



Burning Alive in a Ruthless Matriarchy: A Critique of “Stench of Kerosene” By Amrita Pritam

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Abstract

This paper critiques Amrita Pritam's short story “Stench of Kerosene”. It probes into Pritam's narrative from a literary and psychological perspective. Fundamentally, it semiotically assesses the metaphors engendered by “the mare” that takes Guleri away, “the harvest festival of Chamba” that causes her physical separation from Manak, “the hookah” Manak smokes to overcome his sorrow, “the flute” Manak gives Guleri as an assurance of his fidelity, “the bride price” Guleri's father declines to mean that his daughter is not a child-bearing machine for sale, “the baby” born to Manak's second wife as the posthumous replacement of Guleri, “the kerosene stench” that suggests the fire in which Guleri died, and later the agent of the olfactory hallucination that tortures him psychotically. Moreover, it discusses the social, cultural, psychological, and moral implications of the significant developments in the storyline under eight sub-topics: 1) Invitation from Guleri's Parents; 2) Manak's Reaction to the Invitation; 3) Guleri's Immaturity as a Juvenile; 4) Manak as a Subject of his Mother's Matriarchy; 4) Manak's Guilty Conscience; 5) Manak's Destiny in His Second Marriage; 6) Guleri-Manak Relationship; 7) Pritam's Application of Irony; and 8) Pritam's Attainments in “Stench of Kerosene”. Overall, the paper strives to expose how the regimentally implemented conditions of a matriarchy maintained in an irrational society suppress fundamental human values. The focal point it attempts to foreground in Pritam's message is that women are not child-bearing machines and any resort to treat them as disposable items based on their obstetric complications is humanistically despicable.

Keywords: Love, Child Marriage, Reproduction, Mother-in-Law, Sterility, Olfactory Hallucination, Amrita Pritam, Matriarchy, Bride Market, Trauma

INTRODUCTION

“Stench of Kerosene” by the Panjabi writer Amrita Pritam (2019-2005) projects a severe medical condition the hero Manak suffers on account of his innocent first wife Guleri's suicide that traumatises him by provoking his guilty conscience, exposing his self-betrayal, and challenging his psycho-somatic resilience. The olfactory hallucination of the kerosene stench that he harbours while taking in his hands the child delivered by his second wife revives in his imagination the kerosene-fuelled fire in which Guleri was supposed to have died. Manak, a helpless subject of his mother's matriarchy, is not brave enough to make an independent decision about Guleri's future and knowingly allows her to meet her tragic end because she has not been able to deliver a child over the seven years of their marriage. Guleri, still a naïve juvenile unaware of the gravity of her failure takes for granted Manak's effort to stop her departure for Chamba and goes ahead with her holiday plan. In her absence, Manak's dominant mother arbitrarily buys him a new wife—a helpless subject of her ruthless matriarchy, Manak surrenders to all her scheming. Traumatized by Guleri's violent suicide at the news of his betrayal, Manak becomes a psychiatric patient. His sensory channels absorb Guleri's pain during her burning in a bonfire. Although the child his

second wife delivers pleases his mother, it only revives in him Guleri's suffering in terms of sensory hallucinations. The paper analyses the social, cultural, and psychological factors of the Guleri-Manak disaster from a literary perspective.

Invitation from Guleri's Parents

From her warm, open, and innocent but emotional welcome to the mare, which appears at the onset of the story to take her to her parents' village Chamba for the harvest festival, as an annual feature, it is clear that, although married and settled down with her husband Manak, Guleri, an unsophisticated girl with a few simple delights, remains always nostalgic about her home.

“Whenever Guleri was homesick she would take her husband Manak and go up to this point [from where] She would see the homes of Chamba twinkling in the sunlight and come back with her heart aglow with pride.” (Pritam, 1956)

This suggests that Guleri is not so happy at Manak's house in Lakarmandi due to her in-laws but draws inspiration from the sight of her parents' village Chamba to sustain her hope for life. She seems satisfied with her husband's concern and care and enjoys only his company in her struggle to continue her life at Lakarmandi. Her frustration can be attributed to

her marriage as a juvenile which compels her to live among a group of adults who do not respect her age in decision-making for household management.

