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# A Critical Study of Amrita Pritam's Writings: Her Sensitivity towards Social Norms during Indo-Pak Partition Holocaust

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### Abstract

Amrita Pritam, the living legend in the Indian Literature in Translation, belonged to Lahore and in post-independent India she belonged to Punjab India. Most of the contemporary novelists of her times from nook and corner of Indian Peninsula convey meanings and messages in relation to cultural baggage, cultural identity, and cultural difference. Amrita as the first modernist writer in Indian Literature who insert life into literature which signifies her being an outsider within her own world. As a female novelist too in gender-biased Indian society she struggled with the conventional norms of society and the women characters become her way of expressing her concern of her conscience regarding the prevailing norms and her viewpoint upon the general public opinion during her time. Women characters in her works are autobiographical agents who share something in common with the novelist's journey of life and her point of view towards custom-based practices. Amrita Pritam does not simply write about women who got injured and then resurged. The themes of her novels provide deeper meaning to the embodied women's body.

The study in this paper will take up analysis from the point of feminine subjectivity as well as in context of specific gender victimization, abduction, rape, and violence to fulfil communal-patriarchal ambitions to rule over or ravage the territory, women, and common mass during Indo-Pak Partition Holocaust just after post-independence of both India and Pakistan. The study is an attempt to bring out binary within oneself that is to die or to live; to realise the pain and find precarity or to continue with the self-anguish in one's self-reflection; to repeat the same that one has undergone over the other or to be a phoenix to resurge after a living trauma, shame, and internal death of one's thinking capacity. The structure of the film *Pinjar* (2003) that is adapted from the translated version of the novel "*Pinjar*" (1950) in Punjabi language, titled "*Skeleton and That Man*" (1992)-surfaces two aspects of the women characters-first to attain or regain the path of respect and self-dignity in an unknown house or place or in a different communal society; second the inner desire that constantly play with struggles without knowing the outcome and without thinking of any expectations.

**Keywords:** Holocaust, partition, communal society, thinking capacity, resurge

### Introduction

The dawn of 15<sup>th</sup> August brought India freedom, but with it there was also a colossal of division on grounds of communal disharmony created with the auspicious celebration of India and Pakistan as the new-named nations. It ripped apart harmony between two communities-Hindus and Muslims. As the contemporary poet and the writer Hassan Manto in his short fiction titled "Toba Tek Singh" says the madness of partition embodied the madness of healthy and sound minds as well as the madness of the sick psyche of national identities, whose sudden shared history and heritage got into mass displacement and in enormous sense exodus across the new-named nations as per the then outgoing colonizers' settlement of the issue of independence of both communities in the name of separate nations. Subsequently the division caused the wave of hatred, humiliation, robbery, mass murder, molestation and rape of women and girls in the ongoing

unending process of Partition which had its worst phase in the year 1948.

The complexities of Partition Holocaust were deciphered and communicated by many writers. They experienced, witnessed and suffered the trauma of dislocation, nostalgia, uprootedness and to many it was a narrative of sense of belongingness. Isabella Bruschini writes:

For ordinary people, whose lives were devastated, Partition was too high a price to fully relish the coincidental attainment of freedom and independence. Most of them were totally deprived of their properties and homes; Many lost their friends and relatives, were witnesses, victims or perpetrators of unutterable atrocities or murders and ended up as refugees on one of the other sides of the borders <sup>[1]</sup>.

Incidents that took place in the outer world raised turmoil in the inner self of the writers of the subcontinent. Writers like Krishna Baldev Vaid (The Broken Mirror), Rahi Masoom Raza (Aadha Gaon), Intizar Hussain (Basti), Yashpal (Jhoota

Sach) and Amrita Preetam (Pinjar) narrated their experiences taking Partition as a leitmotif. The killing spree followed by the Partition was soon converted into ethnic cleansing.

