

Physical Torture and Trauma of Indian Women in Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar: The Skeleton*

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Abstract

Amrita Pritam was an Indian novelist and poetess who wrote in Panjabi and Hindi. She is a prominent writer in Panjabi literature. She got Sahitya Akademi Award in 1956. She is the most remembered for her poem 'Ode to Waris Shah'. Her most popular novel is *Pinjar* which is written in 1950.

She was born in 1919 in Gujranwala, Panjab in Imperial India. She is the child of Raj Bibi and Kartar Shing Hitkary. Her father was a scholar of Braj Bhasha. He was preacher of Shikh religious faith. Raj Bibi died when Amrita was ten years old. Amrita married to Pritam Singh in 1935. She started writing at the age of sixteen; also she became member of Progressive Writer's Movement. i.e. Aakhil Bharti Pragtisheel Lekhak Sangh. She also criticized Bengal female of 1943. After independence she participated in the social work such as Janata Library in Delhi. She died on 31 October 2000. Amrita Pritam having born in a Punjabi family of united Indian in 1919, has been credited with astute knowledge of the communal violence in 1947 that followed to the partition predicament of Indian and Pakistani people. She started penning her experiences at a very young age of twelve or thirteen as she had extensive observation of Indian life both from Indian and Pakistani context. Her debut novel *Pinjar: The Skeleton* is set against the backdrop of true love which is far more important than the physical intimacy of the characters. Rather, her acerbic observation of women's physical torture, psychological disintegration and circumstantial failure of Indian women presents the darker side of the contemporary Indian ethos.

The present research intends to explore the gendered exploitation of Indian women during the partition predicament. Simultaneously, the same uncovers the social discrimination, love and separation, communal violence, cultural deterioration and identity crisis of Indian women during the period at large.

Keywords: Woman, abduction, partition, rape, exploitation, communal violence, marginalization, etc.

Introduction

Nobody realized that people would suffer so much-houses burnt down, neighbors killing each other, and women being abducted and raped...There was darkness all around. How could so many millions be dispossessed and displaced?. (Bhatia,07)

The partition of Indian into sub-continent India and Pakistan was the darkest period in the history of the nation that caused millions of Indian women the life long suffering because of their physical exploitation, torture placing them amidst the traumatic conditions in life. Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar: The Skeleton* offers the most realistic portrayal of the acerbic suffering of Indian women, their systematic victimization having trapped under the anguish and traumas during the partition period. Women's body, at the time, was merely the object of maltreatment, suppression, torture, and humiliation so as to take communal revenge in the period. Hence, the partition is called as the most tragic event causing unprecedented traumatic experiences to Indian women fully loaded with pangs of loss and separation. Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* mediates through the same thematic confluence where feminine identity, existence and consciousness were being exploited for no fault of theirs' own. Amrita unfolds the women's suffering, exploitation and saga of sacrifices along with portrayal of their psychological dislocation, abduction and rapes during the partition era. *Pinjar* is set against the

backdrop of country's partition, that impartially offers the testimonies of women who sacrificed their lives speechlessly, having displaced, forcibly married, ruthlessly raped and tortured in order to take a revenge on the enmity. It reveals the story of the protagonist Puro, a young girl who is forcibly married by Rashid, a representative of rival religion just to revenge on men of another religion. The novel emblematically reveals how millions of Indian women like Puro were being mishandled, tortured and uprooted at the hands of masculinity during the era. What was the fate of Puro?, that was the fate of thousands of such women who were victimized for no fault of Thiers' own? Nobody realized that people would suffer so much-houses burnt down, neighbors killing each other, and women being abducted and raped...There was darkness all around. How could so many millions be dispossessed and displaced?. (Bhatia, 07)

Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* puts forth the plight of Indian women along with their struggle, and the suffering of the perpetrators of violence, under the shadows of religion, culture and conventions of the society. It sets Puro on the journey of transformation from Puro to Hamida, losing her self-identity, causing cultural dislocation, psychological disintegration and eventually takes her on the brink of death. Further, she is portrayed as helpless, powerless creature having born just to face the music of fate at the whims and fancies of masculinity and patriarchy at large. The novel offers us the consolidated

view of the land where not only geographical areas were divided but caused the division of Indian soul, psychology and mind of people. Amrita Pritam intertwines multiple layers of her acerbic social criticism to bring forth follies of the society.

