

I WILL MEET YOU AGAIN

by AMRITA PRITAM

Translated from the Punjabi via Hindi by PARAMITA PURAKAYASTHA

1. A MOMENT

Just for a moment—I had to meet the sky
But I stood there nervous . . .
About how to pass through the crowd of clouds . . .

Many clouds were as dark as ink
God knows—of when and of which rites of passage
Were some of them proclaimers
As is the fate of passengers . . .

Many clouds sniffing, encircled
Like the dangers arising from the shells of ruin . . .
Many meandered up and down
Like the broken tracks of some ancestors.

Many clouds gathered and patrolled
So that the whole sky was under their control
And whoever would come along
Would be a gold-bought slave . . .

I did not know what to say and to whom
That inside the body—there is a sky
And as a price of its love it demands
Meeting with the endless sky . . .

But the worry that was there for the crowd of clouds
That worry was not my sky's—it was mine.
He had eaten the grain of love
And like a dervish he
Lit the censer of my breath . . .
Sitting beside him I stirred the fire of the censer
Said—this conversation between you and me
These talks—will be heard by the mob of clouds
So tell me yogi! What will happen to me then?

He smiled—
 His blue and celestial smile
 Said—They are tufts of smoke
 They know how to group
 They know how to growl
 They even know how to rebuke with their looks
 But their power
 Does not rise up to the stars.
 And the body of the blue sky
 Remains unblemished . . .

To which I said—
 Holding you close to my heart
 Through the crowd of clouds
 How would I pass through?
 And from the patrolling clouds
 How would I ask for my way?

God knows—
 What desire he was drunk in
 Like a lightning bolt
 He looked at me
 Said—
 Don't ask for the way from anyone
 And don't touch any of the walls
 With your hands
 Don't be scared
 Don't be beguiled
 Through the crowd of clouds—
 Blow like the wind.

2. POLITICS

Heard that Politics is a classic movie

Hero: A genius with many faces

Who changes his name daily

Heroine: She is the seat of power

Extra: Members of the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha

Financer: A wage earning laborer

A worker and a farmer

(They don't finance

But are forced to)

Parliament: The indoor shooting area

Newspapers: The outdoor shooting equipment

I have not seen this film

Just heard about it

Because the censor says—

“Not for adults.”

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: *Main Tumhe Phir Milungi*, or *I Will Meet You Again*, is an anthology of Amrita Pritam's (1919-2005) poems, in Hindi translations of the original Punjabi, and published soon after her death.¹ This collection contains some of her finest poems that she wrote while in love, first with the Urdu poet and lyricist Sahir Ludhianvi, and then her eventual partner Imroz, a painter, for whom she wrote the titular poem on her deathbed.

A connection that transcends lifetimes is endemic mostly to South Asia, and in her poems, Pritam nourishes that with a Sufi love which makes her poems acquire radical political dimensions even today. It is important to understand the social and intellectual contexts by which Pritam was deeply influenced. In the traditions that Pritam is drawing on, the religious and the political were often inseparable, and many of the social reforms in medieval India emerged out of

non-traditional religious movements against orthodoxy.

Pritam's poetry shows a clear influence of the Sufi and the Bhakti poetic traditions—two crucial medieval movements that were at the forefront of several social reforms. Hindu orthodoxy granted only the upper castes, especially the Brahmin males, the power to regulate social practices, including the elaboration and interpretation of religious scriptures, thus allowing for the horrifying exploitation of the people categorized into the lower castes. Bhakti poetry, where devotion and amour fused, consisted of indigenous and regional responses to that. Sufism, contrary to the types of Islam practiced till then, laid strong emphasis on asceticism and rose against the rigidity of law and jurisprudence that Islam was acquiring at that point, and was populated initially by members of the working class, a feature that the left-oriented Pritam heavily

1. Amrita Pritam. 2020. *Main Tumhe Phir Milungi*. Translated from Punjabi to Hindi by Amia Kunwar. New Delhi: Penguin Random House.

drew on. Thus, once it arrived in the subcontinent, Sufism did not find any difficulty in being adopted in the regions of Sindh and Panjab, especially while Bhakti was already flourishing in the north and the south. The Sufi and Bhakti poets (often revered as 'saints' by their followers, though without any of the institutional baggage that the word carries), along with the Baul poets² (another folk tradition) from Bengal, constantly challenged the deeply entrenched caste-system both through their poetry and by mobilizing the lower castes, the untouchables, the disenfranchised, in speaking up against social prejudices. Often denigrated as 'mad' by the orthodox, their popularity was made possible by their message of oneness of all beings and of the ultimate unity of the human and the divine. While the communion with

the Godhead was an intensely personal experience, its implications were clearly political in that it did away with the need for intermediaries and interpretations and institutions, of only the few men who in the entire subcontinent were allowed to be literate and interpret sacred texts. In addition, the Sufi and Bhakti movements were revolutionary also because of the immense boost they provided to regional languages and their speakers.

