

**Femininity as a social construct: Depiction of rural women in Amrita Pritam's "*The Weed*"**

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**Abstract:**

This important new study looks closely at how femininity is built in Amrita Pritam's short story *The Weed* (1968). It focuses on the main character Angoori's harrowing journey through the complicated maze of rural Punjabi patriarchy. This paper uses Judith Butler's revolutionary framework of gender performativity and Monique Wittig's radical feminist theory of social constructivism to break down the complicated web of rituals, superstitions, and epistemic violence that shape Angoori's identity as a "woman"—not by nature, but by the unending force of social engineering (Joy; "*The Weed - An Appraisal*"). The study carefully looks at four areas that are connected: the common marriage customs that are used as sneaky ways to control women, the widespread use of superstition to control and pathologize women's desire, literacy as a battleground as a fiercely contested site of agency, and the assertion of bodily autonomy as a way to fight back against the suffocating grip of tradition (Joy 2; Puletipalli). The results show that Pritam's story not only shows how deeply rooted systemic oppression is, but it also hints at the rebellious thoughts that are growing in Angoori's mind. This article is a big step forward for feminist literary criticism, which is always changing. It puts *The Weed* at the center of important talks about rural women in postcolonial India. It makes people think about the ideas of gender, power, and resistance (Joy 7; "*The Weed* | PDF | Love | Marriage").

**Introduction**

Amrita Pritam (1919–2005) was the queen of Punjabi literature and she was a force to be reckoned with. She was a great writer who wrote stories about the real lives of rural women to resist and dismantle patriarchal norms. A great book called *The Weed* was translated from Punjabi in 1968. It tells the story of Angoori, a lively, talkative, and heartbreakingly innocent child bride who is stuck in a marriage with Prabhati, an older, world-weary widower (Puletipalli). In this story, one does not become a woman just by being born a woman. You must undergo societal conditioning to become one. A huge number of rituals, stories, and gender-based divisions of labor make sure this happens. Pritam's portrayal of Angoori, who is stuck in a loveless and mismatched marriage, is a shocking example of how the patriarchal

system works in rural Punjab. It shows how society makes and enforces what it means to be a woman (Puletipalli; "The Weed - An Appraisal").

The main point of this analysis is the shocking statement by Monique Wittig that "one is not born a woman." This rallying cry is on every page of Pritam's story, and it forces us to face the harsh truth that Angoori's identity is not natural but is shaped by a never-ending set of social expectations (Joy 1). This building process happens in three main ways:

**Ritualized Marriage Practices:** Angoori's fate is sealed not by choice but by her father's chillingly symbolic act of "drying Prabhati's towel" after his first wife's cremation—a gesture that turns his daughter into a piece of property and a pawn in a patriarchal game where women's agency is systematically erased ("The Weed | PDF | Love | Marriage" 5).

**Mythologized Sexuality:** The "weed" in the title is a strong symbol of how superstition is used to pathologize and control women's sexual desire, making it seem like an outside, almost supernatural force instead of a normal human emotion. This myth not only lets men off the hook, but it also keeps women in a cycle of guilt and fear ("The Weed - An Appraisal" 2) **Controlled Literacy:** Angoori thought that "reading is sinful for village women," which shows how strong epistemic violence can be. It makes knowledge a forbidden fruit that only men and women in cities can have, while girls in the country are left in the dark (Puletipalli 3) This essay says that Pritam's *The Weed* is nothing less than a subversive manifesto, a literary act of rebellion that goes against and weakens essentialist ideas of femininity. Pritam not only criticizes the status quo by showing how patriarchal control works and how Angoori's tentative gestures toward bodily and emotional agency show how it works, but he also dares to imagine the possibility of resistance and change—a vision that is just as important today as it was when the story was written (Joy 7; "The Weed - An Appraisal" 4).

### **Research Questions**

How do wedding customs in rural Punjab in the 1960s back up the idea that women should be obedient?

How does the "weed" superstition stop women from being sexual and wanting things?

How do limits on literacy make it easier for men to control women? Where does Angoori fight against this?

How does Angoori's body become a place where she fights against gender roles?

### **Literature Review**

The rural society in Amrita Pritam's *The Weed* is as complicated and changing as the critical discourse around it. Critics and scholars are always finding new levels of meaning in the story that seems simple on the surface. There are three main kinds of research that have been done on this important work. Each one shows

how Pritam's writing questions, undermines, and sometimes mourns the fate of women in a society run by men.

### **1. Thoughts on men and women and who they are**

The Weed is about how patriarchy never stops working and is so strong that it controls every part of Angoori's life. Joy's (2018) sharp use of Monique Wittig's theory is simply mind-blowing. She says that Pritam's women don't just play their parts; society makes sure they always follow the rules. Joy says that Angoori is a "product of society needing individual redefinition," and she is a living example of how social norms can limit women's freedom and make them silent vessels of tradition (Joy 1). Angoori's father was willing to give her to Prabhati without her permission, so her marriage resembled more of a transaction. This shows how women's voices and choices are taken away, which backs up the idea that a good woman is one who does what she's told and puts her own needs last (Joy 1; 5).

