Mapping the Feminine Subjectivity in Amrita Pritam's *Once There Was an Anita* and Krishna Sobti's *Damn You, Mitro!*

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Amrita Pritam (1919-2005) and Krishna Sobti (1925-2015) are two stalwarts, who, through their acute sensibilities as unafraid authors, have garnered widespread accolades not only in their respective languages, Punjabi and Hindi, but also world over: a fact attested by the continual demand for English translations of their works. While Pritam was the first woman author ever to receive the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1956, Sobti was the first woman author to receive the same in 1980 for her writings in Hindi. Further, while Pritam received Jnanpith Award (country's highest literary award) in 1981, Sobti received hers in 2017. However, most importantly, owing to their roots in undivided Punjab and subsequent immigration to post-Partition India, both of them share a similar socio-cultural and historical background, which gets reflected in their writings as well. The following paper is, therefore, an attempt to compare *Once There Was an Anita*[1] by Amrita Pritam and *Damn You, Mitro!* by Krishna Sobti, to map the respective feminine subjectivities of the eponymous heroines, Anita and Mitro. The paper will deliberate upon the ways in which the heroines negotiate the patriarchal restrictions within the confines of their traditional marital lives and the manner in which they exercise their will as well as fulfill their sexual desires within the same space. It will also discuss the pertinent issues under three subsections viz. a general discussion on marital house versus the privacy of the room, *Once There Was an Anita* and *Damn You, Mitro!*

In its theme and artistic vision out of all of Pritam's works, *Once There Was an Anita* resonates strongly with Sobti's *Damn You, Mitro!* and provides a fertile ground for comparative analysis. To illustrate briefly, Anita belongs to an upper-middle-class household and becomes financially independent, Mitro, on the other hand, is her direct foil. She is uneducated, loud, boisterous, and mostly lives a cloistered life in a lower-middle-class joint family. However, standing at the juncture of love, marriage, and patriarchy, both Anita and Mitro face similar dilemmas and carve out distinct but similar spaces for themselves in their respective claustrophobic familial setup. The resulting selves that emerge out of the individual experiences of Anita and Mitro take monumental personal decisions for their own sake and serve as strong examples of female subjectivity that resists, subverts and overturns patriarchal injunctions vis-à-vis marriage and wifely conduct.

Marital House versus "A Room of Their Own"

Most Indians perceive marriage as a sacred bond between two heterosexual individuals which is blessed by both god and their elders. In effect, such a socio-religious conception determines the amount of space and familial care that women can legitimately ask for without harming the smooth functioning of the patriarchal families. Although the socio-political history of the Hindu marriage is quite complex,[2] the paper will limit itself to the most basic understanding of marriage as a contractual obligation between two families which marginalises a woman's desires and individuality as both insignificant and inconvenient. Thus, women's role gets reduced to playing the role of primary caregivers and nurturers besides being the reproductive medium through which the legal male heirs would be born. Further, to eliminate the perceived threat of the contamination of the patrilineal bloodlines, the patriarchies strictly regulate and contain women's sexuality and freedom and often with violent consequences, like abandonment, physical and sexual violence, honour-killing et al.

In both of the chosen texts—*Once There Was an Anita* and *Damn You, Mitro!*—within the space of marriage, there is a severe lack of the desired mental, emotional and physical companionship which causes the eponymous heroines to seek them outside of their respective marriages. Such sexual and emotional adventures by women are often sidelined in masculine assertions of identity and instead become moral yardsticks to condemn women. Thus, the need for carving their personal space is the driving force for both Anita and Mitro to assert their feminine subjectivities and exercise a degree of independence, however little. The female protagonists determine and control their thoughts and actions to posit themselves as independent agents. But their marital houses function more like claustrophobic prison-houses than as actual spaces of nurture and comfort where they suffer isolation and humiliation, albeit to different degrees. At the core of the feelings of claustrophobia is intense dissatisfaction with their respective husbands and their marital status as ordinary wives with repressed sexual and emotional desires.

