

I Say Unto Waris Shah

AMRITA PRITAM

Amrita Pritam (b. 1919), the distinguished Punjabi poetess and fiction writer, has been an ardent crusader for humanism as the bedrock of communal relations. Her first collection of poems *Amrit Lehran* 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 Movement in literature. Her *magnum opus*, the long poem *Sunehray*, won the Sahitya Akademi Award.

Aj Akhan Waris Sah Nun (I say unto Waris Shah) is a heart-rending 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*.

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 lie 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
Coutless 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 have mesmerized 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.
Sudden let go the boats
along with the wedding-beds.
The wing has snapped
alòng with the strong branch of the tree.
The flute,
through which blew the breath of love,
is lost in bewilderment,
The brothers of Ranjha
have forgotten
the art of handling this instrument.
Blood raining on the earth,
Has seeped into the graves.
The princesses, the valley
called Love,
now weep in graveyards.

* *trinjan*—the courtyard where young girls gather together to spin and sing

All the villains
now parade
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.