Puletipalli (2016) builds on this criticism by pointing out how Pritam cleverly uses irony and subtle humor to show the "stronghold of customs" that keep women in invisible chains. Angoori's long wait to get married, which was supposedly because her mother was sick and she wasn't mature enough, is a powerful metaphor for how patriarchal society limits women's sexuality and freedom by deciding what they can do with their bodies and their lives (Puletipalli). The story's dialogic structure shows Angoori's beliefs and experiences through dialogue. This shows how deeply these norms become ingrained and how they affect women's behavior and how they see themselves.

### **2. Using superstition to control other people**

The weed motif might be Pritam's most powerful symbol. It shows how fear can make people do what you want. People who comment on Scribd and literary critics have seen this part. People say that the "myth of the weed," which is thought to make girls fall in love with it, is a way to pathologize natural female desire by calling it a "sinful result of magical manipulation" instead of a real human emotion ("The Weed - An Appraisal")<sup>1</sup>. This story device doesn't just tell people about rural folklore; it also keeps an eye on women's sexuality by making them scared and suspicious. People use the weed as a scapegoat, a simple way to explain any behavior that breaks the rules, and a warning about how dangerous it is for women to be free. Judith Butler's idea of "melancholy gender" is similar to this. She says that when real desire is hidden, it turns into cultural taboos and mental illness. Angoori believes in the weed's power, saying that "a man makes the girl eat the weed and then she starts loving him." This is a sad example of how superstition becomes ingrained, making women enforce their own subjugation. The climax of the story, when Angoori's love for Ram Tara comes through without any magic, shows how silly these beliefs are and that people can stay strong even when things are at their worst.

### **3. School and Agency**

Pritam's depiction of education, or rather the lack of it, may be the most damning criticism of patriarchal control. Critics have pointed out how different

Angoori's later, subtly radical request to learn how to write her name is from her first, almost ritualistic refusal to learn how to read ("Sin for women, reading be"). People say that this change marks the start of a "nascent feminist consciousness," a time when the idea of self-determination starts to take shape (Puletipalli 5). Mastanappa (2016) puts this fight in the context of the larger divide between rural and urban areas. Urban women can go to school, but rural women are still illiterate, which is a very bad thing.

Pritam's story shows how hard it is for women in rural areas who don't have the money or time to learn and can't question why they are being left out. Angoori's acceptance of her illiteracy goes beyond just giving up because she has been brainwashed for her whole life to think that wanting to learn is wrong or strange. But her last wish to learn to read is a strong, if hesitant, act of defiance that shows that resistance can grow even in the most barren soil.

### **Important Directions and Gaps**

Even with all of these thorough and varied studies, there are still big gaps in the research. Not many intersectional studies look at how caste and class relations make Angoori's oppression worse. Also, not many studies compare *The Weed* to Pritam's other works that look at the violence of patriarchal tradition, like *Pinjar*. This essay tries to fill in the gaps by looking at Pritam's work from an intersectional point of view and making connections between her pieces. This gives a fuller picture of her radical literary vision.

### **Methodology**

The study looks at the complex social, psychological, and symbolic layers of *The Weed* in a strong, multi-faceted way that reflects the complexity of Pritam's story world.

#### **1. Feminist Textual Analysis**

A close feminist textual analysis of the story's recurring themes, images, and dialogue based on the ideas of Judith Butler and Monique Wittig is the basis for this study. Cannabis and silver jewelry are important symbols of identity and oppression. The way Angoori uses the phrase "weed-induced" to describe love is looked at as an example of how patriarchal myths affect even the most personal parts of women's lives. People see her metal jewelry as both a burden of expectations and a sign of traditional femininity.

#### **2. Context in history**

The study looks at Punjab's socioeconomic situation in the 1960s, when the Green Revolution, land reforms, and the end of traditional Jajmani relationships were all happening. *The Weed* has strong ties to its historical setting, which is why this is happening. People see Prabhati's job as a servant as a sign of changing class dynamics, even though child marriage and illiteracy are still common.

#### **3. A Framework for Comparison**

The study compares *The Weed* to other Pritam works, especially *Stench of Kerosene*, to show how Pritam's criticism is both universal and specific. This

comparison shows that Angoori is one of many strong heroines in Pritam's works who are also oppressed. These heroines talk about things like women's sexuality, the fight for freedom, and being oppressed in marriage.

