

Critically analyse I Say unto Waris Shah

Or,

Discuss Amrita Pritam's poem as an example of partition literature.

I Say unto Waris Shah (1949) by Amrita Pritam is the translated version of her original Punjabi poem 'AjjAkhan Waris Shah Nun'. It is a part of the Asian genre of partition literature. This is so, because the poem reminds us of the unfortunate situation of people at the time of the partition of India.

Amrita Pritam evokes the spirit of Waris Shah (1722-98), a popular Punjabi Sufi poet, famous for his romantic tragedy 'Heer Ranjha' (one of several popular tragic romances of Punjab, telling the story of the tragic love of Heer Sial and her lover Dheedo Ranjha) to help the Punjabi people at the critical moment of partition. She wants to spread the message of love like Waris Shah did with the love-story of Heer Sial and Ranjha.

Amrita Pritam depicts the bloody effects of partition in Punjab following the territorial division of the pre-Independence undivided India. Thus the poem falls into the category of partition literature as it depicts the effects of partition in the Western border of India: like so many other poems, short stories and novels deal with the same theme of partition in the Eastern border of India and East Pakistan, now Bangladesh.

The poetess, Amrita Pritam, is in a state of extreme sadness. She implores the poet Waris Shah, her muse, to see what is happening to both of their beloved birthplace. Corpses are lying on the fields; the result of communal conflict. Everything she sees around her, has turned red: including the river Chenab (popular name: Chandrabhaga), whose water has 'turned crimson'. The land of the love of Heer and Ranjha Dheedo is now playing Holi with human blood. The message of compassion and purity of love is lost from Punjab. The partition of India is the root cause of all these evils. Humanity is at stake.

One million people, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs died from communal violence that followed the partition of India. It left the already married Amrita Pritam (she married at the age of 16) a Punjabi refugee at the age of 28: when she left Lahore and moved to New Delhi. In this personal context Amrita Pritam is witnessing the bloodbath happening all around her motherland, the undivided India. The condition of Punjab is hurting her deeply. At this critical moment, she turns to the spirit of the now-dead Waris Shah, the Punjabi Sufi poet of compassion and love: famous for his romantic tragedy 'Heer Ranjha'. The poetess needs the assistance of Waris Shah very much at this moment of crisis. The people of Punjab have killed enough people (one million, to be precise) to turn the water of the river Chenab (popular name: Chandrabhaga) "crimson" red, a deep red colour. Amrita Pritam thinks that some evil force is responsible for this chaotic destruction. It has contaminated the water of the tributaries (five in all, one of them being Chenab) of the Indus river with poison. This water is now irrigating the land of Punjab with poison. It is the poison of the British imperialist policy of 'Divide and Rule' which is now irrigating the land of the communally divided Punjab 'with poison.'

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The fertile land of Punjab is now giving birth to poisonous "saplings", young trees with a slender trunk, which are a metaphor for the communal hatred of men. The poison of revenge has poisoned the minds of common men. Even the wind blowing through the trees is poisonous with the poison of communal hatred, turning the "bamboo-shoots" into cobras. Obviously, the cobras are metaphors for the selfish political leaders who are trying to destroy brotherhood, compassion and love: and replacing them with the poison of communal hatred. In the midst of all these, the daughters of Punjab are the worst affected. The "spinning-wheel", metaphor for rural economy has stopped functioning. The image of 'trinjan' is very important in this context. To Punjabi women trinjan is the symbol of female liberty and wisdom; providing a platform to women for sharing their skills like cooking, embroidery, spinning, as well as traditional agricultural knowledge like seeds and the use of herbs. Even the newly-married couples who had hoped to enjoy living a happy life, are fleeing to save their lives.

The partition of India has snatched everything beautiful from the innocent people of Punjab. It has "snapped" the invisible thread of love and brotherhood existing among the Punjabi people. The men of Punjab are not in the mood for playing the flute: producing songs of love. There is an allusion to the romantic story of 'Heer Ranjha' here. According to the poetess, even the dead will weep: seeing this horrible picture of Punjab. In utter anguish, the poetess says that Punjabi men have turned into "villains". They loot beauty and love, according to the poetess. Amrita Pritam, in the persona of the poetess-speaker, desperately needs the voice of Waris Shah; whose words, she thinks, can stop this state of conflict and confusion. The refrain, the repetition of the line 'Today I implore Waris Shah' at the end of the poem: emphasises Pritam's sincere prayer to the dead poet.