Therefore, the families of Anita and Mitro coerce and attempt to neutralise their threatening presence through the effective use of surveillance and the fear of punishment. According to Michel Foucault, surveillance aka "panopticism" is an effective means to "discipline" the prisoners who in turn begin to self-regulate their behaviours ("Panopticism" 5-6). Therefore, patriarchal societies mainly exercise power and control via the monitoring of women's everyday activities and punishment of deviant individuals. In such cultures, the power-wielding patriarchs regulate the sexuality of its women by employing other female members as vanguards. As a result, women either participate in

their subjugation or those of other women. Yet, in these novellas, the patriarchal logic and machinations fail to arrest the feminine expressions and transgressions to full effect. Anita can still withdraw from the overbearing familial spaces and record her most profound secrets in her diary, whereas Mitro uses her abusive and innuendo-laden speech as a counter-effect to the patriarchal discourse. In another book, *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault opines that:

> If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is [writing or] speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places [herself or] himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; [s]he upsets established law; [s]he somehow anticipates the coming freedom. (6)

Therefore, the very act of recording or writing down and speaking about sex or sexual desires destabilises the patriarchal authority, which primarily functions by silencing the sexual desires of married women. And this is where the idea of a private room again re-assumes importance. A "room" is a space-within-a-space, that is, private space within a marital space, with its connotations of personal and psychological freedom. But it can also function as a malleable concept where privacy and self-contentment can enlarge or diminish the resulting spatial conception in different points of time. It means that free of any permanent anchors, the room can exist in mind as a sense of belonging as well as a physical space which when shut off from the rest of the household transmutes into a female haven. Ergo, in the present conception, free from familial panopticism, a woman can take out time for herself; express her fears and desires, and take it away to another brick-and-mortar house. This idea of room is derived from Virginia Woolf's seminal essay "A Room of One's Own" where she emphatically proclaims that a woman can only write if she has a distinct source of income and an available private space for writing.

Interestingly, what Woolf mentioned in a specific context of women's writings has surpassed its original intent and has become a rallying cry for female independence and empowerment the world over. And it is this modern sense of the room, as an enabler of female autonomy and empowerment, which is applied in the paper to understand the predicament and subversion of the eponymous heroines. To this effect, empowerment is understood not only in terms of economic self-sustenance but also an ability to manipulate, control and dominate the same power structures that were erstwhile disempowering them.

Once There Was an Anita

On the face of it, one may read *Once There Was an Anita* as a tale of caution where a married woman's transgression of finding love outside of her

prescribed marital space results in her lonely death (by brain haemorrhage). Within such an understanding, Anita steps over her normative boundaries and seeks passion, not once, but twice–with Sagar, a writer and later with Iqbal, a painter, despite her husband Rampal being a "good man." However, within the space of marriage, Anita feels intellectual, emotional and physical incompatibility with Rampal and along with her growing attraction towards Sagar, she cannot pretend to lie to her husband anymore. Besides, she is already miserable that her marital status is a significant hindrance to her love with another man whom she already considers as the father of her child, Rashmi. While Rashmi is Rampal's biological son, yet, Anita claims that since she was thinking about Sagar, when she conceived him thus, Rashmi is Sagar's son. In actuality, there is no real or actual sexual union between Anita and Sagar. Their one-time hotel liaison ends up with both of them hesitating in the end. Yet, Anita fashions a new matriarchal genealogy wherein the reality of the biological father does not matter, but the mother's recognition of the supposed father does. This is inadvertently a strong feminist stance on her part. Inadvertent because given her inferior status as a wife, she can only flail against her husband and her marital status to a limited extent. At the end of the day, her husband can still exercise his control over his legally wedded wife and "his" biological son, as he does when she confesses to him. Yet, it does not deter Anita from leaving her marital house and starting a new life with Iqbal as his live-in partner. This living and loving arrangement too proves temporary, owing to Iqbal's boredom with her, and acts as the final nail in her coffin, literally and figuratively. Thus, the tragedy of Anita is that of a rebellious married woman whose life-long search for unfettered and ecstatic romantic love is doomed since the beginning of her journey. Hence, it is not enough that as a woman, she feels a severe lack and suffocation in her loveless marriage but she must also pay a steep price for daring to disturb the status quo, that too on the double. First, Rampal forcibly separates her from Rashmi; and second, she remains lonely even after sacrificing her entire life in search of her true love, Sagar. Thus, Anita's desire for emotional, sexual, and intellectual companionship with Sagar causes a sense of acute loneliness for her in her marital house, aka Rampal's house.

