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## The Skeletons of Silenced Voices: Partition and Gendered Violence in Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*

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### **Abstract:**

The 1947 partition of the Indian Sub-continent is archived predominantly as the culmination of a series of political negotiations and as the transfer of Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim populations across the cartographic lines drawn by Cyril Radcliffe. The empowered historiography of the Partition, skewed in favor of agreements, laws, and facts, obfuscates the gendered experience of this catastrophe, reducing the suffering of women to numbers and statistics. One way to holistically understand the Partition, its impact on people, and the subsequent post-colonial identity formation is to foreground the myriad marginalized experiences. It is in this context of centering the margins that literary representations of the Partition gain significance.

To this end, Amrita Pritam's Punjabi novel *Pinjar* offers interesting and valuable insights. This paper aims to argue that the novel, through its secular narration and the inter-religious female solidarity of its characters, demonstrates how gendered experiences fissure the empowered narratives of communalism. It will also focus on the themes of violence against the female body, psychological trauma, identity crisis, and female solidarity as explored in the novel.

**Keywords:** Body, Female Solidarity, Partition, Recovery, Violence.

Her thighs still smell of milk  
and her bosom, of blood....  
Now when she has seeped down  
the stony cracks of my story  
with a limp map half-flying

from a shock-stiffened hand,  
waiting for the last ceremonial rite  
my memory can afford.

For when they killed her at the border  
a child was still tugging at her nipple (Kanungo).

This is how Nabanita Kanungo, whose family migrated to Shillong from Sylhet to escape the 1947 Partition violence, addresses the impact of violence inflicted upon women during political and communal conflicts in her 2014 poem, *Her thighs still smell of milk*. Sixty-four years before her, on the Western front of the sub-continent, Amrita Pritam narrates the realities of Partition as follows:

*“One day Hamida saw a band of a dozen or more goondas pushing a young girl before them. She had not a stitch of clothing on her person. The goondas beat drums and danced about the naked girl... It was a sin to be alive in a world so full of evil, thought Hamida. It was a crime to be born a girl”* (Pritam, 87).

What Kanungo and Pritam achieve here is the creation of a fissure- a chink through which the margins can be centred. The predominant historiography of the 1947 Partition of the Indian Sub-continent as the transfer of Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim populations across the cartographic lines drawn by Cyril Radcliffe obfuscates the gendered experience of the catastrophe. One way to understand the Partition and its impact on people is to foreground the margins. The failure of official documentation to explain the communalization of syncretic cultures and acts of bestiality accentuates the importance of literary representation of Partition, as undertaken by Pritam and Kanungo. Thus, Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* offers interesting and useful inroads, as the male voice-over of the novel's cinematic rendition proclaims:

“इस कहानी के सिर्फ किरदारों के नाम सच्चे नहीं, बाकी पूरी कोरी सच्चाई है।” (Pinjar)

[“Only the names of the story' characters are untrue; everything else is absolutely true”.]

*Pinjar* tells the story of Pooro, a 15-year-old girl from Chatto village in Punjab, who is betrothed to Ram Chand and is kidnapped by Rashid. The kidnapping is a result of an ancestral feud between Pooro and Rashid's family, the Sahukars and the Shaikhs. Rashid, who is attracted to Pooro, did not want to kidnap her but was forced to do so for the 'honour of his

family.’ After managing to escape from Rashid’s home, Pooro is turned away by her parents to protect their lives and their family ‘honour’. Death too eludes her when she is found by Rashid. Forced by her gender in a patriarchal society, Pooro becomes Hamida, and Rashid becomes her husband and the father of her son. Through Pooro’s story, Pritam explores the themes of honour, its concomitant violences, and most importantly, survival through solidarity.