“Girls who married young were cut off from their peers’ worlds and were forced to have relationships with people their older age. This made them less inclined to have relationships with others, which in turn led to more social isolation. Also, it was not culturally acceptable for married women to associate with single girls. So, girls who have early marriages will soon be separated from their peers” (Lebni, 2023).

In anticipation of an invitation from her father to this festive occasion, she continues to attend to her daily chores in her husband’s home, but her heart is in her parents’ home. “Guleri always counted the days to the harvest” (Pritam, 1956). Her excitement is implied in her pleasure over the invitation and her reactions to the ones who brought it. In addition to serving as a means of transport, the mare plays a symbolic role in this scenario, which determines Guleri’s freedom.

“The horse is a universal symbol of freedom without restraint because riding a horse made people feel they could free themselves from their own bindings. Also linked with riding horses, they are symbols of travel, movement, and desire.” (Pure-Spirit.com)

“She caressed the mare joyfully, greeted her father’s servant Natu, and made it ready to leave the next day” (Pritam, 1956). The story begins thus with Guleri’s paradoxical departure for Chamba in response to an invitation from her parents, which leads to a tragic irony in her life. Pritam introduces the mare as a messenger from the other world, as her journey on her back determines the end of her life.

Manak’s Reaction to the Invitation

Guleri’s vulnerability is vivid in her innocence which does not allow her to think analytically about her in-laws even after seven years of her married life in their company. Unconscious of the gravity of her failure to have a child of her own and her in-laws’ displeasure over it, she takes for granted Manak’s sorrow on her departure. Pritam portrays this very cleverly in Manak’s reaction to the situation. His awareness and Guleri’s ignorance of her destiny after she departs for Chamba, provide a dramatic irony.

“Her husband pulled at his hookah and closed his eyes” (Pritam, 1956). It appears as a culturally and psychologically representative gesture any man would do during a crisis. Some people smoke as a way of coping with frustration and danger. Pritam describes his facial expressions: “It seemed like either as if he did not like the tobacco, or that he could not bear to face his wife” (Pritam, 1956). Manak knows the plan his mother has already made to bring in a new wife for him during Guleri’s prospective sojourn in Chamba this year and does not want Guleri to make room for it by leaving Lakarmandi. His inability to tolerate this situation is expressed in his closed eyes but Guleri does not follow it. To

all her pleading and coaxing which culminate in a demand, Manak’s response is silence.

However, he manages later to utter a few words to the childish stubborn Guleri, “Just this time, ... My mother...” But Guleri does not try at all to understand these words he utters with difficulty or the “strange anguished wail of sound” he blows with his flute. Finally, he begs her, “Guleri, do not go away, ... I ask you again, do not go this time” (Pritam, 1956). His failure to disclose his mother’s plan suggests his helplessness within the matriarchy managed by her.

Matriarchy is a social system, in which positions of dominance and authority are primarily held by women. In a broader sense, it can also extend to moral authority, social privilege, and control of property. (UIA: Accessed 2024)

He is so scared by his mother’s authority that he loses his creativity to contrive a plan for their well-being, and only keeps making gestures of commiseration for her journey.

Deep in memories, Manak was roused by Guleri’s hand on his shoulder.

“What are you dreaming of?” she teased him.

Manak did not answer. The mare neighed impatiently and Guleri thinking of the journey ahead of her, arose to leave. “Do you know the blue-bell wood a couple of miles from here?” she asked, “It is said that anyone who goes through it becomes deaf.”

“Yes”.

“It seems to me as if you had passed through the blue-bell wood; you do not hear anything that I says.”

“You are right, Guleri. I cannot hear anything that you are saying to me” replied Manak with a deep sigh.

Both of them looked at each other. Neither understood the other’s thoughts.

“I will go now. You had better return home. You have come a long way” said Guleri gently.

“You have walked all this distance. Better get on the mare,” replied Manak.

“Here, take your flute.”

“You take it with you.”

