

Sikh Heritage BC – Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu by Amrita Pritam

Lesson Title	Exploring the Power of Poetry: Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu by Amrita Pritam
Suggested time (classes, minutes)	1-2 classes, 80 minutes each
Grade/Subject	English 10-12
Big Ideas/ Curricular Competencies	<p>Big Idea</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Texts are socially, culturally, geographically, and historically constructed.</li> </ul> <p>Curricular Competencies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Recognize personal, social, and cultural contexts, as well as values and perspectives in texts</li> <li>- Explore how language constructs personal and cultural identities</li> </ul>
First Peoples Principles of Learning	“Learning is embedded in memory, history, and story.”
Focus Questions/ Key Understanding	<p>Students will analyze the themes and devices used in Amrita Pritam's poem "Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu."</p> <p>Students will understand the historical and cultural context of the poem and its significance in Punjabi literature.</p> <p>Students will explore the power of poetry to inspire social change and advocate for equality.</p>



## Lesson Plan

This lesson can be taught in two ways:

1. As part of an English unit which explores the human experience of colonization and displacement through a series of texts (see extensions section for two possible ways to do this)
2. As an introduction to a Social Studies unit exploring colonization and displacement (with modifications)

Note: In this lesson we have used a translation of Amrita Pritam's original poem. As such, there may be minor differences in the translation, but the general meaning of the poem is the same.

## Part 1 - Introduction:

1. Lead the class in a discussion using any/ or all of the following questions.
2. Who is Amrita Pritam?
  - a. Amrita Pritam (1919-2005) was a South Asian writer, poet, and novelist. She was one of the leading voices of Punjabi literature and was the first woman to receive the Sahitya Akademi Award, India's highest literary honor, for her magnum opus "Ajj Aakhaan Waris Shah Nu" (Today I Invoke Waris Shah).
  - b. Pritam received numerous other honors, including the Padma Shri and Padma Vibhushan, two of India's highest civilian honors. She was also a social activist and played an active role in the women's rights movement in India. Her work continues to be celebrated for its bold and innovative approach to language and its profound insights into the human experience.
3. Who is Waris Shah?
  - a. Waris Shah (1722-1798) was a Punjabi Sufi poet and scholar who is considered one of the greatest poets in the Punjabi language. He is best known for his epic poem "Heer Ranjha," which tells the story of two lovers from rival clans and has become a classic of Punjabi literature.
4. What do you know of Partition of 1947 (the partition of India to create Pakistan)?
  - a. The Partition of India was a major historical event that took place in 1947, which led to the creation of two independent nations: India and Pakistan. It was a result of the end of British colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent and the political and social differences between the Hindu-majority India and the Muslim-majority areas of Pakistan.
  - b. The partition was accompanied by large-scale violence and mass migration, with millions of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs forced to leave their homes and move to the other side of the border. This led to one of the largest mass migrations in history, with estimates suggesting that between 10 and 12 million people were displaced and around one million lost their lives in the violence.
  - c. The partition had far-reaching consequences for the people and societies of India and Pakistan, and it continues to shape politics, culture, and identity



in the region to this day. It also had an impact on the global political landscape, as it led to the emergence of two new nations in the post-colonial world.

5. How would a partition of a geopolitical area affect the people living there?
  - a. Answers may vary

Part 2- Reading and Analysis:

1. Distribute copies of the poem and worksheet.
2. After they have finished reading, ask students to identify the themes and literary devices used in the poem. Write these on the whiteboard.
3. Use the worksheet to guide the analysis and encourage students to consider questions such as: What is the main message of the poem? How does Amrita Pritam use language and imagery to convey her message? What historical and cultural context is relevant to the poem?

Part 3 – Discussion:

1. Lead a class discussion on the themes and literary devices identified in the analysis.
  - a. Loss and grief: The poem reflects on the immense loss and grief experienced by the people of Punjab during the Partition, as they were forced to leave their homes and flee to safety. It speaks to the pain and suffering of those who were left behind, and the sense of mourning that still resonates years later.
  - b. Identity and belonging: The poem explores the complex issues of identity and belonging that arose during the Partition, as people were forced to leave behind their homes, communities, and cultures. It speaks to the deep sense of dislocation and alienation that many experienced as a result.
  - c. Human suffering and resilience: The poem also highlights the resilience and strength of the human spirit in the face of adversity, as people struggled to survive and rebuild their lives in the aftermath of the Partition. It speaks to the courage and determination of those who refused to give up in the face of overwhelming challenges.
  - d. History and memory: Finally, the poem reflects on the importance of history and memory, and the need to remember and honor the stories of those who suffered during the Partition. It speaks to the power of literature and art to preserve and convey these stories, and to the importance of bearing witness to the struggles and triumphs of those who came before us.
2. Encourage students to share their interpretations of the poem and their thoughts on its message and relevance.
3. Ask students to consider how the poem speaks to contemporary issues related to social justice and equality.