Nonetheless, Anita's "honesty" and "feminine integrity," to borrow Revti Saran Sharma's words, make her realise that going back to the marital fold is not an option for her especially after she has crossed the marital boundary and spent a few hours with Sagar in a hotel room. In Sharma's views "Amrita [Pritam], by no standard, advocated immorality. On the contrary, she insists upon the highest standard of moral purity: that a man and woman should be totally honest to each other; that their emotional lives should be of a 24-carat purity" (127). Thus, as one of the numerous "fictional autobiographies"[3] of Pritam, *Once There Was an Anita* shares the all-familiar[4] plot by Pritam where

the female protagonist is torn between what her heart desires and what her beloved/society desires of her. In other words, what is "honest?" and what is "dishonest?" in a man-woman relationship. In this novella too, Anita faces the dilemma between choosing to live with her son but in a marriage-of-convenience with Rampal, or, to move out of the house and seek true love outside her marriage.

Consequently, the inherent duality of her condition causes a split in Anita's psyche and her self-perception. She begins to imagine the simultaneous existence of two women in one-body which are sometimes at war and sometimes at peace with each other:

> The one who was known as Anita was the daughter of Dharam Prakash Anand, the wife of Rampal Sachdev, whose religious identity was that of a Hindu, whose nationality was Indian, and who was subject to myriad rules and regulations. But the other one was simply a flesh and blood woman, the daughter of the earth who was eagerly waiting for her lover, none other than the sky himself. For this second Anita, her faith was love, her home was the entire world, and her wanderlust was the only covenant that mattered. (My translation) (Pritam 176)

Even the 1971 English translation of the novella, titled "Two Faces of Eve," very well captures the idea of the split-self of a married woman who is role playing herself as an automaton in a loveless marriage versus that of a psychologically trapped lover who wants to break free to unite with her beloved. According to Soma Banerjee, "… the split personality [of Anita] …. acts as a superb defense mechanism in a merciless, tense world. … [It] depicts the agony of the woman who must generate a clone within herself to voice her secret desire" (43). She further states that "The duality of Anita the person was created by the conflicting persona of the wife and the woman within her" (43). Thus, one can see that the unequal and un-companionate marriage of Anita and Rampal turns her into a stranger unto herself.

As a result, the split-psyche also prevents Anita from feeling a sense of attachment with any object of her marital house for they are all owned by her husband Rampal (Pritam 208). But Rampal is not the good benign husband as he is projected in the novella. For instance, to punish Anita for her marital transgression, he forcibly sends away Rashmi to the hostel and prohibits his school from allowing the mother-son duo to meet (209). Rampal not only asserts his patriarchal and patrilineal right over his "biological" son to separate him from his mother's "corrupting" influence but also makes Anita realise that as the father and the husband, he can and will take adverse measures to protect his familial interests, that is, to keep "his" son with himself.

Further, not solely content with this, Rampal employs Shanti, a female widowed-relative of his, to "take care" of Anita, that is, to keep an eye on her in his absence. However, Shanti's presence has another ulterior motive. Instead of giving her proper medicines, Shanti administers her some kind of slow poison or anaesthesia to make her feel lethargic and bed-ridden all the time (Pritam 213-214). In this case, the surveillance is coupled with the actual punishment of immobility to arrest Anita's efforts of meeting her son or leaving the marital house. It is also highly probable that it was a surreptitious ploy to murder her for her sexual and moral deviance (of loving another man) when she was already married to Rampal. Unlike Sardarilal of *Damn You, Mitro!*, Rampal does not physically abuse Anita, but he does play mind-games with her and formulates a ploy to murder or immobilise her. Irrespective of the reasons, the "poisoning-plot" remains a profoundly misogynistic episode at the heart of this novella and shows that the marital house can also be a place of actual bodily harm for a woman.