“Will you come and play it on the day of the fair?” asked Guleri with a smile. The sun shone in her eyes. Manak turned his face away. Guleri perplexed, shrugged her shoulders, and took the road to Chamba. Manak returned to his home (Pritam, 1956).

When Guleri does not respond, Manak remains engrossed in some flashbacks about their relationship, and Guleri cracks a joke about it, alluding to a fairytale she remembers. Unfortunately, Guleri does not even try to understand Manak’s reply to it made with a deep sigh. Pritam precisely

states the circumstantiality of the problem of communication that prevails in this situation. Manak makes another unusual gesture by giving Guleri his flute to carry with her. But even that does not stir Guleri's curiosity and alarm about the impending danger or fear Manak has about her departure. Manak does not promise to visit Chamba for the harvest festival and play the flute as usual and Guleri has no query about it either.

Guleri as a Juvenile

Along with Guleri's joyful reactions to the invitation from her parents, Pritam portrays her ingenuous character through her uncomplicated ways of finding solutions to her day-to-day problems and her plain childlike ambitions in life. The annual harvest festival at Chamba is crucial for her life as it allows her to meet “two of her friends ... married to boys outside Chamba”; talk “about their experiences, their joys and sorrows”; walk “about the streets together”, wearing “new dresses,” “*dupattas* dyed, starched and sprinkled with *mica*,” “glass bangles, and silver ear-rings.” All these activities in her agenda for the harvest festival represent some innocent childhood delights.

Her usual tendency to ignore simple changes in her husband's attitude to her departure prevents her from using her wit on this occasion. Guleri's lack of pragmatic knowledge is vivid in her unresponsiveness to Manak's behaviour throughout this situation. She does not bother to compare Manak's reactions to her departure this time to those on the previous occasions. She simply goes ahead with her innocent fun planned for the harvest festival but does not take heed to think about the realities behind her marriage that Manak tries to disclose in his muffled-up expressions of sorrow and frustration.

Pritam achieves a compelling irony through the interaction between Guleri and Manak where lack of seriousness on the part of Guleri upsets all attempts made to signal the danger of her departure. Guleri's insecurity can be again attributed to her marriage as a juvenile.

When women got married in childhood, they had very little power in their married lives because they did not know many issues related to life. Also, because they lived with the husband's family, in many cases, they interfered in the young couple's life under the pretext of instructing them on the issues of married life so that they made the final decision on their issues and decided on them what to do and what not to do (Lebni, 2023).

Manak's timidity implies that he is incapable of making any decision for himself and his wife, and the other people make decisions he has no right to challenge.

Manak as a Subject of his Mother's Matriarchy

In the rational world, Manak is technically an independent man, married and settled down with a wife of his own, and it is his wife Guleri who cooks and feeds his parents. Yet, from his reaction to his mother's scheming against Guleri, it is

evident that Manak does not have any self-esteem, dignity, independence, or individuality in the company of his mother who seems to be a dominant character in the family. This is clear from how she treats Manak on his return after Guleri's departure. When Manak enters the house after seeing Guleri off, she speaks to him like a small boy still needing parental attention and depending on parental support. “You have been away a long time. ... Did you go all the way to Chamba?” (Pritam, 1956) Her tone is domineering as usual. Commenting on Manak's “heavy” voice, she throws innuendoes at him, “Why do you croak like an old woman? ... Be a man.” (Pritam, 1956) On the occasions Manak is addressed with condescension and humiliation, he remains “silent” though he wants to “retort.” Her shouting retains the tone of a narcissistic mother selfishly engaged in manipulating her son for her matriarchal satisfaction, regardless of his welfare. Psychologists warn against such narcissistic mothers in the following terms:

Hence, her over-involvement with her son can camouflage her toxic parenting. There's usually a high price to pay for his attempts at autonomy. Through her manipulation with anger, shame, guilt, self-pity, and/or martyrdom, he learns to put her wishes and needs first and feels obligated to do so. (Lancer, 2019)

Conforming to the culture in this isolated Indian village, Manak does not try to establish and defend his position about his marriage and his mother rules the lives of everybody in the family. A victim of this situation, Manak is compelled to follow his mother's orders, without comments. He is so scared of his mother that he does not reveal to Guleri the impending threat to their marriage, however dangerous it would be.

