

Narratives of Female Agency in Amrita Pritam's *Dr. Dev*

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This article examines the ways that Amrita Pritam's novel *Dr. Dev* has redefined women's lives in the middle-class patriarchal world, focusing on female desire, moral responsibility and emotional courage. Based on close literary criticism and feminist criticism, the essay propose that Pritam disrupts orthodox images of the "ideal woman," who she's been taught to select love over pregnancy and motherhood, even if patriarchal institutions fail to confer formal freedom upon women. In the analysis, male characters — Dr. Dev in particular — act as vessels through which women communicate their agency, guilt and struggle. Ultimately, *Dr. Dev* represents a multifaceted critique of patriarchy, and its eventual conclusion is not just a undermining of gender roles, but rather an illumination of the price exacted from women's and men's domination and rebellion.

Keywords: Amrita Pritam; *Dr. Dev*; Female Agency; Patriarchy; Motherhood as Choice; Feminist Literary Criticism.

Introduction

Contemporary Indian fiction has become an important space in which we can see Amrita Pritam's bold expression of woman's essence along with her unapologetic rejection of patriarchal practices. In *Dr. Dev*—widely regarded as one of her all-time greatest novels, even in relation to *Pinjar*—she's turned away from the histrionic violence of the epic past and into the quieter, ongoing violence of everyday life at home. And the story of a woman who loves, yet cannot protect her unborn child enables Pritam to interrogate how women negotiate the relationships of duty, desire and social respect in a family that is awkward by social standards. This article critically engages with *Dr. Dev* as an antidote to patriarchy, telling a story in which women are continuously engaging in the moral-ethical acts of choice as a matter of structural restriction.

It asks three guiding questions:

1. How does Pritam's portrayal of women's subjective encounter with love and motherhood feel?
2. How do the women of the book violate, accommodate or recontextualize patriarchal expectations?
3. How does the character *Dr. Dev* himself become that space where female agency is tested, validated, or denied?

Literature Review

The predominant critical perspective on Amrita Pritam focuses on both her representation of women as complex and desiring subjects but doesn't treat women as passive victims. As scholars have written, women in her fiction desire identity, dignity and emotional truth while trying to keep the societal and family pressures that force them into personal sacrifice and silence in check. Research investigating her partition novels has emphasized trauma, memory and the cutting-off of female identity, while more holistic reviews of her work have pointed to her

criticism of religious, cultural and gender orthodoxy as well. But *Dr. Dev* has received comparatively less sustained attention compared to *Pinjar* and her autobiographical works. Previous commentary tends to paint it as an emotional family drama or drama of devotion and sacrifice, which often only flirts with fully engaging the book with its radical re-imagining of motherhood, adoption and the ethics of care. This paper continues the general insights of feminist readings of Pritam's text, but specifically focuses on the extent to which *Dr. Dev* dramatizes female agency from love, reproduction to quotidian choice.

Methodology

This is a qualitative, text-centred writing project which explores close reading of the text (in Punjabi/Hindi text, and, when possible, in translation) which leads readers to the text's narrative development. Certain scenes in courtship, pregnancy, child-rearing and marital feuds are examined using perspectives from feminist literary analysis and gender studies. Narrative voice, interior monologue, and symbolism are of particular interest because these elements portray how the characters perceive themselves as well as the text's role in causing readers to examine their decisions. Rather than a theoretical concept of patriarchy, the paper treats patriarchy as a social organization of expectations that are implanted in parents, husbands, neighbors, and kinship members of the family and the community. Female agency is understood not as sheer freedom but as reimagination of options, making one of many choices through some level of constraint, and

in such a way that accepts or rejects emotional and moral obligations. This structure enables analysis to push beyond a victim-versus-rebel binary with relative ease in following the subtle, sometimes ambivalent and slow ways in which Pritam's women act.

Dr. Dev: Catalyst and Limits

One of the characters whose name she takes after the novel's protagonist, and which plays this part in the novel but performs not as an unassailable hero but rather as a means for women to voice their worries and passions more than anything else. With the novel, *Dr. Dev* comes to represent romantic love and intellectual company when he's young and he represents romantic love; from the outset, however, he is an embodiment of intellectual companionship and mutual respect for her that forms a relationship between themselves (on the one hand, mutual respect, rather than arrangement). When her parents refuse this match and send her off to a suit, she turns her back on that match, Dev gradually loses the old style of control aplomb because she cannot control what she does not do with it anymore - his unyielding emotional presence in her life influences much of her future life to this day. His nurturing influence is to be found in the heroine of the story when she is young. Dev is a doctor; he symbolizes care, reason and moral rectitude. His profession is authoritative, but it also renders him susceptible to a patriarchal system where men are formally allowed to prescribe the decisions women's bodies and their health will make. Pritam raises questions about this control. Dev might care for the child, who is his child, but he is unable to

