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**Femininity as a Construction of Patriarchal Society in Amrita Pritam's "The Weed": A Study Based on Monique Wittig's "One Is Not Born a Woman"**

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**ABSTRACT**

The research paper intends to do an in depth study into the short story "The Weed" by the Indian writer Amrita Pritam. The paper particularly explores the theme 'Femininity as a Construction of Society' in the short story, based on Monique Wittig's "One Is Not Born a Woman". The story throws light on the condition of women in rural India – the marriage, their sexuality as well as their emotions. This short story discusses the stronghold of customs and traditions on women and how it adversely affects them. The concept of love is stifled and termed unnatural. The story is relevant in the present context where the issues related to a woman's sexuality, the repressive culture in which they grow up and the patriarchal system that is prevalent has been well portrayed.

**Key words:** Patriarchy, Amrita Pritam, women in rural India, Monique Wittig

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"The Weed" is a beautiful short story of a rustic girl. Angoori, the protagonist, is a typical Indian village girl, black, young and beautiful. Simple, uneducated and superstitious, she was married as the second wife of an old man. A victim of the patriarchal society and forced to marry by parental choice, Angoori believes it is 'the weed' given by a man that makes a girl fall in love, which is a sin. At the end, she realizes that she herself is a victim of 'the weed', the natural inclination of a girl for the man she loves. The story is based on the author's own observation of the typical Indian rural society and the customs and traditions associated with it. Through the character of Angoori the author has portrayed the position of a common woman in the Indian society and also the role played by the society in attributing the femininity to her. Amrita Pritam has exposed the age old customs, traditions, superstitious beliefs associated with the lives of people in rural India. Women's subjugated status is another area where the author has thrown ample light. Even women have internalized the social constraints and carries it forward themselves. Through the story, Amrita Pritam has shown how women are made to believe that the natural instincts like love and companionship are the result of some magical power and not a human attribute.

According to Monique Wittig, in the case of women, their bodies as well as minds at a particular point in life becomes the product of society. They have been compelled in their bodies and in their minds to correspond, feature by feature, with the ideas of society that has been established for them. Distorted to such an extent that the women's deformed body is what the society call "natural" and thus in the end even the oppression seems to be a consequence of this

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“nature” within the women. Quoting Simone de Beauvoir, “One is not born, but becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society: it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.”

The notion that the basis of society or the beginning of the society lies in heterosexuality is evident in the story “The Weed”. Amrita Pritam describes that every bride is new and when it comes to Angoori, she was new in a different way, the second wife of her husband who could not be called new because he had already drunk once at the conjugal well. The way in which Prabhati was chosen as the husband of Angoori is also strange and it clearly shows the dominance of patriarchal society and the kind of femininity assigned by the society to the women. Angoori had no say in her marriage. She is not even given the minimum human right to choose the man whom she should spend her entire life. Her father just wished to give away his daughter to some man. And the daughter who acts according to the wishes of her parents is considered to be ideal by the society. When Prabhati came home to cremate his first wife, Angoori’s father approached him and took his wet towel, wringing it dry, a symbolic gesture of wiping away the tears of grief that had wet the towel. The simple act of drying the tear-stained towel on the part of a person with a nubile daughter was as much as to say, ‘I give you my daughter to take the place of the one who died. Don’t cry anymore. I’ve even dried your wet towel.’ This is how Angoori married Prabhati. However, their union was postponed for five years, for two reasons: her tender age, and her mother’s paralytic attack.

When we admit that there is a natural division between women and men, we naturalize history, we assume that men and women have always existed and will always exist. Not only do we naturalize history, but also consequently we naturalize the social phenomena which express our oppression, making change impossible. A materialist feminist approach shows that what we take for the cause or origin of oppression is in fact only the mark imposed by the oppressor: the “myth of woman,” plus its material effects and manifestations in the appropriated consciousness and bodies of women. Thus this mark does not predate oppression. Pritam mentions about the purdah Angoori wears to keep herself from men and women, but as time moves ahead, one can see the changes that happens to her clothing. The veil soon started to shrink until it covered only her hair, as was becoming to an orthodox Hindu woman. The story also highlights how the society shrinks the world of women to just her home, husband and probably to the silver jewellery that she owns.

The story also highlights the myths that surround a woman created by the patriarchal society. The patriarchal society never wishes the women to rule them or question them. When Amrita Pritam asks Angoori whether she wants to learn reading, she says that it is a sin for the village women to read but it is not so for the men and the city women. This statement of hers clearly proves how influential the society is, in structuring and forming the thoughts in uneducated women’s mind. Angoori has never learned to question all that she was told to believe. Pritam describes Angoori’s body from a patriarchal point of view, “They say a woman’s body is like a lump of dough, some women have the looseness of under-kneaded dough while others have the clinging plasticity of leavened dough. Rarely does a woman have a body that can be equated to rightly kneaded dough, a baker’s pride. Angoori’s body belonged to this category.” Even the body which can be said to be of oneself, in the case of women, is described by men and belongs to men. Pritam further mocks at the patriarchal society saying, “Angoori was the dough covered by Prabhati. He was her napkin, not her taster.”

The author also tries to bring forth the notion of the society which entraps women in the familiar deadlock of “woman is wonderful”. Simone de Beauvoir underlined particularly the false consciousness which consists of selecting among the features of the myth (that women are different from men) those which look good and using them as a definition for women. What the concept “woman is wonderful” accomplishes is that it retains for defining women the best features (best according to whom?) which oppression has granted us, and it does not radically question the categories “man” and “woman”, which are political categories and not natural givens. It puts us in a position of fighting within the class “women” not as the other classes do, for the disappearance of our class, but for the defence of woman and its reinforcement. It leads us to develop with complacency new theories about our specificity: thus we call our passivity nonviolence, when the main and emergent point for us is to fight our passivity.

Angoori describes the way in which marriage is done in their community. A girl when she is five or six, adores someone’s feet. He is the husband. The girl has no particular role in her marriage. Her father takes money and flowers and puts them at his feet and all of a sudden the man is declared to be the husband of the girl. The girls don’t even see the man before their marriage. And her concept about love marriage is a clear indication of how the women are oppressed socially and how this oppression is disguised to be natural and biological. Angoori believes that when a man makes a girl eat the wild weed which he gives her in a paan, she will start loving him. Angoori strongly believes that love can come in no other ways. Her mother even warns her not to take paan or sweets from anyone because they might contain the weed and she might fall in love.

Pritam points out the fact that “women” is a product of the society. It is time for us to destroy the myth inside and outside ourselves. There is a necessity to have an individual definition for women. Women should first be made aware of the oppressions that they are undergoing and thus one needs to know and experience the fact that one can constitute oneself as a subject (as opposed to an object of oppression), that one can become someone in spite of oppression, that one has one’s own identity. There is no possible fight for someone deprived of an identity in cases like that of Angoori and no internal motivation for fighting. Consciousness of oppression is not only a reaction to oppression. It is also the whole conceptual revaluation of the social world, its whole reorganization with new concepts, from the point of view of oppression. The destruction of heterosexuality as a social system should be ensured because it is the base for the oppression of women by men and which produces the doctrine of the difference between the sexes to justify this oppression.

## References

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