As opposed to all of this, in quiet afternoons, away from the prying eyes of her in-laws, Anita claims her conjugal bedroom as her safe space. She transforms it into a place of reverie and imagination where she can dismantle the split between her two selves. In this remodelled room, she is not Rampal's wife but Anita, a composite and desiring woman in her own right. Here, she can smoke cigarette butts left by Sagar and imagine his hot breath on her lips (Pritam 182-183); weave sexual fantasies about him (185), and celebrate his birthday in secret (188). Here, she also succeeds in breaking the boundaries of marital and motherly boundaries by transferring her obsession for Sagar on her son Rashmi in a classic example of Reverse-Oedipus or Jocasta Complex, where the mother is sexually fixated on her male child. Pritam was well versed with the psychoanalytic theories of both Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung (Pritam Interview by Jha 194). Hence, it is no mere accident that her female character Anita conflates her son with her lover. Anita's psychological and sexual repression in her marital life manifests in turgid dreams, split psyche and sexual transference. Thus, her first act of feeding her infant in postpartum tiredness is highly potent with its sensuality and sets the mood for the rest of the narrative until Rashmi is sent away:

> Before dying, I want to touch each and every part of this child's body. I want to smell his odour, drink his breath from his mouth, and I want him to suck my breasts with his little lips . . . He looks just like Sagar–same face, same forehead, same eyes, same lips . . . (angrily) what kind of a mother am I? I want to suckle my child not because I am his mother, but because he reminds me of Sagar. (My translation) (Pritam 186)

Here, one can see that Anita's first memory of suckling her son Rashmi is her most potent erotic experience. Therefore, it does not matter if Sagar is in the same room with her or a different city, Anita can and does feel pleasure by imagining him and creating fantasies in her head via her son in her transformed private room. Here she can also write erotic love poems and myriad letters to Sagar in her personal diary, which she eventually burns at the onset of her labour pains (192-193). Similarly, with Iqbal, Anita manages to possess an entire home to herself for the first time in her life and embarks on a new career, that is, of a writer. Akin to Edna Pontellier's trajectory in Kate Chopin's seminal work *The Awakening*, the room gets transported to Anita's new house, now home, and also expands to encompass the entire flat where she is living. Again, reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own," Anita now has money as an individual woman author and a room to relive her life in a loving relationship as an equal. And as far as infidelity is concerned, it is always debatable whether infidelity can be measured only in terms of actual sexual transgression or, could it be psychological and emotional as well, as Pritam wonders in her poem "Hand-reading."

> The line of faithfulness
> I don't know how to define it
> How to tell
> What limits are
> How far thought should be free to stray
> And at what point the danger lies.
> How much nearness of other's lip
> How much intimacy of talk
> How much warmth of hands
> Goes with the notion of faithfulness? (5-15)

Ergo, Anita's guilt over her mental infidelity is as much about "honesty" and "integrity" as it is about the indefinability of the concept of faithfulness or faithlessness itself.

Damn You, Mitro!

Sobti's Samitrawanti aka Mitro of *Damn You, Mitro!* is the fiery middle daughter-in-law of the Gurudas-Dhanwanti clan who upsets the patriarchal order and balance of her marital house by virtue of being the daughter of a notorious prostitute, named Balo (72). Implicit in her ill-famed inheritance is Mitro's lack of sexual decorum, wifely-impropriety, the tact of innuendo-laden speech, and earthy sarcasm. The much-discussed central episode of *Damn*

You, Mitro! where the eponymous heroine pulls apart her shalwar-kurta and exposes her naked body to her sister-in-law while lovingly admiring her breasts and physical beauty, is a progressive take on a married woman's sexuality. Since its publication in 1967, the text has provided a historic literary space to the tabooed subject of a married woman's unfulfilled sexual desires (Chanana 169). Mitro is not only bold and confident about her own body, but she is also self-aware of her seductive charms that awaken the desires of other men.

