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Unveiling the Saga of a Women during the Pre-Partition Period: A Feminist Analysis of Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*

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Abstract:

This research article explores the experiences of women during the pre-partition era of India through a feminist analysis of Amrita Pritam's novel "Pinjar". Set against the backdrop of the 1947 Partition, the novel delves into the multifaceted struggles of women caught in the crossfire of communal strife and patriarchal oppression. "Pinjar" centers on the character of Pooro, whose abduction by Rashid, a Muslim man, triggers a cascade of personal and social conflicts. Through a nuanced narrative, Pritam sheds light on the deep-seated patriarchal structures that dictate women's lives and bodies, revealing the profound impact of these structures on their autonomy and identity. Despite the severe adversities faced by the women in the novel, they exhibit remarkable strength and resistance, challenging their subjugation within a patriarchal and politically unstable society. The paper examines the intersecting dimensions of gender, class, religion, and national identity, highlighting how these factors collectively shape the experiences and responses of women during the pre-partition period. Through a feminist critique, this paper aims to unravel the complexities of female subjectivity and resistance as depicted in: "Pinjar". The findings underscore the resilience of women who, despite being subjected to violence and displacement, refuse to be mere victims. Instead, they actively shape their destinies, forging connections across communal divides. This study contributes to the broader discourse on gender dynamics and communalism, providing valuable insights into the historical and social context of women's lives in pre-partition India. By analyzing Pritam's work, this paper seeks to illuminate the enduring relevance of these historical narratives in contemporary discussions on gender and communalism.

Hypothesis:

The novel "Pinjar" by Amrita Pritam, through its feminist narrative, reveals the profound impact of patriarchal structures and communal tensions on women's lives during the pre-partition period of India. It demonstrates that despite the violence and oppression faced, women exhibited resilience, agency, and a struggle for autonomy, thereby challenging and resisting their subjugation within a patriarchal and politically tumultuous society.

This research paper aims to explore how Pritam's narrative captures the complex interplay of gender, class, religion, and national identity, highlighting the multifaceted challenges faced by women and their responses to these adversities.

Keywords: Feminism, patriarchy, autonomy, identity.

Introduction:

Amrita Pritam, a revered figure in Indian literature, stands as an emblem of literary brilliance, notably hailed as the well-known female Punjabi writer, novelist, and poet of the 20th century. Throughout her illustrious six-decade career, she produced an extensive body of work comprising over a hundred pieces spanning poetry, essays, novels, biographies, and more. Her contributions to literature were adorned with prestigious honors such as the 'Sahitya Akademi,' 'Bharatiya Jnanpith,' and 'Padma Vibhushan,' underscoring her unmatched impact in the literary realm.

One of her most famous novels titled "Pinjar" was made into a movie of the same name. She also penned an autobiography, in which she expressed her audacity by writing about her personal life, which might be considered 'controversial' by many, even in contemporary India. Amrita Pritam is most remembered for her poem, 'Ajj aakhaan Waris Shah nu.'

The Partition of India in 1947, a seminal event delineating the division of British India into independent nations of India and Pakistan, stands as a moment fraught with profound tragedy. This rupture inflicted a devastating toll of loss and displacement, with countless lives lost and communities shattered amid unprecedented migrations. Amidst the grim narratives of Partition survivors, the plight of women emerges as particularly poignant, with shocking

accounts revealing the atrocities endured by tens of thousands of women – from abduction to rape, murder, or trafficking – as they became casualties of political upheaval.

The pre-partition era in India witnessed significant social, political, and cultural transformations, with women often at the forefront of these changes. Amrita Pritam's "Pinjar" offers a poignant exploration of women's lives amidst this tumultuous backdrop, capturing their experiences, aspirations, and vulnerabilities. Drawing upon feminist theory, this research endeavor seeks to unravel the complexities of female subjectivity, agency, and resistance portrayed in Pritam's work. By analyzing the novel through a feminist lens, we endeavor to illuminate the intricate interplay of gender, class, religion, and nationality during this pivotal juncture in history.

Women's experiences during the partition of British India in 1947 have often been overlooked in historical narratives, despite their significant impact on the fabric of society. Amrita Pritam's novel "Pinjar" provides a poignant insight into the lives of women during this tumultuous period, offering a nuanced portrayal of their struggles, resilience, and agency amidst the backdrop of communal violence and displacement.

Women came to represent the perceived honor of both individual men and the state. This symbolism led to unspeakable violence perpetrated on them by both outsiders and their own family members.

Many women accepted their new situation, even finding happiness and love with their abductors. Indian Novelist Amrita Pritam's novel *Pinjar* narrates the story of a young Hindu woman named Pooro who is kidnapped by a Muslim man Rashid during the 1947 riots to avenge an age-old land dispute between their family. Pooro's sexual assault by Rashid is accompanied by her family's rejection of her and the following societal ostracism. The only tool for women to survive their loss of "purity" was to reconcile with their converted identity. The story recounts Pooro-turned-Hamida's gradual journey of acceptance, culminating in love for her captor. Rashid's assistance in locating a missing Hindu woman during the riots was an essential factor in her metamorphosis. Touched by his act of redemption Pooro chose to continue with her new life despite having been offered the hand of her ex-fiance Ramchand.