Puro, having born in a Hindu family, initially, enjoys the heavenly bliss of life. She is shown as born in well settled family having two sisters and a younger brother. She is shown as the darling child in the parental family. Yet, her fate takes her towards self-destruction as it has nothing best to offer her. She could be seen as cherishing the dream of happy married life with Ramchand. But this dream of happy married life soon turns to be a nightmare and she is made to face the uncertainties of destiny as a helpless, powerless creature, left to suffer the pangs of partition. However, Puro comes in contact with Rashid, a Muslim boy who forcibly abducts and marries her without her wish at all. It is viewed as an act of revenge for the similar act committed by Puro's uncle to one of the girl in Rashid's family. In gradual course of development, Puro transforms from a Hindu girl to a Muslim female having lost her identity, chastity and womanly dignity because of her forcible marriage. At times, Puro manages to escape from Rashid's clutches and reaches her parental house, but is unwelcomed as she had already lost her identity, chastity as per the conventions of Indian life. She is left with no choice but to return to Rashid's house where she is displaced, marginalized and uprooted at the whims and fancies of her husband. Her body remains merely an object of gratification, just to feed her stomach with tasteless food. As the story progresses, the situation aggravates the tension, fostering a conflict in her that begins the bequest of Indian women to prove her chastity from time to time.

Puro had to suffer the social insecurity, maintain her womanly dignity against the oddities of circumstances in the partition period. The story projects as many questions of marriage, identity, torture, dehumanization, security of women as the very rejection from parental house raises these questions in front of her. Amrita Pritam postulates the double subjugation of Indian women as they were colonized under the British power and additionally by the men of their own land. They were allowed no voice or offered with no choice but to fall prey to the mercy of their men. They are treated merely as the object of suppression under the dominant powers. This unjust treatment offered to Indian women during the period made Amrita Pritam stand and raise her pen against the same

'Amrita became the first Punjabi woman writer to move out of the shadows of the contemporary male writers and create her own niche in Punjabi literature. Not just as a poet, she was indeed revolution personified. *Pinjar* can be called as the most celebrated partition novel of her own.'

Puro faces this music of double subjugation, firstly she is abducted by Rashid violating her physically and secondly her family that causes her psychological disintegration. This physical and psychological displacement brings her nothing worthy than the turmoil, tension demanding an escape from her life itself. Once, she demands a retake in life as she longs ...she had believed she was returning to life; she had wanted to live again, to be with her father and mother, she had come with full of hope. Now she had no hope, nor any fear. (*Custody*, 16)

Nothing remains worthy in her life as she develops merely *the Skeleton* and attempts to commit suicide, yet Rashid who develops love for her womanly goodness helps her save from committing the suicide. However, he marries her the next day which is symbolic of her temporary dislocation transforming

her from Puro to Hamida losing her parental identity. Pitying at the worst condition of Puro, having been abducted by a man of rival religion, abandoned by parents, appears to be an epitome of violence against women, surrenders to the fate as We begin to discern some specific features of 'communal' crimes against women... women's sexuality symbolizes 'manhood'; its desecration is a matter of such shame and dishonor that it has to be avenged... It is women ultimately who are the most violently dealt with as a consequence. (*Custody*, 43)

Puro wanted to marry, but not to a Muslim guy, hence, her marriage brought her nothing best than the social humiliation, insult as her mother questions her, "Who will marry you now? You are defiled! Your religion is polluted. (*Custody*, 28) She begins to lead a traumatized life of an abandoned woman who caused dishonor to family, abused and mistreated, seen with jaundiced eyes and tormented at the fate of woman. Amrita Pritam turns to be acerbic in her criticism as she poses the mental agony of woman undergoing such situations. Yet, she pities at her condition as she is expected to sacrifice her life for the dignity, status and identity of her family. The partition of Indian sub-continent brings a natural disaster that drastically influences the lives of innocent women. Eventually, having left with no choice, Puro had to return to Rashid's home just to lead a life of a skeleton, soulless, mindless and emotionless. *Pinjar* remains her only identity turning her totally dry, emotionless and dreamless for rest of life. She turns from Puro to Hamida sacrificing her every wish to be a human being. On the contrary, Rashid by experiencing the streams of goodness and human kindness develops true love with Puro that she rejects blaming him to be the cause of destruction of life. Similarly, the communal violence and bloodshed finds its best expression in the lines as