Thus, unlike Anita, Mitro does not care about abstract ideas of love and infidelity. In the latter's view, motherhood and sexual gratification are the primary basis of a happy marital life. That is why Mitro openly castigates her husband's lack of virility as the reason for her childlessness and her sexual-dissatisfaction in their marriage and thereby unhinging the patriarchal control over her. According to Raji Narasimhan, "This fruition of child-bearing, of motherhood, is not written for Mitro. Not only is she making no secret of it, [but] she is [also] absolving herself as the reason for this not-to-be. She thereby puts the man in the dock" (178). Yet, when the real opportunity arises to have sex outside the marital boundary, Mitro chooses her marital life over and above her sexual wish-fulfilment. Scared by her mother's (Balo's) lonely fate, Mitro rushes back to the comforting embrace of her once-abusive husband, Sardarilal (Sobti 131). Her return does come as a considerable shock to the readers, but it makes sense in the context of her marriage to Sardarilal.

In *Damn You, Mitro!* Mitro's primary identity is either being the "Middle One'' (the middle daughter-in-law) or as Sardari's wife, both of which denote her as a property of her husband and by association, his household. But, all that Mitro ever desires is to become a mother and is very much steeped into the milieu of patriarchal society against which she speaks out. Thus, she turns the masochistic domestic violence upon herself and uses it to get even with her younger sister-in-law Phoolawanti (179). Therefore, the only times Mitro can exercise her personal freedom is when she is challenging Sardari's authority (Sobti 54); giving away her personal wealth (87); caressing her own body in the privacy of her bedroom (60); in her caustic speech against Phoolawanti (Sobti 81). Also, while Anita can still claim a degree of financial independence owing to her job, Mitro only has her "streedhan" in the name of economic self-independence and that too she willingly parts away with to alleviate her affinal family's financial distress (87). Streedhan are those gifts/jewellery that are bestowed by the bride's natal and marital family upon her wedding and seen as her rightful property (Agnes 14-18).

Apart from Mitro's mother-in-law Dhanwanti and elder sister-in-law Suhagwanti, there is a lack of support by other family members. That is why even though she enjoys their female company, she can sense and pre-empt

their incoming moral-policing tirade and adjusts her behaviour accordingly (62, 79). For Mitro, everything is a form of entertainment as far as these two are concerned. She knowingly drives them to the tethers of their patience but does not disrespect them, which makes her different from Phoolawanti, who does both. And in turn, to contain/channel over-brimming and threatening sexual desires, Dhanwanti and Phoolawanti train Mitro into observing the propriety and decorum associated with being the daughter-in-law of a respectable middle-class family. For instance, Dhanwanti advises Mitro to not argue with her husband when he is in a temper and to accept what he demands of her (54). In this particular case, the mother-in-law asks her insubordinate daughter-in-law to "lower her eyes" as a mark of patriarchal deference and shame to her son's authority as the latter's husband-supreme. While Dhanwanti does berate her son for indulging in the domestic abuse of his wife and eventually manages to stop him, yet this particular instance depicts that the women-of-the-household can intervene only so much. At the end of the day, if it comes to that, a husband can physically, emotionally and sexually abuse his wife without impunity. But, Mitro refuses to cower down and continues to rattle her man with her bold look:

> Like a mad woman, with dishevelled hair, the Middle One was trying to extract her hand from Sardarilal's grip. And Sardarilal, clad only in a loincloth, was slapping her on the face, and all over the torso. [...] Sardarilal didn't heed her [Dhanwanti]. He hit his wife once again, saying, "Will you drop your eyes or not?" But the Middle One of her daughters-in-law didn't do anything of that sort. She kept challenging her man with her brown eyes, straight and sharp. (54)