Amrita Pritam had a first-hand experience of Partition like Bhishma Sahani, Khushwant Singh, Chaman Nahal, Shiv-K. Kumar etc. All have to leave their homelands, which were allotted to Pakistan after partition. The tragedy and trauma besides shame and anger speak of the writers' exasperation which they let it outburst through the compelling anguished portrayal of their characters. They all have tried to relieve, relive, and recollect their past. Amrita Pritam was a victim of Partition and was rendered refugee. She left her birthplace Punjab (now in Pakistan) and came to India. She remembers the same in her autobiographical writing titled "Revenue Stamp" the same in these words: "The riot-torn month of May, 1947, took me for safety to Dehradun" [2].

Further in her autobiography she elaborates the heart-shattering and sensitive account of Partition, which throughout her life left an indelible print on her psyche and her heightened lyricism towards holocaust of Partition affected her and she describes her own injured consciousness and endurance:

"The most gruesome accounts of marauding invaders in all mythologies and chronicles put together will not, I believe, compare with the blood curdling horrors of this historic year. Tale after tale, each more hair-raising than the last, would take a whole lifetime to retell. Uprooted from Lahore, I had rehabilitated myself at Dehradun for a while, but later went to Delhi for work and a place to live in. On my return journey, I could not get a wink of sleep on the train. The pitch-black darkness of the night was like a sign of the times. So piercing were the sighs of winds carried and echoed, it seemed we were back in mourning over this watershed of History. The trees loomed larger and larger like sentiments of sorrow. There were patches of stark aridity in between like the mounds of massive graves. The words of Waris Shah: "How'll the dead and departed meet again?"-surged back and forth through my mind. I thought, a great poet like him alone could bewail the loss a Heer once had to bear. But who could not think of no one greater than Waris Shah to chant my invocation to. In the moving train, my trembling fingers moved on to describe the pangs I went through –

From the depths of your grave,  
Waris Shah.

Add a new page to your saga of love..... [3]

Amrita Pritam's novel "Pinjar" is written with this backdrop of Partition that presents evidences of bloodshed, mass displacement, ethnic cleansing, molestation, abduction, and raging acts of brutality that violated both territory and females cross-borders, at frontiers and disgustingly impeached the humanitarian rights, civil law and civil sense. She has problematized abduction, rejection and disillusionment as elements of transgression and self-deception to withdraw from outside chaos and internal pain. She encapsulates how she came to write this novel:

".....and even after having suffered so much from the Partition, I found it within me to deplore dispassionately the holocaust caused by the devotees of the two religions. Thus, it was that I came upon that painfully sensitive face around which my novel "Pinjar" was written [4].

Her observations in the novel "Pinjar" are so keen that they do not require direct descriptions of mass displacement, dishonour and dislocation. Her novel is embedded with the echo of Partition, and subsequent social and cultural embarrassment and shamelessness both for country and women's bodies' embodiment ruthlessly. During Partition people started leaving their respective regions or the declared nation's respective territories. The scale and ferocity of enmity and brutality displayed disrespect towards a specific gender, which could neither be prevented nor described. Renn Addhalaka in her book "Gendered Bodies and Sexualities" (2013) writes that, "women and girls both of the oppressive and the oppressor caught in the grip of body politics" [5].

In the context of the novelist's narrative, the novel shows the author as the participant and the path-breaker who attempts to manifest shams of social structure and cultural civility. This fact persists in the trauma of the characters of "Pinjar" novel too. Pooro, the female protagonist in the novel, voices the cause of those who had been marginalised, silenced and tortured during the Partition. Her sister-in-law Lajo is abducted by the marauders during Partition. Pooro saves and rehabilitates her. Thus, the situation of Partition is also represented as a platform for women where they emerged as the saviours of victimized. Many women as well as victims of Partition worked as self-inspired agents of benevolence., friends, care-takers and instructors. They were either "appointed by the government" or became the members of the organisations for the rehabilitation of women. They got an opportunity to work as counsellors, friends, care-takers and instructors. They at the same time provided motherly care, love and friendly assistance to the sufferers of this conflagration.