### **Women, Honour, and Violence**

The particular violence enacted against women during Partition seems to tie intrinsically to the discourse of nationalism and communalism. Denied participation as active political agents in the nationalist imaginings, which increasingly took communal tones and turns, women were predominantly aligned with tradition and relegated to the domestic sphere by the 19<sup>th</sup>-century nationalists. The association of the feminine with tradition also made an apt case for imagining the nation as an “essentially feminine entity” (Bargohain and Punekar), evidenced best in the much-popularised idea of ‘Bharatmata’. This made the woman’s body the site on which the nation and the community’s ‘honour’ was inscribed and violent struggles enacted.

Furthermore, as Susan Brownmiller puts it, “when killing is viewed as not only permissible but heroic behaviour sanctioned by one’s ... cause, ... rape becomes an unfortunate but inevitable by-product of the necessary game called war. Women, by its reasoning, are simply regrettable victims – incidental, unavoidable casualties – ... lumped together with children, homes, personal belongings, a church, a dike, a water buffalo, or next year’s crop.” In *Pinjar*, Pooro’s body becomes the object- much like Rashid’s grand-aunt before her- on which the strife of the Sahukars and the Shaikhs is enacted. Pritam, by highlighting Rashid’s reluctance and subsequent regret at abducting Pooro and the inter-generational transfer of vengeance, shows that the particular violence against Pooro is, in fact, a continuum of the larger communal war machinery at work- one that exploited existing fault lines to its advantage.

Thus, the abduction of women becomes a common way of settling and gaining scores in the communal clashes of Partition. The act of abduction came to signify an assertion of identity and honour by a community against its perceived ‘other’- the created enemy. As Rachna Mehra puts it “a corollary to abduction was forcible conversion and marriage, which was perceived as an outrage to the family, community honour and a grave setback to the religious sentiments.” This effectively excludes the woman from the conversation, treating her as a relic to be fought over and then placed in her ‘rightful’ place- at the margins of the

household as much at the margins of her own life. Pooro's abduction seems to have a mythic resonance with the Hindu Epic, Ramayana's episode of *sitaharan* [abduction of Sita]. Both are crimes committed to supposedly salvage the 'honour' of the family, defiled by the rape and mutilation of Rashid's grand-aunt and *Shurpankha*, respectively. The two abductions share another commonality in the rejection of Pooro and Sita by their own families on account of the constructed ideal of 'honour'. The cinematic rendition of *Pinjar* makes this resonance rather explicit when the film's poetic, secular and almost saintly, Ram Chand, sings of the sufferings of Sita. However, for all the ambiguities of the song, one of its couplets points to the conniving and convenience-based ideals of patriarchy, which will simultaneously apotheosize a woman and slut-shame her to perpetuate its control:

सीता को देखे सारा गाँव

आग पे कैसे धरेगी पाँव ,

बच जाए तो देवी मान

है जल जाए तो पापन ।

*The whole village watches Sita*

*how will she put her feet on fire*

*If she survives consider her goddess*

*If she burns, she is a sinner.* (Wadhkar)

Additionally, Pooro's rejection by her family, due to her being considered 'defiled', can be located within the matrix of sexual purity and family honour, which are the most potent tools of patriarchal control in heteronormative societies. Pooro's rejection also seems to corroborate Susan Brownmiller's argument that even the threat of rape and shame can be used as "a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear" (Brownmiller). Her rejection from the space and people she considered 'home' forced her into a perpetual state of homelessness for the rest of her life. When Rashid decides to shift from Chatto to Sakkar, the narrator says of Pooro: "After her parents had turned her away from their door, leaving the ancestral village did not seem so momentous... what difference does it make? All villages were alike" (Pritam, 24).