Amidst the backdrop of upheaval and anguish, Amrita Pritam's novella "Pinjar" emerges as a poignant chronicle of resilience and redemption. Set against the canvas of Partition, the novel intricately narrates the journey of Pooro, a young woman ensnared in the chaos of communal strife. Abducted by Rashid, a Muslim man, Pooro's journey unfolds as a testament to human fortitude amidst adversity. As she grapples with the trials of a hostile community and confronts the shadows of her past, Pooro's narrative becomes a metaphorical exploration of the ruptures wrought by Partition.

"Pinjar," with its evocative depiction of human strength and resilience, transcends mere storytelling to become a profound reflection on the shared history of India and Pakistan. Amrita Pritam's masterful narrative resonates across generations, offering poignant insights into the enduring scars of Partition while illuminating the indomitable spirit of humanity in the face of adversity.

Pinjar

In the first half of the novel, we find that Pooro's family is a happy family of two sisters and a brother. Pooro is an obedient and ideal daughter of her parents. Her father, like all fathers, associates the idea of family honor with the women of the family. The turning point in the story arrives when Pooro is abducted by Rashid, who is forced to do it to avenge a similar act committed by Pooro's uncle. This portrayal highlights how conflicts between families, communities, and nations are often brutally and mindlessly played out on the bodies and identities of women.

Rashid is a decent guy; he does not assault Pooro. She, after a long struggle, manages to escape and goes home but is shockingly told by her father that there is no place for her in the family. Her abduction now puts her chastity and fidelity into question. Since she was abducted by a Muslim man, it is taken for granted that she is no longer chaste. But Rashid does not rape her. Pooro pleads before her parents for her acceptance, claiming that Rashid has not done her any harm sexually. To her dismay, she is rejected straightaway. The humiliation and disgrace on the family's honor and the threat that the entire family would be killed by the Sheikhs if they accepted her made her father refuse to take her back. He says: "Who will marry you? You have lost your faith and birth right. If we dare to help you, we will be cut down and finished without a trace of blood left behind to tell our faith" (Amrita Pritam, *Pinjar*, P 16). Her father refused to

accept her, reiterating that it would prove difficult for him to face the queries of the society in which he thrived.

Rejection from her own family is another trauma that hits Pooro hard. The refusal by her counterparts is a much larger blow than her abduction, which consequently transformed her into a skeleton. She has been doubly violated, firstly by her abductor, Rashid, who bruised her physically, and secondly by her parents, who refused to feel her tragedy. "She had believed she was returning to life. She had wanted to live again, to be with her father and mother, she had come full of hope, now she had no hope, nor any fear" (P 16). Pooro becomes the victim of deeply ingrained gendered violence and has to pay the price of her existence for the cultural role being assigned to her by society. She is considered the symbol of honor and a medium of taking revenge. She asks Rashid, "If my uncle abducted your aunt, what fault was that of mine? You have reduced me to a homeless vagrant" (P. 14).

Devastated and dejected, Pooro ultimately returns to Rashid to lead a hellish life. Her identity undergoes a drastic change. Rashid forces marriage on her and transforms her into Hamida from Pooro. She now has a new identity which she resists as she longs for her family and marriage to Ramchand. On the other hand, Rashid is repentant for the crime of Pooro's abduction and seeks redemption. He tries to provide love and care to Pooro, but she is unrelenting as the wounds inflicted by Rashid are unforgivable. Over time, Pooro comes in contact with three females who were also victims of gendered violence.

All three characters are treated merely as bodies, not humans. Taro is suffering from some unknown disease and is disowned by her husband, who has brought another woman to live with him and forces her to become a prostitute. Her illness and her husband's attitude towards her are unbearable. She desires death to free her from the caged life. She says to Pooro: "For full two years, I had to sell my body for a cup of pottage and few rags. I am like a whore, a prostitute...there is no justice in the world, nor any God. He (her husband) can do what he likes. There is no God to stop him. God's fetters were for me and only for my feet" (P.27-28).

The misfortune befallen Pooro is a pre-partition incident and is a result of the ancestral family feud. Thus, she is not a victim of communal violence but of gendered violence in the patriarchal set-up of society where women are used as objects of desire and as baits and are exploited for others' interests. Rashid takes advantage of the situation and in the guise of

abducting Pooro to satisfy his family members, he fulfils his desire to possess Pooro since he loves her secretly. Pooro's self is left traumatized by the upcoming awful life, which is reflected in her dreams and intuitions. She realizes her ill fate and ultimately accepts her life as pictured by destiny. Her heart is full of hatred for everybody as she thinks: "He had robbed her of her birth right, he had robbed her of her future. Her parents had probably given her up for the loss and left the village" (P. 15).