#### **4. Review of Reception**

Finally, the study looks at every important review of *The Weed* from when it first came out until now. The study makes sure that its analysis is based on history and relevant to current debates by following changes in how scholars and the general public understand the text, especially when it comes to Angoori's agency and the story's feminist implications. By using this strict and multi-layered method, the study hopes to provide an analysis that is as thorough, deep, and transformative as Pritam's own literary imagination.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **1. Marriage as a Women's Issue Play**

In Amrita Pritam's *The Weed*, marriage is not just a rite of passage; it is a carefully planned performance in which femininity is choreographed, practiced, and performed under the watchful eye of rural patriarchy. Angoori's marriage to Prabhati is a good example of how women's individual choices and preferences are systematically erased and replaced by the submissive, obedient persona that tradition requires. When Prabhati dies off after the funeral of his first wife, it leads to Angoori's marriage. This is a scary example of how men feel entitled and how women's bodies and work are seen as things to be bought and sold. Angoori's world sees marriage as a business deal, and a girl's fate is decided by her father's and the community's whims, not by her own. This ritual, which doesn't have any real emotional connection or consent, shows this (Joy 2; 1; 5).

The fact that it takes five years for the marriage to be consummated shows how closely women's bodies are watched and controlled. The elders of the village decide that Angoori's change into "a woman" is a public event instead of a private, personal milestone. People look closely at her body and try to hide her innocence as a child until she is deemed ready for marriage. This shows how patriarchal society tries to control women's sexual behavior and ability to have children. Joy says that Angoori "is not even given the minimum human right to choose the man she should spend her whole life with" (Joy 2). The fact that her father's businesslike negotiations take away her power backs up the idea that being a good woman means being submissive and putting your own needs first.

Beauty is also a weapon for women. Angoori's silver jewelry, which is said to "transport her with its mere touch," is a stunning shackle that shows how valuable she is as a decorative item that people want to own, admire, and ultimately control. It doesn't mean you love someone. On the other hand, Prabhati's "aging, unappealing physique" is never seen in the same way. This shows the sexual double standard that puts men's desires ahead of women's bodies and keeps them being judged and punished. Caste and class differences make these problems worse. It is okay for

Prabhathi to marry a "secondhand" bride because he is a servant. This keeps the strict rules that govern gender and social mobility in place.

## **2. The Weed: Making Women Sick and Controlling Their Desires**

The titular weed is more than just a silly country superstition; it's a great way for men to control women. There is a myth that says love is a dangerous outside threat and that women's desire is a sickness. Angoori says that "a man makes the girl eat it...then she loves him" is a sad example of how women are not allowed to feel their own feelings. In this case, love is a curse that women have to deal with instead of a natural feeling that everyone has. The weed myth is a way to control women's sexuality by making them scared and suspicious, which takes away their freedom and makes their desires seem "sinful."

Women also spread this myth, as shown by Angoori's mother's warnings to her to "Don't take paan from strangers." These warnings show how women internalize and pass on patriarchal myths from one generation to the next, making them enforcers of their own subjugation. The weed is poisonous in both a literal and a figurative sense, which makes people feel suspicious, ashamed, and scared. But Pritam plants the seeds of disobedience in this strict system. Angoori's quiet act of rebellion, his interest in Ram Tara, the night-watchman, can't be explained by superstition. In Marguerite Duras' *The Lover*, wanting something turns into a kind of resistance. This is subtly echoed in the fact that she "croons a sad song" while he is away.

## **3. The violence of not knowing how to read and write**

The Weed, a very competitive school, is where the fight for women's rights is going on. Angoori's first reaction to reading as a "sin for village women" is a sad example of how the oppressed internalize epistemic violence. There are a lot of differences between women who live in cities and those who live in the country. Angoori and her friends see learning to read and write as a way to rebel, even though women in the city might not want to. Pritam's story shows how hard it is for women in rural areas to get an education and have the power to question why they are left out.

The most shocking part of the story is when Angoori asks to be taught how to write her name after years of following social norms. This request is more than just a desire for knowledge; it is a symbolic statement of identity that she is more than just someone's wife or daughter. She is a person in her own right. Angoori starts to change her life by trying to learn how to read and write. She goes beyond the limits that have kept her from moving forward for so long.

## **4. Ending Passivity and Gaining Physical Independence**

People often say that Angoori has "rippling muscles" and "metallic resilience." Her body is very different from the passive, ornamental ideal of womanhood that her society promotes. Her strong body is a living example of how women should not be weak, quiet, or submissive. Angoori doesn't fit the stereotype of a submissive wife because she is physically strong and feels powerful. Her



emotional state is equally complex. Her sobs after Ram Tara left show that she is heartbroken and has hidden desires. Judith Butler would call the mental toll of not being able to express real feelings "gender melancholy." In these cases, Angoori's feelings and body show a truth that her culture won't accept. This makes it possible that there is a self that is different from what patriarchy says it is.

### **Conclusion**

The Weed brutally breaks down rural femininity, showing that it is a patriarchal performance forced on women through a network of myth, ritual, and epistemic violence. Pritam is able to resist even though this framework is very limiting. Angoori's physical presence, her aspiration to attain literacy, and her silent protests show that even the most established structures have flaws that let people take charge and make changes. According to UNICEF, 23% of girls in rural India are still married before they turn 18, so the story's urgency is still strong today. Since Punjab is a unique farming area, it would be interesting for future research to look at how Pritam's vision fits with Dalit feminism, ecofeminism, and other critical frameworks. The Weed is a story of hope, change, and perseverance, not just of oppression.

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