Guleri's failure to bear a child even after seven years of marriage to her son disappoints Manak's mother and makes her devise a plan to get rid of her. Being a woman herself, she is insensitive to the fact that, being a delicate juvenile, Guleri is not yet physically ready for pregnancy or childbirth.

“Complications from pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death in young women aged 15 to 19 in developing countries... An estimated 70,000 adolescent mothers die each year because they have children before they are physically ready for parenthood...” (Mayer, 2004)

So cunning and hypocritical, she pats Guleri's head and blesses her when she is to leave for the harvest festival, pretending that she still respects the latter as her daughter-in-law. In Guleri's absence, she organises for Manak to marry another woman, implementing her secret resolve, “I will not let it go beyond the eighth year” (Pritam, 1956). Manak does not have his individuality and acts according to his mother.

“Obedient to his mother and the custom, Manak's body responded to the new woman. But his heart was dead within him” (Pritam, 1956)

So concerned about the family values, Manak's mother does not bear any maternal love for him. As far as he conforms to the culture and satisfies the fundamental requirement of having a child, Manak's mother is content with his marriage. She is not bothered who his son's wife is or whether his son is happy with his wife and has no regard for love, mutuality, and interdependence, which are basics in a marital union.

Manak's Guilty Conscience

Pritam uses dramatic irony to a large extent to manifest Manak's suffering after his second marriage. Although he becomes guilty-conscious under the circumstance of betraying his beloved Guleri, there is no way to dramatise the trauma he contracts from it as generally such an incident is suffered internally. The character of Bhavani a travelling businessman in his identity is used to provoke Manak into thinking, imagining, and suffering Guleri's destiny. At an invitation from Manak, Bhavani, a witness to the origin of the relationship between Manak and Guleri, joins him in a smoke. His mention of going to Chamba tortures Manak's feelings:

“Bhavani's words pierced through Manak's heart like a needle” (Pritam, 1956).

The following day Manak tries to avoid Bhavani, but the latter invites himself to Manak's compound and announces the news about Guleri's suicide. Here Pritam's apt use of irony provides a clear picture of Manak's psyche. The announcement reaches Manak as a vertical attack on his mind.

“When she heard of your second marriage, she soaked her clothes in kerosene and set fire to them” (Pritam, 1956).

His vehement reaction to this is conveyed effectively in the statement:

“Manak, mute with pain, could only stare and feel his own life burning out. ... But he was like a dead man, his face quite blank, and his eyes empty” (Pritam, 1956).

Life expires from Manak in the same fashion as from Guleri. He burns in the same fire that consumed Guleri. From Manak's reactions to Guleri's death, it is understood that he genuinely loves Guleri. Still, his chief defect is his lack of resistance to the traditions of his clan, especially to his dominant mother.

Manak's Destiny in his Second Marriage

Wounded deeply in his heart Manak leads the life of a dead man. His second wife complains about his indifference to her. Her success at conceiving a child pleases Manak's mother but not him. Hopeful that the child would work miracles within the family, Manak's mother pacifies her daughter-in-law. The dream of having a grandson that Manak's mother has had for several years materialises when Manak's new wife delivers a boy. Proud of her achievement, she puts the boy in Manak's lap, “bathed” and “dressed in fine clothes”, presuming that

Manak would be elated about it. Nevertheless, Manak reacts to it in a contrary way:

“He stared a long time, uncomprehending, his face as usual, expressionless. Then suddenly the blank eyes filled with horror, and Manak began to scream. “Take him away!” he shrieked hysterically, “Take him away! He stinks of kerosene” (Pritam, 1956).

The kerosene smell he feels of the baby, despite being bathed and dressed in fine clothes, can be interpreted in terms of an olfactory hallucination, a psychotic symptom related to a trauma that cognitively influences his olfactory function. In psychiatric literature, olfactory hallucination, which is found “significantly associated with self-reported anxiety symptoms and stressful life events,” (Kohli et al, 2016) is introduced as “an uncommon type of hallucination in which the individual reports olfactory perceptions in the absence of chemical stimuli” (Xingmei et al, 2022) Accordingly, the newborn appears as the posthumous replacement of his beloved Guleri and opens his long-sustained psychological wounds. The “kerosene” smell it emanates reminds Manak of the terrible death Guleri had in her attempt at suicide. Pritam effectively uses here olfactory imagery to reveal the mental disposition of Manak.