The inherent violence of this brutal wife-beating episode right at the outset of the novella, contextualises Mitro's defiance and revolt within the systemic patriarchal oppression in her marital house. Further, the family also screens people/outsiders who can come in contact with her. When Banwarilal casts aspersions on Mitro's character, Dhanwanti protests by saying that, "It's a packed house. Can anyone escape our eyes?" (108). Meaning, since it is a house full of people, any unknown paramours of Mitro could not have entered or left the premises without their knowledge. This idea of a "packed house" which observes and screens the outsiders again lends a sense of "panopticism" to the entire setting, where every entry and exit is carefully watched over by other family members. Similarly, in the famous clothes-shedding episode, Suhagwanti admonishes Mitro for gloating about her voluptuous body:

> "You strayed one! Once dead, you'll never know whether you had ever lived! You take so much pride in this daily dissolving body! Woe to you! Every home has such swarthy, brimming women. They too

> have limbs and organs like you. The same two breasts too. Are you the only one blessed with these female organs?" (60).

The elder daughter-in-law propagates the patriarchal idea that a woman's body and beauty is to be consumed by her lawfully wedded husband. In the absence of which a wife should practice temperance and abstention as the woman's body will, in any case, deteriorate in the near future. Suhagwanti uses the Hindu philosophy of "death as the great equaliser," but she is herself the second-wife of her husband Banwarilal and younger in age than Mitro, thus, incapable of understanding Mitro's angst and insecurities. While there is no mention of Banwari's first wife, it is quite apparent that in patriarchal societies the rules of monogamy apply differently to men, they can always take a young mistress or practice polygamy (if legally allowed) or marry a younger woman whenever they want to. On the other hand, a wife is socially and morally expected to remain faithful to her husband under any or all circumstances, including domestic and psychological violence. That is why society frowns upon and castigates women who have experienced marital separation, divorce, or widowhood as their respective statuses in effect signify unfettered sexual energy that is now loose of husband-ly moorings and free to trample around in societies as femme-fatales. That is to say that the unchecked and overflowing female sexuality threatens to break the dam of life-long patriarchal conditioning and social injunctions against unbridled female sexual-hyperactivity.

Interestingly, in Balo's house, a brothel, the identity of a child's father is irrelevant. A brothel can then be seen as a matrilineal space where only the mother's identity is of any importance. Additionally, there is also a distinct source of income from owning the use and control of one's body the way a woman wants to, albeit under economic or pimping pressure. As opposed to this, a marital space is a legally and socially approved site of ensuring a patronymic inheritance where infidelity is akin to a criminal and punishable offence. Mitro, in her thoughts, rightly points out that when the husband plants the "seeds" [sperm], it is legitimate, but when it is someone else's, then it is a sin (101). The preceding family gathering scene heightens the same morality versus immorality debate by convening to judge and punish Mitro's wanton behaviour if she is guilty of the accusations (73-74).

Rekha has aptly referred to this scene as a family "court scene" where the patriarch Gurudas acts as a judge and Mitro is put in the dock for her "transgressive sexuality" ("Renegotiating" 178). In contrast, other family members—Sardarilal, Banwarilal and Dhanwanti—stand as spectators and accusers (179). But here too Mitro stumps her in-laws with her wit which cannot be deciphered by them (179). When asked whether the allegations of infidelity made against her by her husband are true or false, Mitro replies that

"it's both true as well as false!" (Sobti 74). In her book, Rekha elaborates on this scene by stating that, "Her [Mitro's] witty rebuttal, that the allegations levelled against her are both true and false at the same time, renders the patriarchal sexual discourse doubtful and unhinges its power and gender configurations" (*Gender, Space* 95). Similarly, in *Once There Was an Anita* when Rampal wishes to know if there is another man in her life, Anita enigmatically replies that "Yes there is and there isn't" (Pritam 208).

