. In an increasingly urbanized world, cities serve as vibrant backdrops, reflecting the diverse experiences and complexities of human existence. This study aims to examine how short story author Amrita Pritam capture the essence of urban landscapes, exploring themes such as alienation, sex, depravity and the clash of traditional and modern urban cultures. The story under study brings to light how alienation and depravation led the narrator to break the traditional taboos and attach herself with the ruined city of Pompeii. This research article aims to highlight the multifaceted relationship between literature and the urban experience of a woman.

Keywords: City; Alienation; Depravation; Dead city; Urban landscape; Sex.

Introduction to Short Story:

The art of writing short stories in India dates back to the classical times. The narrative tale in Classical Sanskrit begins with the Vedas. Our epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and mythological legends are also full of fables and tales. Beast Fables developed for a long time covering the Upanishadic as well the Epic Period. The *Jataka Tales* of Buddhism as well as Jain literature included them. The *Panchatantra* and *Kathasaritasagara* are the examples of beast fable and popular tale making use of a frame story. Their purpose is preaching morality and practical truth. This makes them related to our life in society. The fable form depicted the picture of human nature and giving expression to man's ambitions and aspirations in the world. They also present the glimpses of the social conditions prevailing in the Indian society. The ancient Indian fable and the ancient Indian popular tale have helped the Indian short story writer in English giving his stories a definite shape. The Indian short story writer in English has tried a synthesis of salient features of both the fable and the tale.

The Indian short story in English starts with the publication of *Stories from Indian Christian Life* (1898) by Kamala Sathianadan. The main objective of this work was to convey the essential India which he had understood and of which he wanted others to get a proper perspective. The selection of English language was done because it was understood by many, inside as well as outside India. A number of writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Manjeri Isvaran, R. K. Narayan, etc. wrote fascinating stories in English in the Indian background. The impact and presence of British Rule was experienced in the stories of the pre-Independence



Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596

An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

Indexed in: ROAD & Google Scholar

era. In the post-Independence era, the social awareness of the literary writers increased. They saw urban India in the clutches of social evils like ignorance, hypocrisy, corruption, inferior treatment to females, etc. This research article proposes to delve into the intricate tapestry of urban life through the lens of short stories. In an increasingly urbanized world, cities serve as vibrant backdrops, reflecting the diverse experiences and complexities of human existence. The story “Death of a City” is a gem of literature written by the famous Punjabi writer Amrita Pritam.

Biography of Amrita Pritam:

Amrita Pritam was born on August 31, 1919, in Gujranwala. She was a prominent Indian writer and poet, celebrated for her contributions to Punjabi literature and Indian literature. Her first collection of poems, *Amrit Lehran (Immortal Waves)*, published when she was just 16 years old. In her lifetime, she penned more than hundred books including including poetry collections, novels, essays, and short stories. Her autobiographical novel *Pinjar (The Skeleton)* depicts the trauma and turmoil faced by women during the partition of India in 1947. She was also the first woman to receive the Sahitya Akademi Fellowship. She also received the Padma Shri, and the Padma Vibhushan awards. The major themes of her works were love, loss, longing, and the plight of women in society. This story is no exception in that. It compares the life of a woman with that of a ruined city, the city of Pompeii to highlight the devastation, destruction and death of the inner self i.e. essence of life for a human being, here a woman. This study aims to examine how short story author Amrita Pritam captures the essence of urban landscapes, exploring themes such as alienation, sex, depravity and the clash of traditional and modern urban cultures.

“The Death of a City” as the Self of the Narrator:

The protagonist faces a traditional society and encounters a conflict with it – the narrator of the story. She gave a strong fight against the traditional society through her acts like illicit love affair. But the traditional society was too much for her. She was alienated in their fight against the society, lost in the conflict and was forced to accept the norms in a passive form. The acceptance was merely for survival in the alien urban world. The story under study brings to light how alienation and depravation led the narrator to break the traditional taboos and attach herself with the ruined city of Pompeii. This research article aims to highlight the multifaceted relationship between literature and the urban experience of a woman.



Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596

An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

Indexed in: ROAD & Google Scholar

The story begins in far away past, in the 4th century B. C. Italian city of Pompeii. The city served as a port for the Greek ships and in 80 B.C. it was captured by the Romans. It was under the influence of the Romans that Latin language, Roman laws, customs, art and architecture developed here. It was populated by 20,000 people in February, 0063, a major earthquake destroyed the city. Later, it was again built. In August, 0079, the lava eruption from a volcano converted the city into ashes. The burning stones from volcano came upon the city “like rain from the sky” (Pritam). The entire place was under six feet of hot lava. A number of people, artefacts, etc. were buried exactly in the same position as they were at the time of volcanic eruption. The city was lost for a number of years from the memory of the people. In 18th century, the Emperor of Naples ordered the excavations of the city. A number of things were obtained from it, including statues, human beings stuck in sand and ash, etc. By applying plaster of Paris, these were recreated in their original position and manner. From the number of various articles obtained, the perspective about Silver Wedding and House of Golden Cupid and about the glorious art and architecture of the city of Pompeii came to be known. The ruins explained to the world how beautiful the city was. They were the testimony to the grand art of the people of Pompeii.

The narrator protagonist of the story is a female teacher, Miss Singh. In the last vacation, she had the privilege to visit Rome. Those who visit the place will light candles in the cathedral, throw coins in the fountain to fulfill wishes, visit Michael Angelo Square to feed pigeons and hold them in palms for a photo. Miss Singh did nothing of the above. She also visited Pompeii. The story now becomes more subjective, the personal experience of Miss Singh while she visits the ruined city of Pompeii. The psychological perspective reins the remaining part of the story, as Miss Singh reflects on her past life and compares it with the ruins of Pompeii.