Finally, it is proved that even his own child cannot fill the void in his heart left by his beloved Guleri. The child brought to existence at the expense of the innocent and sweet Guleri remains a source of horror to Manak, establishing the injustice it exercised on the life of his love. The story ends with the implication that Manak would not be a happy man for the rest of his life although his mother feels proud of his progeny.

Guleri-Manak Relationship

Guleri and Manak marry each other based on love and attraction. They are both young and emotional individuals. They meet each other for the first time at the fair during the famous harvest festival at Chamba. When Manak manages to meet her alone, he expresses his love to her and she responds with the same zeal he manifests on the occasion. The “corn” metaphor they use in their conversation suggests the influence the agricultural setting in which they live has on their imagination. Yet the woman in this society compared to an ear of “unripe corn” that “cattle” eat raw and “humans prefer ... roasted” seems to be treated as a consumable. Pritam captures the value system developed on marriage in this social setting through this metaphor which limits the privilege and dignity of the woman. However, Manak and Guleri do not adapt to this social setting. Guleri's father, “prosperous” and exposed to cosmopolitan atmospheres “in cities” prevents her from being a commodity or rather a consumable in the state of “corn” by declining a bride price for his daughter. Considering him “a worthy young man from a good family,” he marries her to Manak on the basis of trust. This non-conformist gesture of her father does not change Manak's passivity and submissiveness when it comes

especially to satisfying the expectations of his mother and the rest of his clan in Lakarmandi.

Manak loves Guleri by all means. He tries his best to dissuade her from going to Chamba, once he learns his mother's plan. He fails to stop Guleri's journey as he is compelled not to expose his mother's wickedness. When Manak takes Guleri halfway to Chamba, the interaction between the two shows that Guleri is more vivacious, expressive, and vivid than Manak. Guleri demonstrates more personality than Manak even in her naïve perception of life, and her determination to go to Chamba for the annual harvest festival. Therefore, it is Manak's fault that he does not tell Guleri directly what they are in for. Rather he tries to stop her from going away.

Manak's love for Guleri surfaces in her reaction to her death. In his heart, he starts burning in the fire where Guleri is reduced to a cinder. He gets haunted by the stench of kerosene which fuelled Guleri's destruction. He starts imagining that the baby boy born to his second wife came up through the grave of Guleri. That is why he cannot tolerate the child in his lap. That is why he smells the child of kerosene. For the rest of his life, he continues to suffer from the injustice caused by him to Guleri. That is all due to his love for Guleri. Manak and Guleri are both victims of the same plight under the family institution run by Manak's mother.

Pritam's Application of Irony

Irony developed in symbolic terms is the major device in Pritam's "Stench of Kerosene." The harvest festival in Chamba which has great symbolic value plays a pivotal role in the lives of Manak and Guleri by happily uniting them and sadly separating them from each other. It couches the greatest irony in the story by achieving suspense. Guleri leaves Lakarmandi for Chamba for the festival despite Manak's repeated dissuasion.

His gesture of entrusting his flute to Guleri contains a sexual implication. The flute is played by holding it to the player's mouth and blowing wind into it with energy drawn from the player's lungs. In the present context, its physical shape and performing technique turn the flute into a phallic symbol. By leaving it in the care of Guleri, whom he does not expect to see again, he means his abstinence from sex from then on. Here love, sacrifice, or any other element that accommodates their union does not come to rescue them from the danger of separation.

Overconfidence on the part of Guleri leads her to take Manak's entreaties for granted, and timidity on the part of Manak leads him to hide his mother's wicked plan to get rid of Guleri. The sustenance of their relationship attracts the least attention from either of them under this great irony where each takes the other for granted and gives outside things more importance. So, the destiny of Guleri and Manak figures through a great irony.