## Part 4 – Extensions:

## Option 1:

The Partition of India in 1947 had a profound impact on Sikhs, many of whom were displaced from their homes and suffered violence and trauma during this tumultuous period. Here are some poems about Partition from the perspective of Sikhs:

1. "Khooni Vaisakhi" (The Bloody Baisakhi) by Nanak Singh: This poem describes the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919, which was a precursor to the violence that would later erupt during Partition. It is a powerful indictment of British colonialism and its legacy of brutality.
2. "Udham Singh" by Amrita Pritam: This poem honors the Sikh revolutionary Udham Singh, who assassinated Sir Michael O'Dwyer, the Lieutenant Governor of Punjab, in revenge for the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. It is a tribute to the courage and sacrifice of those who fought against injustice.
3. "Hind Di Chadar" (The Veil of India) by Baba Farid: This poem, written by the 12th-century Sufi saint Baba Farid, is often recited by Sikhs during times of crisis. It speaks to the unity and resilience of the Indian people, and the need to stand together in the face of adversity.
4. "Kandh Tapke" (The Sword Falls) by Harbhajan Singh: This poem is a poignant reflection on the trauma of Partition, as experienced by a Sikh family that is forced to flee their home. It captures the pain, loss, and dislocation that many people experienced during this time.
5. "Punjab" by Amrita Pritam: This poem is a lament for the land of Punjab, which was divided during Partition. It speaks to the sense of loss and displacement that many Sikhs and other Punjabis felt as a result of this traumatic event.

These are just a few examples of the many poems that have been written about Partition from the perspective of Sikhs. Each of these works captures a different aspect of the human experience of this difficult period in history, and reflects the ongoing struggle to come to terms with its legacy.

## Option 2:

Displacement has been a common theme in literature and poetry across many cultures and regions. Here are some examples of poems that address this theme:

1. "The White Man's Burden" by Rudyard Kipling: This poem, written in 1899, is a classic example of the rhetoric of imperialism. It describes the supposed duty of white colonizers to civilize and uplift the "savage" peoples they conquer, and reflects the paternalistic and racist attitudes that were prevalent during this time.
2. "A Far Cry from Africa" by Derek Walcott: This poem reflects on the experience of the poet, who was born in the Caribbean but whose ancestors came from Africa. It speaks to the legacy of colonialism and the displacement that has been inflicted upon people of African descent, as well as the complexities of identity and cultural heritage.
3. "The Hill We Climb" by Amanda Gorman: This poem, which was delivered at the 2021 presidential inauguration in the United States, speaks to the experience of displacement and marginalization that has been faced by many communities,



including African Americans and Indigenous peoples. It is a call to action, urging people to come together to build a more just and equitable world.

4. "The Song of Hiawatha" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: This epic poem, published in 1855, tells the story of an Indigenous hero who fights against colonial encroachment on his land and culture. It reflects the romanticized and often problematic portrayal of Indigenous peoples in literature and popular culture during this time.
5. "Canadian Eh?" by Phinder Dulai: This poem explores the idea of citizenship, the nation/national and class.
6. "What I remember of the Evacuation" by Joy Kogawa: This poem is about a 6-year-old Japanese Girl who, along with her family, was forced out of their Vancouver home to live in an internment camp is due the war.

These are just a few examples of the many poems that address the theme of displacement. Each of these works reflects the complex and often painful history of colonialism and its ongoing legacy in the present day.

#### Lesson Sources

##### Audio

- In Amrita Pritam's own voice - [Amrita Pritam recites AJ AKHAN WARIS SHAH NU - YouTube](#)
- Video with English translations (not exactly the same as the worksheet) - [Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu \( English translation \) - YouTube](#)
- Connect FM tribute with background information in Punjabi - <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3043445855900903>
- [Partition Voices - Amrita Pritam - YouTube](#)
  - Amrita Pritam talking about her memories of Partition and the inspiration behind her poem "Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu"
  - recites parts of the poem and translates into English and explains the poem as well

##### Partition

- In Amrita Pritam's own voice - [Amrita Pritam recites AJ AKHAN WARIS SHAH NU - YouTube](#)
- [Partition Museum | Amritsar](#)
- [www.1947partitionarchive.org](http://www.1947partitionarchive.org)
- [1947 Partition of India & Pakistan | The 1947 Partition Archive - Spotlight at Stanford](#)
- [Why was India split into two countries? - Haimanti Roy - YouTube](#)
- [Partition: 'Walking for 11 days to reach India' - BBC Stories - YouTube](#)

##### Amrita Pritam

- [Amrita Pritam Biography – Life History, Achievements \(culturalindia.net\)](#)



Lesson Resources	Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu Worksheet

