

I Say unto Waris Shah

Today I implore Waris Shah
to speak up from his grave
and turn over a page of the Book of Love.

When a daughter of the fabled Punjab wept
he gave tongue to her silent grief.
Today a million daughters weep
but where is Waris Shah
to give voice to their woes ?
Arise, O friend of the distressed !
See the plight of your Punjab.
Corpses He strewn in the pastures
and the Chenab has turned crimson.

Someone has poured poison
into the waters of the five rivers
and these waters are
now irrigating the land with poison.

In this fertile land have sprouted
Countless poisonous saplings
Scarlet-red has turned the horizon
and sky high has flown the curse.
The poisonous wind,
that passes through every forest,
has changed the bamboo-shoots into cobras.

The cobras mesmerised the gullible people
and bit them again and again
so in no time
the limbs of Punjab turned bluish.
the songs vanished from the streets
and the thread of the spinning-wheel snapped.
The girls fled the trinjan screaming
and the resounding whirr of the spinning-wheel stopped.
Ludden let go the boats
along with the wedding-beds.
The swing has snapped
along with the strong branch of the tree.

The flute,
through which blew the breath of love,
got lost in bewilderment.
The brothers of Ranjha
have forgotten
the art of handling this instrument.
Blood rained on the earth,
it seeped through the graves.
The princesses of the valley
called Love,
now weep in graveyards.
All the villains
now move about
as thieves of love and beauty.
Where shall we seek another Waris Shah ?
Today I implore Waris Shah
to speak up from his grave
and turn over a page of the Book of Love.

Ajj Akhan Waris Shah Nun (1949)

Amrita Pritam

Amrita Pritam (b. 1919) is a distinguished Punjabi poetess and fiction writer. Her first collection of poems *Amrit Leherm* was published in 1936 when she was barely 17 years old. Starting as a romantic poet, she matured into a poetess of revolutionary ideas as a result of her involvement with the Progressive Writers' Movement in literature. Her magnum opus is the long poem *Sunehray* which won the Sahitya Akademi Award.

Ajj Akhan Waris Shah Nun (I Say unto Waris Shah) is a heartrending poem written during the riot-torn days that followed the partition of the country. It is addressed to Waris Shah, the celebrated eighteenth century Punjabi poet and author of the immortal *Heer*.

When Amrita Pritam called out to Waris Shah in a heartrending ode while fleeing the Partition riots

The immortal Partition poem turns 70 too.

Nirupama Dutt

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The train rolled through the dark night as though it was moving through an endless tunnel in the fall of 1947. A sad and beautiful “refugee” wondered if there would be light at the end of the tunnel, or whether she would keep travelling through the darkness, with her two little children by her side.

This hapless woman was none other than the [poetry diva](#) of Lahore who had charmed literary circles with her verses in Punjabi. [Amrita Pritam](#) (1919-2005) was born in Gujranwala and brought up in Lahore, the city she had to flee literally in the clothes she was wearing when communal rioting broke out at the time of Partition in the blood-soaked August of 1947.

Brave and daring always, this pioneering woman poet of Punjabi was picking up the shreds of life so that she could take root again. In her autobiography, *The Revenue Stamp*, she recalls the train journey thus:

“Uprooted from Lahore, I had rehabilitated myself at Dehradun for some time. I went to Delhi looking for work and a place to live. On my return journey in the train, I felt the wind was piercing the dark night and wailing at the sorrows the Partition had brought. I had come away from Lahore with just one red shawl and I had torn it into two to cover both my babies. Everything had been torn apart. The words of Waris Shah about how the dead and parted would meet, echoed in my mind. And my poem took shape.”

This ode to Waris Shah, the Sufi poet who had penned the tragic story of Punjab's folk heroine [Ranjha](#), written during a sorrowing journey, went straight to the hearts of the traumatised, bereaved and displaced Punjabis both sides of the border, where the land of the five bloodied rivers lay in two pieces, cut off mercilessly by the infamous Radcliffe Line.