Irony emerges from Guleri's father who brings up a

charming daughter and gives her away to a "decent young man from a good family" even without charging a bride price. His whole expectation is the happiness of his daughter, but she dies an untimely death in a most unfortunate and painful manner. While the innocents are affected by irony through such a sorrowful loss of life, the wicked and crafty too become victims of a similar process. Disappointed by Guleri's sterility Manak's mother contrives a plan for getting rid of her to marry her son to a fertile woman. But since hearing the news of Guleri's death Manak "behaves like a dead man." Traumatized by the process in which Guleri died and convinced that his son sprang up from Guleri's grave, he feels the kerosene smell even in his newborn child. For the rest of his life, he is supposed to burn away in the fire that licked off Guleri. This is no doubt not a mother's wish, and Manak's mother is destined to suffer from her son's psychotic condition. Ironically, for the sake of a grandson, she sacrifices her son.

While such major situational ironies operate overarching the storyline, the descriptions and dialogues are packed with verbal or pictorial irony. The mare that usually comes to carry Guleri to the festival appears this time as a messenger from Death. Considering it a luxury, Guleri comes to the house of a witch who tries to get rid of her with an allegation of infertility. Unknowing her mother-in-law's wicked plans and her husband's passivity, Guleri lives in confidence with her hostile in-laws. Guleri takes leave of her in-laws for a short time, and they take leave of her forever. Manak tries to tell in so many ways about the imminent disaster but Guleri does not follow it. Even after seven years of marital life, Guleri does not realise her vulnerability without a child. She has no notion of Manak's timidity either. When Manak wants to ignore Bhavani, he comes on his own to tell him about Guleri's death. Thus, like live coal under ashes, the sad destiny of Guleri and Manak lies hidden everywhere without making any eruption or coming to either of their notice. Pritam's craftsmanship as a storyteller becomes vivid in the effective use of irony.

Pritam's Attainments in "Stench of Kerosene"

Pritam has developed a very sophisticated structure for her short story. As the story progresses through a set of ironies from the beginning to the end, Pritam carefully connects the major incidents into a coherent whole. The story begins with the invitation Guleri receives from home to the harvest festival in Chamba. The lovable mare that comes to carry her to her father on this festive occasion neighs to open the story. But it turns into a cry from Death. Guleri's ignorance and Manak's intelligence of what is in store for them lead to an ideological conflict that culminates in their unwanted separation. Unable to reveal the secret resolve of his mother, Manak beats about the bush rather than enlighten Guleri on the reality, and unable to resist her temptation to go to her father's home Guleri goes ahead with the invitation rather than comply with Manak's pleas. Very unfortunately, neither

of them strives to work out a solution to the problem created by Manak’s mother. They do not use their right to take any step for their well-being as husband and wife. Insensitive to her son’s feelings, Manak’s mother marries him to a second woman. When that is heard Guleri commits suicide. Manak becomes a dead man on hearing Guleri’s destiny. Even the baby born to his second wife by him cannot repair Manak’s heart. Manak continues to dwell on the trauma of Guleri’s horrible death. He is disturbed by olfactory hallucinations engendered by his knowledge of the kerosene-fuelled fire that killed Guleri. Pritam portrays Guleri and Manak as victims of naïveté and conformism in a ruthless matriarchy.

CONCLUSION

All in all, in “Stench of Kerosene”, Pritam makes a powerful indictment of the Indian tradition of demanding every married woman to deliver a child to her in-laws, where her love, loyalty, care, and concern on the part of the wife are considered immaterial. She attacks the condition that for the price they pay for the woman, she should bear a child with her husband. She has found a very appropriate situation in an isolated community to mount her attack on this irrational practice. Her story functions as a universal appeal for sympathy as it addresses women’s plight in all cultures where they are treated as child production machines. Although Pritam is a strong feminist writer here she portrays how one woman engineers the destruction of another in a situation where a man remains helpless as a subject of a matriarchal regime. This suggests the form of feminism she promotes does not discriminate against men in particular but just raises a voice for women’s rights exposing the perpetrators of their suffering irrespective of their gender.

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