The streets ran with blood and were to be cluttered with human corpses, with no one to bury or cremate them, the stink from putrefying flesh hung in the air spreading pestilences. (*Custody*, 84)

When Puro returns to Rashid, her identity changes dramatically as Rashid forcibly converts her to Islam and marry her. Puro soon turns to be Hamida. However, Rashid repents for abducting, raping and polluting her identity. Yet, he seeks salvation on the counterpart of his repentance. He tries to be pure, divine lover of her, but Puro remains stubborn as she is unable to forgive his sin. Hamida now comes in contact with other three women; all of them are treated merely as dead bodies, and not as living things. Amrita Pritam incorporates other supportive characters such as Taro, Kammo who are also treated merely objects as non-living things. Taro suffers with an unidentified disease and left by her husband. Circumstantially she leads a life of a prostitute bearing illness and family condition compels her to beg for her tragic death. The destiny shows no mercy to her as she helplessly demands death in the lines Puro as-

What can I tell you/when a girl is given away in marriage, God deprives her of her tongue, so that she may not complain. 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. (*Custody*,38).

Kammo appears to be a motherless young girl who is disowned by father as she stays with her aunts who ill-treats her by all possible means. She conceives Puro in the mother figure but is denied to meet her as she is a converted Muslim. Pritam is deliberate at deploying '*a naked parade of a girl*' as a form of procession accompanied by drums and beats in the

village. This act is treated as dehumanization bringing merely mutilation to a woman's dignity. Deepti Misri calls this as "violence merely phenomenal" and "historical" who appears to look beyond partition. Life appears to all of them as sinful, fruitless and soulless. Ultimately, they declare their womanly birth as a crime. Amrita Pritam courageously illustrates the large scale onslaught of women during the partition period. Women, in order to safeguard their identity, chastity and survive in the darkest hour needed a company of men. They were seeking supposedly safer places to secure their lives. Amrita Pritam recounts on insecurity of Indian women as

There was a refugee camp in the adjoining village set up for the Hindus and Sikhs. The camp was guarded by the military. But daily the Muslims hooligans would come and take away young girls from the camp at night and bring them back the next morning. (*Custody*,93).

The horrific picture gets revealed when Lajo gets kidnapped by Muslims. Puro persuades Rashid to help Lajo return home. She signifies tremendous power in her attempt and succeeds in her attempt. She takes her back to familial life.

An in-depth scrutiny of *Pinjar* reveals the pitiable conditions of Indian women during the partition period those were mis-handled, exploited forcibly, tortured, and dehumanized under the dominating powers of male masculinity. Her narration offers us the horrendous record of the darkest episode in the entire history of India. Amrita Pritam portrays women as weaker sex having no voice or choice as they are conventionally denied all rights of human justice. It is her victimization and silent suffering that demands urgent need of social equality against the powers of masculinity. Be it Puro, Taro or Kammo, all of them meet their destruction offered not by their destiny, but by male domination from all possible dimensions. Their suffering and victimization is more talkative than expression of their voice itself in the novel. *Pinjar* denotes violence at all levels ranging from domestic, communal, social, religious, and national to worldwide that is systematically encroached upon women in India. All female characters such as Puro, Lajo, Taro and Kammo explore through distinctive forms of physical torture, destruction of identity and psychological trauma breaking them into as many pieces. Their struggles against the dominating powers decoy them to the levels of brutal animals rejecting rights of living to other creatures. Pritam postulates multiple layers of physical, sexual, psychological, communal and political violence that ruins very identity of women in epidemic proportions. Her characters merely embody deadly existence and struggle to survive in the midst of physical torture, tension and trauma with frustrated dreams only. Physical torture, sexual assaults, kidnapping, rapes and resultant unwanted pregnancies bring merely humiliation on the counterpart of female autonomy was so common in the partition period. Amrita Pritam offers this realistic portrayal on the larger canvas of her outstanding narrative *Pinjar: the Skeleton*. Her portrayal comes with as many incidents of mutilation overwhelming the sense and sensibilities of Indian readers, with extensive suffocative detailing that represents merely distaste, hatred, anguish, psychological trauma and helplessness of Indian women in the period.

Conclusion

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