At the main entrance, she was not able to let herself free from the iron gate – “the iron door held my hand tightly in its grip” (Pritam). The man holds the hand of a woman tightly, as the narrator understands, but no man ever has held her hand in such tight grip. Later, she was forced inside by the door and saw the ruined statues and walls. In the present ruined scenario, there was no distinction of rooms or other places. The passages were present but the place where they lead was not there. The narrator was paralyzed in such a ruined place. She felt as if she was a part of the place – “I felt like a corpse – like one of the 20,000 corpses of Pompeii” (Pritam). She was trying to enter the place by putting right foot forward and raising the left to move ahead. She found herself paralyzed in right side first. Later, the entire journey in the place was made unconsciously by her. She felt intervals of bright and dark moments in her life and she compared herself



Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596

An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

Indexed in: ROAD & Google Scholar

with the city of Pompeii. Alike the city, she remained covered under the London frost and her silence, which has completely submerged her. For her, the real identity of hers is now inside her – “there was a city living within me. Every girl attaining youth has a city living within her” (Pritam). This city is the desire to lead a free life.

Miss Singh makes use of a number of metaphoric comparisons to highlight the semblance of her life and the ruined city. In fact she considers herself as a ruined city. Within the self city, the narrator has a house belonging to her parents having “the largest and most spacious courtyard” (Pritam). In other words, the importance of parents is highest in one’s life. There were trees, a street where friends lived, shady tree giving relief to travellers. The desire of the narrator is articulated by the huge mansion, from where lights shine at night and day. The small town i.e. the school life of the narrator turned into a big city i.e. college life. She participated in a number of dramas and loved a number of characters of those dramas. The reading of the books brought a number of feelings in the heart of the narrator, which she compares with the rise and fall of the sea waves.

The narrator mentions an important stage of her life, the stage of being ruined by rain of lava. This makes her comparison with the city of Pompeii apt. Miss Singh started her life in the traditional Indian scenario. Her morality was being forced on her as she was a girl. She was forced to keep her “hairs well-combed with straight parting, white silk pyjamas, a green shirt and a matching dupatta, thin earrings in the ears, an innocent face with a copper-like obstinance which made it look soft and stiff according to the need of moment” (Pritam). The force due to which she was to become a traditional girl is the one which kills her i.e. takes away the freedom from her. The conflict between the traditional views and the modern views is the root of the inner turmoil in the narrator. She felt as if she was like the ruined city of Pompeii. This reflects the social change in the traditional India, which starts from inner self and reaches to outer self.

The change in morality and social perspective is mentioned in the two episodes of the story. The love gesture with George while watching a movie and the mentioning of an old lady Claire. She went to watch a romantic movie – De Cameron – with George. The romantic scene in the movie fascinated both and they made love with each other. The narrator meets one old lady Claire who uses “a rubber replica of the male sexual organ” (Pritam) so as to satisfy herself. Claire argues that as she is old no male is interested in her. The narrator thinks about herself in such a position. If the narrator keeps following the morality rules, she will also face a crisis in her life like that of Claire. She rejects the morality concerns set-up by the society



Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596

An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

Indexed in: ROAD & Google Scholar

and invites a male friend of hers. She lies to him by saying that it was her birthday. She asserts that a man and a woman cannot talk more than an hour about books and films in a room. It is an indication to the romantic desires of both which get activated in loneliness. Both of them make love that night. The narrator feels to inform George about the feelings of being a corpse but she was not able to do so. She is back to her own world, in which she is nothing but a dead body.

There was the entry of a male Verindra in her life, her dream of huge mansion. She felt that her dreams will now come to an end. The mother of the narrator came to know about her pre-marital relations and threatened her – “if you were so keen for it why didn’t you put this burning rod inside you?” (Pritam). This compels the narrator to make a comparison of love making for a female with inserting a burning rod inside her “velvety thighs” (Pritam). She was given something to eat due to which she vomited. Later she was informed that she was to be married to a widower, who belongs to their sect while Verindra didn’t. Though the narrator refused the proposal but was sad to know that Verindra married another girl. She had no option but to accept the traditional life style of a dead city. She obeyed her parents and got married to the widower. Though this is not mentioned directly but her turning into a corpse in the burning ash is an indication to the same. Thus, metaphorically, she considers herself as a living corpse. She is back to her own world, in which she is nothing but a dead body. The feeling of being lonely is compared with that of the ruins of a city like Pompeii in the story. Emotionally, the story depicts the desire of an Indian woman to be free from the clutches of social and moral chains of traditions.

Conclusion:

Amrita Pritam uses the metaphor of a ruined city like Pompeii to shed light on the plight of a female in the traditional Indian society. The lack of freedom to express self is common to both, as both are deprived and ruined in the present condition, lacking freedom to do what they desire to. The narrator is a glowing instance of what a female in the traditional and orthodox society has to face even in the urbanized Indian world. Without the freedom to express self or do any act of one’s choice, the narrator feels herself as a dead city, an apt metaphor.



Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596

An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

Indexed in: ROAD & Google Scholar

Bibliography:

1. Pritam, Amrita. "Death of a City". *Death of a City*. Arnold-Heinemann Publishers (India), 1976.
2. www.thehindu.com/books/Historical-survey-of-Indian-short-story/article16813374.ece