Thus, the inability of the patriarchal discourse to decipher both Mitro's and Anita's enigmatic one-liners lend them the power to triumph over the restrictive marital norms by failing to bracket them. Additionally, there is also the realm of dreams and imagination, where irrespective of her marital status, Mitro can "relish" Nayamat Rai's embrace and sexual overtures and that too in her conjugal bedroom (Sobti 62). Just like Anita, Mitro in her transformed private room can shed her clothes and fondle her breasts in front of Suhagwanti (60) or dream sleazy dreams about Nayamat Rai, a police inspector (62). In both of these novellas, the mental infidelity on the part of the married protagonists either occurs unconsciously when they dream or, consciously when they weave sexual fantasies around other men who are not their legally-wedded husbands, both in the privacy of their bedrooms. The only difference lies in their attitude towards it. While Anita feels guilty about cheating her husband mentally and emotionally (Pritam 187-188); Mitro, on the other hand, seeks thrill from her dream (Sobti 62). Thus, the forbidden desires of real-life get accomplished in the realm of mind and here lies the potential of feminine subversion.

Moreover, when Mitro is sent back to her mother's house by her in-laws to neutralise her destabilising presence in the marital fold, she readily seizes the opportunity to move out of the claustrophobic environment of her affinal home into the sexually free environs of her mother's brothel. Her seductive gait through the street (122) and innuendo-laden speech with her mother (123-123) enliven her senses once again and empower her as a desirable woman. It shows that her marital-house, despite having supportive female characters, is dull and deadening. But this does not mean that all is better at her natal house either. When Mitro is about to indulge in sexual dalliance with her mother's former client, Balo stops her and laments her own lonely fate: "Your mother's days are gone, dear one! Who is there in the name of a friend and dear one now?" (130). This lesson in isolation-in-old-age acts as an eye-opener for Mitro who realises the security that her marital house offers irrespective of the domestic abuse. Ergo, her final physical and mental reunion with Sardarilal also takes place in a room whose door she locks from the inside to keep her devilish mother outside (130). Mitro claims this small space as a private room for them in Balo's brothel and wins Sardari's confidence both as a wife and as a temptress (131) which

attests to the fact that the concept of "room" as a dynamic space can be carried over to other actual spatial areas as well.

Conclusion

While Anita's quest for her true love never materialises with either Sagar or Iqbal, it still gives her the courage to walk out of her loveless marriage with Rampal. In contrast, Mitro gains a new-found appreciation of her husband and her married life which is also reciprocated by Sardarilal. The rebellion against the system, however, localised, is radical in its own right and worth appreciating. Neither Anita commits suicide nor does Mitro "relinquish her desires" (Rekha, *Gender* 95) and yet, in the course of the narrative, at various junctures, they upset the patriarchal project of creating a division between their desiring-minds and thinking-bodies by being impenetrable to the former's logic. Also, they "re-structure their social [and personal] priorities" irrespective of the social and cultural diktats to find their self-worth (Rekha, *Gender* 95). Hence, their actions and voices create inherent contradictions and challenge the readers to grapple with their preconceived notions regarding female oppression and female emancipation.

Endnotes

1. The page citation for *Once There Was an Anita* belongs to its authorised Hindi translation "Ek Thi Anita" from the new compendium *Kaili, Kamini Aur Anita* in 2011. I have translated the relevant lines myself.
2. For a nuanced discussion on the changing contours of Indian family and women's role within that in the Pre and Post-Independence era, please refer to Eleanor Newbigin's article "A Post-Colonial Patriarchy? Representing Family in the Indian Nation-State" (2010).
3. Pritam has discussed this novella in detail by focussing on the similarities between her own life and the story of the text in her autobiography *The Revenue Stamp*.
4. Please see Revti Saran Sharma's article "The Search for Feminine Integrity: The Course of Amrita Pritam's Fiction" (1968) where he critically analyses the common strands of Pritam's fiction vis-à-vis man-woman relationship in *Aerial, Once There Was an Anita, Village Number 36, Earth, Sea and Shells* et al.

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