She suffers from pangs of loneliness as her family abandons her to live a life with a stranger, with no scope of seeing them again. It is like a rebirth with a new identity. Rashid marries Pooro, and she bears a son to Rashid. At the beginning of the novel, the novelist mentions Pooro's disgust over having Rashid's child. She is utterly traumatized by the thought of carrying his child in her womb. Her disgust is visible in her feelings, "She felt as if her body was a pea-pod inside which she carried a slimy, white caterpillar. Her body was unclean. If only she could take the worm out of her womb and fling it away! Pick it out with her nails as if it were a thorn! Pluck it off as if it were a maggot or leach...!" (P. 06).

Pooro is tormented by the idea that: He had been planted inside her by force, nourished inside her womb against her will, and was now sucking the milk from her breasts, whether she liked it or not" (P. 22). It shows her dislike for the men-folk who treat a woman's body as an object of use. She is constantly grieved at the thought of carrying his child. Through this episode, Amrita has highlighted the fact that women are considered merely bodies and nothing more than that, and the violation of their bodies has become the moral perversion of the community itself.

The next female Pooro meets is Kammo, a motherless young girl, who is disowned by her father and stays at her aunt's house. Kammo is ill-treated and exploited by her aunt. She sees Hamida as her mother figure but her aunts dissuade her from meeting her as she is a Muslim. Pooro's dilemma is repeated when Lajo, Pooro's sister-in-law and the third female in Pooro's life, is abducted by Muslim men and kept in capture in her own house. Ramchand comes to Pooro seeking her help to release Lajo. Pooro convinces Rashid to help Lajo return to her home. She reflects immense strength in the hour of crisis to help Lajo escape the clutches of her abductors. Here she realizes that the ultimate victims in all clashes are women, "It was a sin to be alive in this world full of evil," thought Hamida, "It was a crime to be born a girl" (P.45).

Almost all the female characters in the novel are victims of one or the other type of violence. They are oppressed by the double yoke of patriarchy and dislocation. Pooro is not only disowned by her father but by her fiancé Ramchand too, who questions her chastity, purity, and dignity by ignoring to recognize her after her abduction. The mournful process of abduction is aggravated by the rejection from her parents when Pooro succeeds in escaping from the clutches of Rashid. Her parents do not let her in. Instead, they say: "You have lost your faith and birth right. If we dare to help you, we will be cut down and finished without a trace of blood left behind to tell our fate" (P 16).

Shocked, Pooro returns to Rashid. She marries him and moves to a nearby village. In due course, she is pregnant. She is renamed as 'Hamida' and her new name, as if to establish her new identity, is tattooed on her hand. Priyadarshini Das Gupta says about Pooro: "Now she is Pooro only in her dreams and in her reminiscences of her parent's home. This duality she cannot take affably to and is soon reduced to mere skin and bones." Though Rashid did not call her Hamida, Amrita writes: "In her dreams, when she met her old friends and played in her parents' home, everyone still called her Pooro" (P 17). And again, "It was a double life. Pooro became Hamida by day and turned back to Pooro by night. In reality she was neither Hamida nor Pooro; she was just a skeleton, without a shape or a name" (P 17).

Pooro cannot even accept her child. For her, it is Rashid's torture. She is bewildered by the thought that she is carrying a portion of a person who has spoiled her life: "He had been planted inside her by force.... against her will" (P 22). She thinks, "Only if she could take the worm out of her womb and fling it away" (P 06). And she feels, "...as if the boy was drawing the milk from her veins and was sucking it

Findings and Discussion:

Amrita Pritam's "Pinjar" offers a compelling portrayal of women's experiences during the pre-partition period, showcasing their agency, resilience, and capacity for resistance. Through characters like Pooro, the protagonist, and her sister Rajjo, Pritam illuminates the diverse ways in which women navigate patriarchal constraints and assert their autonomy within the constraints of societal norms. Despite facing violence, displacement, and loss, these women refuse to be reduced to passive victims, instead actively shaping their destinies and forging connections across communal divides.

The novel also underscores the intersecting nature of oppression, as women's experiences are shaped not only by gender but also by factors such as class, caste, and religion. Pritam's depiction of Hindu-Muslim relations in the pre-partition era offers a nuanced critique of communalism, highlighting how women become pawns in larger political conflicts. However, amidst the chaos and turmoil, the resilience and solidarity of female characters emerge as powerful symbols of hope and resistance.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, Amrita Pritam's "Pinjar" provides a compelling insight into the lives of women during the pre-partition period, offering a feminist critique of patriarchal structures and communal tensions. Through its richly drawn characters and evocative storytelling, the novel highlights the agency, resilience, and struggles of women within a society in flux. By analyzing Pritam's work through a feminist lens, this research article has sought to shed light on the complexities of gender dynamics and women's experiences during a tumultuous period in South Asian history. As we continue to grapple with issues of gender inequality and communalism in the contemporary world, the voices and stories of women from the past remain both relevant and resonant.

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