Pritam says in her autobiography:

“The most gruesome accounts of marauding invaders in all mythologies and chronicles put together will not, I believe, compare with the blood curling horrors of this historic year. Tale after tale, each more hair-raising than the last, would take a lifetime to retell.”

Unpublished, the poem reached Pakistan and was translated into English and published. Faiz Ahmad Faiz read it in jail. When he came out, he found many people had a copy and wept on reading it. Sadly, in India, Pritam had to face the ire of her community on why her poem was not addressed to Guru Nanak, while Left-wing writers felt it should have been addressed to Lenin or Stalin!

Khushwant Singh, who was to translate the poem as well as Amrita's Partition novel [Pinjar](#) (*The Skeleton*) was taken up by her “stunning beauty” and not so much by her literary prowess. Yet of this poem he conceded: “Those few lines she composed made her immortal, in India and Pakistan”.

NOTES

Waris Shah (1706 -1798) was a Punjabi poet, best-known for his seminal work *Heer Ranjha*, based on the traditional folk tale of Heer and her lover Ranjha. Heer is considered one of the quintessential works of classical Punjabi literature.

Qaido – A maternal uncle of Heer in *Heer Ranjha* is the villain who betrays the lovers.

The Punjab – the region of the five rivers east of Indus: Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej.

Massive population exchanges occurred between the two newly-formed states in the months immediately following Partition. Once the lines were established, about 14.5 million people crossed the borders to what they hoped was the relative safety of religious majority. Based on 1951 Census of displaced persons, 7,226,000 Muslims went to Pakistan from India while 7,249,000 Hindus and Sikhs moved to India from Pakistan immediately after partition. About 11.2 million or 78% of the

population transfer took place in the west, with Punjab accounting for most of it; 5.3 million Muslims moved from India to West Punjab in Pakistan, 3.4 million Hindus and Sikhs moved from Pakistan to East Punjab in India; elsewhere in the west 1.2 million moved in each direction to and from Sind.

The newly formed governments were completely unequipped to deal with migrations of such staggering magnitude, and massive violence and slaughter occurred on both sides of the border. Estimates of the number of deaths range around roughly 500,000, with low estimates at 200,000 and high estimates at 1,000,000.

Summary of *I Say unto Waris Shah*

Amrita Pritam in her *'I Say unto Waris Shah'*, depicts the effects of partition in Punjab and portrays the bloody chapters of the territorial division of India.

The poetess is in a state of extreme sadness. She implores Waris Shah, her muse, to see what is happening in her beloved birthplace. Corpses are lying in the fields. Everything she sees has turned into red. The land of Heer–Ranjha is playing holi with human blood. The partition of India is the root cause of all those evils. Humanity is at stake. The message of love and purity of compassion is lost from Punjab. The poetess hopes that the people of Punjab will listen to her lamentation and stop this nonsensical bloodshed.

You can read the full poem *I Say unto Waris Shah* [here](#).

Structure of *I Say unto Waris Shah*

'I Say unto Waris Shah' contains five stanzas. The fifth stanza is the longest one. There are 57 lines in the poem. The translated version doesn't have any specific rhyme scheme or metrical composition. It is in [free verse](#). A dirge-like rhythm flows through the lines of the poem. The number of words in each line varies and the verse has a [lyrical](#) flow throughout the end. The short lines are in iambic and [trochaic meter](#) alternatively. Some long lines contain anapaestic meter as well.

Literary Devices in *I Say unto Waris Shah*

In this poem, literary devices play a major role. It makes Amrita Pritam's words more convincing and picturesque. In the third line of the first stanza, readers come across the [metaphor](#) of "Book of Love". It refers to the famous work of Waris Shah, named "Heer Ranjha". In "he gave tongue to her silent grief" the poetess uses [metonymy](#). Here "tongue" means giving voice to someone's feelings.