However, it is perhaps Pritam's inclusion of and treatment of both physical and psychological trauma suffered by women during the 1947 Partition that makes *Pinjar* a chilling

narrative. In the novel's best-dealt scene, Pooro's hand is inscribed with her new name, Hamida. Anisha Ghosh points out that "naming is indeed a strategy through which the 'other' is appropriated within the consciousness of self and Pooro's new name locates her within the performative milieu of a new identity and leads to a permanent partition of her female psyche" (Ghosh, 136). The corporal violence seeps into the subconscious, as the tattooed hand leads to a conflicted psyche. Pritam succinctly points out how Pooro's self has become bifurcated in her consciousness: her dreams are populated by two versions of herself - the Pooro of her parent's home and Hamida of today. She has been forced into "a double life: Hamida by day, Pooro by night. In reality, she was neither the one nor the other. She was just a skeleton without a shape or a name" (Pritam, 25). This conflicted and troubled psyche is also mapped on Pooro/Hamida's relationship with her child, Javed. At one end of the spectrum, Javed represents nostalgia, "a toy made of her own blood", a sustaining reminder and connection to her parents (Pritam, 35). On the other, he fosters repulsion and frustration within Pooro/Hamida at having lost everything to his abductor. She muses: "This boy... this boy's father... all mankind... all men... men who gnaw a woman's body like a dog gnawing a bone" (Pritam, 35).

### **Strength in Solidarity**

The novel moves out of narrating the individual sufferings of Pooro/Hamida by introducing other female victims of patriarchy and Partition: Kammo, an orphan girl living with a troublesome aunt; Taro, a wife forced into prostitution by her husband; and a 'mad' woman driven 'insane' in her marriage, abandoned and later raped; an unnamed girl who escaped a refugee camp where she was raped for nine consecutive nights; Lajjo, Pooro's sister-in-law, who was abducted and forced into being a mistress in her own house. Throughout the novel, empathetic interactions with these women nudge Pooro towards accepting Rashid and the new life thrust upon her. Thus, the homeless Pooro/Hamida seems to be steered back home - or at least towards a sense of belonging- by the other marginalized women of the novel, who having been stripped of flesh and life, are merely, pinjars [skeleton].

Kammo, the first bond Pooro forms in Sakkar, is an orphaned Hindu girl living with a dreadful aunt. In Kammo, Pooro seeks to find bridges to her own amputated past, but this attempt is forcefully obstructed by the social codes that assume the power to dictate the separation between Hindus and Muslims. Such instances of empathetic alliances forged between women across perceived religious divides also help to dispel the flawed two-nation theory, which is premised on an artificially created intra-community homogeneity and inter-

community antagonism. Pritam further explores the idea that women, as victims of patriarchy, can forge sustaining solidarity across communal divides by introducing the character of a 'mad woman'.

Pooro one day finds the corpse of a woman – called the 'madwoman' by the villagers – in a field lying next to a boy she just birthed. Pooro takes the child to her home and nurtures him as her own for six months, until the Hindus of the village realize that the 'mad' woman was a Hindu and consequently assign the child's religious identity to Hinduism. They decide that Muslim Hamida should not raise the Hindu child, and they take the child away and gave it to a Hindu woman only to later return him to Hamida because of his deteriorating health. This "reveals how patriarchal and religious interests regulate private emotions ... of who should love whom and how" (Ghosh, 139). Such an attempt to regulate the nurturing care of motherhood within the confines of communal considerations also implodes and contradicts the conception of the nation as a mother- giving sustenance to all and sundry.

Another marginalized woman in the text is Taro, who raises jarring questions about the institution of marriage and the discrimination it imposes on women. She is married to a man who was already married before her marriage and has forced Taro into prostitution. Her natal family refuses to intervene because "when parents give away a daughter in marriage, they put a noose around her neck and hand the other end of the rope to the man of their choice." And "it is up to her husband to treat her as he likes. It's a man's privilege" (Pritam, 44). Pritam uses Taro's marital situation to serve two important purposes in the novel. Firstly, it helps nudge Pooro towards accepting her reality, as she realises that although her marriage was not consensual, it seems preferable compared to the consensual marriage Taro was forced into. Secondly, it shatters the fantastical and Manichean juxtaposition of an idyllic marriage arranged by parents and reluctantly consented to by the daughter, and a marriage forced by abduction. This, however, does not in any way justify the coercion implicit in the latter but merely exposes the farce of the former. Taro's marriage thus bares the reality of the foreign land that Pooro's mother talks of in the song:

I have got out my spinning  
wheel I have my wads of cotton  
I'll weave blankets of dreams

To sons are given homes and  
palaces Daughters are exiled to

foreign lands

Why do you give birth to a daughter (Pritam, 11)

Pooro then rescues Lajjo, who was abducted during Partition violence. Unlike Pooro, however, Lajjo was not displaced spatially. She is held captive and raped in her own home. Lajjo's tale splinters the idea of the home as a safe haven or refuge, revealing it instead to be a site of abuse. Lajjo's narrative of abuse at the hands of an outsider abuser, coupled with the abuse Taro and Kammo suffer from familial abusers, raises more profound questions about the very possibility of a safe space for women in a patriarchal society, especially one infested with violence. With Rashid's help, Pooro manages to free and reunite Lajjo with her husband and brother. Since Lajjo was abducted during a time when many women were similarly abducted, her reunion with her family socially more acceptable. In an emotional denouement, Pooro's brother urges her to return to their 'home' like Lajjo, but Pooro chooses to remain as Hamida with Rashid. It is by reuniting Lajjo with her family that Pooro finally achieves the "satisfaction of returning home" (Ghosh,140). Thus, Pritam seems to illustrate how 'homes' for women are built in the nooks and crannies of their lives- through solidarities with other women, through compromises with abductors, through small yet potent acts of resistance against discourses of communalism. In doing so, Pritam does not romanticize the violence suffered by Pooro but shows how women live and survive life after the violent rupture[s] that alters the course of their life and self.

The instinct to survive and continue with life is best illustrated by the responses of multiple women who were abducted during the Partition violence and forced into marriages with their captors. Forced by circumstances, these women, like Pooro, attempted to forge a semblance of peace and stability through fragile relationships with their new environment. However, the fledgling peace is disrupted again through the efforts of the governments of India and Pakistan carrying out the 'Recovery of Abducted Women'. 'The Recovery of Abducted Persons Ordinance' promulgated on 31 January 1949 in India described an "abducted person" as "a male child under the age of sixteen years or a female of whatever age who is, or immediately before the first day of March 1947, was, a Hindu or a Sikh and who, on or after that day, and before the first day of January 1949 has become separated from his or her family and is found to be living with or under the control of a Muslim individual or family." Thus, according to the ordinance, while men are considered adults at the age of 16, women are perpetually regarded as infants, incapable of making decisions about their own lives. A clause



in the Bill stated that all marriages carried out post-1947, which took place after conversion, stood null and void. This clause did not account for marriages that had taken place with the 'consent' of the woman. The absolute rejection of the idea of consent highlights: A) a theoretical view of the law which does not take into consideration survival instincts; and B) a refusal to recognise women as individuals with the capacity to consent. Urvashi Butalia's response in an interview sums up the critique of this clause well: "There can't be a cut-off date where relationships become coercive. Even when terrible things are happening between countries, people can still fall in love, can still have relationships across religions. Law is black-and-white- it can not take [into account] life's ambiguities and nuances".

## Conclusion

The ambiguities and nuances of life that Urvashi Butalia refers to are perhaps illustrated in the boy of the Hindu woman sucking at the breasts of Muslim Hamida; or perhaps in the emotional solidarities of the many victims of Partition; or perhaps in the odes written to Waris Shah on train rides from a home to the new nation; or perhaps in the pinjars [skeletons] that man created in 1947 and never since revisited. *Pinjar* is, thus, an important literary documentation of the nuances that contoured the lived experience of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent. It brings to the center the marginalized experience of women while highlighting the healing power of empathetic emotional female solidarity.

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