reverse the woman's earlier rebellion of her family by bearing the child, though her family was opposed to her doing so. His idealism and self-restraint are presented through repetition as women's responses to choices they have already made; he tends to be more of a witness to, and sometimes an accomplice to, female agency than the source of it. It's Choosing, Not Being Fate. This is one of Dev's most original ways of subverting patriarchal values. She treats motherhood as a choice rather than a given – that's a real choice. Although carrying that pregnancy with her in the end, the heroine refuses to abort. This will compromise her future prospects and thus means she'll lose respectability as well as marriage chances. Also, from this choice, she controls her own body as much as herself, and takes control of the very nature of motherhood. But when the child is taken from her and placed in another household the novel examines adoptive and surrogate motherhood. Non-biological mothers do the caring, the teaching and emotional labor — for example, feeding and schooling the child. This fragmentation of maternal roles challenges patriarchal assumptions regarding “real” mothers connecting this person to marriage and legitimate origins. And so, Pritam suggests, mothering should be made of something which is not so much legal and biological as emotional/moral integrity and extended loyalty. Emotional Truth and Female Subjectivity

The story-telling in Pritam is a reinforcement of her thematic focus on agency. The text runs rampant through women's interiority; a space of doubt, guilt

and small hopes. Rather than casting them as epitomes of good and evil, it allows them to articulate their own contradictory feelings about love, duty, and respect. It's a sustained interiority that's as subversive as the very way that patriarchal storytelling silences or reduces women to plot points. In its meditations like this on its interior, the novel reveals women's facility for moral argument. Characters must reconcile the realities of deception, hiding the child's parentage or living in problematic home situations. And not all of those decisions are victories or liberation in that they're made; all of them come into existence as thought participants that make sense of their experiences and behave in this or that way and, however imperfect, aligning with their ideology of truth. And in the way they do so, Dr. Dev's role is part of something much larger in Pritam's canon: refocusing female characters who have otherwise been rendered reductive stereotypes. When Marriage, Trust, and Betrayal Meet

Marriage in *Dr. Dev* is not perceived as a settled thing so much as a war of wills. The forced separation of lovers and the heroine's eventual marriage make clear how much family honor and financial rationality trump personal freedom, especially for women. But Pritam isn't just railing against marriage; she describes how women make the most of the confined space marriage affords them to look after children, save self-respect, pursue marital romance. Another axis where patriarchy is interrogated—trust and mistrust. The heroine's trust in others feels contradictory to the fact that there is widely held suspicion about female sexuality. And when she turns over her

kid to others, when she accepts help from Dr. Dev, she is doing so deliberately because she knows what people say might reflect badly on her character. And such trust transactions expose how patriarchal structures coerce the female into transparency and obedience and allow males to keep secrecy and authority, although in showing women a perpetual trust, and even a need for trust (from men), the novel gives a quiet one to be maintained, one that is always resistant. Ambivalent Men and Shared Costs

The book, looking at it through the simple feminist eye just makes all male characters oppressors; Pritam is much more complex. Even Dev, the adoptive fathers, and some husbands appear beleaguered, torn between love for the people that are women and following the societal order that hurts them. However, the book doesn't shirk, or deny, the fact that so much of this system is driven by men, and in reality women deserve to suffer both the emotional and corporeal damage of decisions reached while out of earshot of their children. Men might suffer guilt or frustration, that is, while women might suffer loss of reputation and bodily harm and a separated life from their children. In both examples, patriarchal systems undermine people's physical safety; their victims are often the people that don't get it, people whom patriarchy sees as less valuable. Dr. Dev's words bear out the moral depravity of a civilization that will be willing to sell women's lives as collateral in the name of preserving family honour.

Conclusion

Dr. Dev tells us about a tale in which women are both agents of, and interpreters of, their worlds — even when formal power is kept behind patriarchal ideals of fathers, husbands and medical doctors. Yet through the heroine's own decision to keep having the baby in her hands, the tangled web of adoptive and true maternity, and by always looking upon female interiority, Amrita Pritam turns an outwardly run-of-the-mill family drama (in which the women are the main characters) into a biting meditation on the male-dominated world. The novel offers no easy emancipation; its fates feel tinged with loss and compromise. Its realism is just that — a radicalism: it says that what female agency takes place is not only in acts of heroism and rebellion but also, most important, through the relentless, no-nonsense insistence of daily life on loving, remembering and being cared for.

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