Readers come across a [hyperbole](#) in this line, “Today a million daughters weep”. The poetess is actually emphasizing the pain of Punjabi daughters here. “Arise, O friend of the distressed!”, is the use of an [apostrophe](#). Here the poetess calls the spirit of Waris Shah. “Punjab” is a metonym for the people of Punjab. The variety is “container for the thing contained”

Pritam [personifies](#) river Chenab and portrays it as her grieving companion. “Chenab has turned crimson”, here the word “crimson” is the use of metonymy. The poetess refers to the cause by using its effect which changes the river’s color into red. The poetess personifies “curse” in the line, “sky high has flown the curse.”

In this poem, “Breath of love” is a metaphor that refers to the sweet songs of love. Amrita Pritam hints the bloodbath in “Blood rained on the earth”. “princesses of the valley” are the daughters of Punjab who are now resting in the grave.

At the parting section of *‘I Say unto Waris Shah’*, the poetess asks a rhetorical question to the readers. It is a popular [figure of speech](#) used in such emotional poems.

Analysis of *I Say unto Waris Shah* Lines 1–17

Today I implore Waris Shah

(...)

now irrigating the land with poison.

Amrita Pritam is witnessing the bloodbath happening all around her motherland. The condition of Punjab is hurting her deeply. At this critical moment, she resorts to the poet of love and compassion, Waris Shah. He is no more. The people of Punjab have forgotten his words of pure love. They are now fighting and killing their own countrymen ruthlessly. She wants to spread the message of Heer and Ranjha at this chaotic moment.

The poetess needs the assistance of Waris Shah badly. She is requesting him to appear again as the moment needs him the most. The people of Punjab have killed enough people that it turned the water of Chenab crimson red. The act of partition has impregnated evil spirit into the hearts of people. Now the green pastures of Punjab have turned into a graveyard. Corpses are lying here and there. Such was the condition of Punjab at the time of partition.

Amrita Pritam thinks that some satanic force is responsible for all this hurly-burly. It has contaminated the tributaries of the river Indus with poison. The water is now irrigating the land with poison. It is the poison of “Divide and Rule Policy” which is irrigating the spirit of an Indian. This poison like the diabolic policy is the root cause of what is happening around the poetess.

Lines 18–37

In this fertile land have sprouted

(...)

along with the wedding-beds.

The fertile land of Punjab is now giving birth to poisonous saplings. Amrita Pritam compares the saplings to hatred of men metaphorically. The hallucination of “otherness” is ultimately a threat to the integrity and unity of India.

The poison of revenge has intoxicated the commoners. The beautiful natural landscape of Punjab is now turned into a field of mass-slaughter. That’s why Amrita Pritam writes, “Scarlet-red has turned the horizon/ and sky high has flown the curse./ The poisonous wind,/ that passes through/ every forest,/ has changed the/ bamboo-shoots into cobras.”

This metaphorical cobra is biting the people of Punjab and inserting its venom into their bodies. The poetess is pointing here to the selfish political leaders who are trying to destroy love, compassion, and brotherhood from people’s hearts by spreading its venom. Amidst all of this, the daughters of Punjab are the most affected. They have stopped singing. The “spinning wheel”, metaphor of “rural economy”, has stopped its functioning. Girls are running to save their lives. They can’t attend the trinjan to sing together, to share their sorrows, and to help each other in this critical situation. Even the couples who have married recently to live a happy life, are fleeing to save their lives.

Lines 38–57

The swing has snapped

(...)

and turn over a page of the Book of Love.

Partition of India snatched everything away from the innocent people of Punjab. It snapped the invisible thread of love existing among people.

The men of Punjab aren’t in the [mood](#) of blowing the flute. They are indulged in fighting and killing each other. Blood is spread everywhere. According to the poetess, even the dead will start weeping after seeing this horrid picture of Punjab.

In utter anguish, the poetess says that the men of Punjab have turned into villains. They have become the “thieves of love and beauty” for the poet. After seeing all this the writer can’t hold her tears. She desperately needs the help of Waris Shah whose words, she thinks, can stop this

turbulence. The refrain used at the end of the poem, emphasizes her sincere prayer to the dead poet.