What made Pritam's poetry radical was that she started writing at a time in the early and mid-twentieth century when women's writing was scoffed at in India. "People were very furious from the beginning," she says in a 1968 interview. "Plain intolerance of women, especially in the world of letters; for there the woman expresses herself, projects her views, her feelings. A woman doctor

2. A Bengali Baul song, for instance, says:
That is why brother, I became a madcap Baul
No master I obey, nor injunctions, canons or custom
Man-made distinctions have no hold on me now.
I rejoice in the gladness of the love that wells out
of my own being.

is all right, not a woman writer," she adds.³ That Pritam was positioned to acquire an education, hone her literary skill, and could defy conventions by being unapologetic about her gender, supplementing that with an intellectual take on traditions of emotions, were more than enough for her to be regarded as a trailblazing woman. Pritam was, in fact, the first woman to win the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1956. What is relevant in this interview is Pritam's point that a woman can be included into the folds of the national imagery only if she is serviceable in some way, and being a doctor is the extent to which she can reclaim her traditional roles of caregiving and healing. Unless she has a particular kind of social capital, a woman trying to make a career out of writing is still looked at in askance in an average middle-class South Asian household.

While she draws on devotional poetry, her own poetry is not de-

votional, the left-leaning Pritam insists: "I am not a devotional person ... I love life too much!" When she writes in "Politics" that politics is "Not for adults," she is inverting the trope that women do not and should not talk about it, either in drawing rooms, kitchens or clubs. Women, in fact, are the most alienated and the worst affected when political changes take place, for instance during the recent NRC (National Register of Citizens) drive by the Modi government, where many women did not have access to the documents they required to prove that they are Indian citizens. Women, migrants, Muslims have to continuously translate themselves to fit in in a paradigm that was not made for or by them.

We can think of the other clouds that the poet refers to in "A Moment" as the parts of women's selves that are acquired to their own undoing. The patrolling clouds could also

3. "Of Pain and Protest." *Mahfil*, 1968-1969, Vol. 5, No. 3, Amrita Pritam Number (1968-1969), pp. 1-3. Asian Studies Center, Michigan State University. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/40874235>.

be any yielder of patriarchy—men, army, other women. Pritam as a woman claims a right to transcendence that exceeds neat categorization, and this can be done through productive projects, in this case writing, or composing songs, thus creating the much-denied selfhood rooted in women's relations to others. In a context where individualism as a concept itself can be co-opted by patriarchal, market-driven institutions, a fine balance is achieved here by acknowledging the existence of the other clouds, the ones which control and patrol, but all of which, being made of vapors, are ultimately ephemeral—a self not having a premium on self-narration, but a “narratable self”⁴ that can be situated within a context that is both communal and political.

NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION: I had translated these poems as a part of an undergraduate class presentation on postcolonial poetry. At that

time, I was part of an inter-departmental project on *dstangoi*, a form of Urdu storytelling. My instructor in the project was the grandson of an Urdu journalist and a Punjabi who had worked on the Partition, a topic very close to his heart. I was a Bengali growing up with personal tales of the Bangladesh War and the tumultuous Bengal of the 1970s, and our project was on investigating links between Bauls and Sufism, among other things. Pritam had been a personal revelation, especially because I had difficulties in conveying certain aspects of the creative process of the project as a woman. I am well-educated in Hindi (I am grateful to my friend and native Hindi speaker Ankit Prasad for his suggestions regarding the original bunch of poems that I had translated) though Bangla is my mother-tongue. Both Punjabi, the original language of composition of these poems, and Hindi, are gendered languages. Bangla and

4. Adriana Cavarero, 2000. *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*. Translated by Paul A. Kottman. London: Routledge.

the target language English are not. And in gendered languages, the default is always male, and the feminine is mostly a tweaking with that.⁵ Going back to what Pritam said about most Punjabi folk poetry being by women, it is directly related to the fact that the classics were out of their reach.

I had read the poems in their Hindi translations by Amia Kunwar, a close friend and associate of the late poet. My translations into English might contain mistakes which might have been carried into the Hindi from the original Punjabi. I would like to elaborate on this using Pritam's own words by excerpting a portion of the 1968 interview in *Mahfil*, interspersed with comments by the interviewer:

"I write only in Punjabi. But I don't get my work published in Punjabi now." She has her books translated into Hindi before publication, because there is no market for Punjabi writing. "Punjab is a rich state. Its people can afford to buy books. But they won't—even if it costs

only two rupees! They are fond of good clothes, good food, but not books." ... As a result, she has no choice but to switch to another language. "I find it difficult to write in Hindi. And yet my publishers want me to write a long novel, a really long one." She has overcome many difficulties, and her works are now being translated into English and published abroad.

Now what to do with the man as the mediator, Kunwar, who had translated Pritam to Hindi in the first place, so that I could read her? Honestly, I do not know, other than to rely on the fact that his are accredited translations that resonated with me. The joy I felt at discovering Pritam four years back, the joy I felt at writing her through me. To refer to the immense history of translations of translations, of which the English Bibles are of course notable instances, one must take risks. For me, this was simply an act of solidarity in ways I know best. And building solidarity is essentially an act of translation. A relationship founded

5. Even for genderless languages, when we use supposedly gender-neutral words like 'doctor,' we usually think of a man. In Bangla, we have *lekhok* and *lekhika* for male and female writers respectively; nevertheless, when we mean writers in general, we use the male variant *lekhok*.

on feminist solidarity can only be built by translations across time, space, class, caste, and of course, language.

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