In "Pinjar" Pooro got stripped of her identity and sense of belonging because she was abducted by a Muslim boy Rasheed in order to inflict vengeance on account of an old family dispute. Poor's family rejected her. But when her brother's wife Lajo was abducted during Partition, Pooro forgot all dishonours fired on her by her family and saves Lajo from the clutches of a Muslim family. Pooro's actions were full of wisdom and her act of saving Lajo was a major event that re-established her lost identity in her family.

In the novel "Pinjar", ".....the process of identity formation is a crucial theme which explores from a female perspective-the physical, emotional, intellectual growth of women against the background of an exceptional political and social situation." [6]

Amrita Pritam titles one section of the novel *Pinjar* also as "1947", because that year was marked by the blood of the millions of innocent Hindus and Muslims. In this novel the news of bloodshed by hysterical fanatics was spread in the village by Pooro. That news came from the villagers like 'dust in wind.' [7] In the novel. Pooro is pictured as a tool to illustrate violent, horrifying frenzy of people. Amrita Pritam writes:

"But people had gone mad; they talked of ominous things. No good news would come. The Pooro heard that streets in the city were smeared with blood, markets were glutted with corpses, foul smell rose from rotten corpses; nobody burnt them, and nobody cremated them. People guessed that epidemic would spread in the city" (Pinjar 64).

The story of the Partition of India in the section "1947" of the novel *Pinjar* is graphically designed through the information

that Pooro gets from other people. Amrita has described the same in the following lines:

The Pooro heard the boundaries were constructed in some cities. There were Muslims on one side and the Hindus on the other. Then Pooro heard, from another side that Muslims came injured and dead, many died on that side, many were killed during their journey, many were dying after coming on this side. (64).

The same feeling has been conveyed by the critic Anjali Bhardawaj Datta in her article Gendering Oral History of Partition: Interrogating Patriarchy, she says-

“Some people were forced to move “out” without any material possessions as they were either looted before moving or were raided or plundered on their way by men of ‘other’ communities. In the wake of communal frenzy, people lost everything in a very short span of time. Most of the women still do not understand why people fought so bitterly during “Batwara”?” [8]

Amrita Pritam indicates that women’s bodies were treated as the metaphors of countries. Urvashi Butalia mentions that “Partition provided rationale for making women into symbols of the nation’s honour.” [9]

The animosity of one country for the other was displayed through the indecencies towards them by the fanatics. There were many Lajos who revolved around the circumference of the patriarchal norms. In “Pinjar” Lajo was saved by Pooro. But many women chose suicide and many were forced to commit suicide to save themselves from the frenzy of fanatics. The existing norms at the times of Partition established suicide as an alternate to the family dishonour and shame.

Humaneness was put aside at that time. Borders were coloured with the blood of innocent people. Everybody was from “the other community” (Pinjar 65) first and human being afterwards. People killed each other in riots. In Pooro’s village too the virtual horror of Partition blew apart the hearts of people. Only Muslims stayed back in Pooro’s village. Hindus got trapped in a Haveli like cattle. One day villagers assaulted the Haveli. They broke in the locked rooms/houses and became the masters of those houses. If anyone dared to come out of the Haveli at night, he was mercilessly killed at once. One day, people of “the other community” poured oil on the doors and windows of Haveli, and set fire on the doors and windows. The following paragraph from the novel appears as a breathing document of inhumanity which carried people nowhere:

Cries of people were rising high like the flames of fire. Military put out the fire and took out people. They had seated fear struck people on a cart. Three half burnt men were also brought out, flesh was oozing from their bodies, and their flesh was burnt and hanging from their bones. Their skeletons were peeping from their elbows and knees. Those three men died while people were sitting in the carts. The carts went on after throwing the corpses of those three men. Their family members cried helplessly, but military did not have time to cremate them (Pinjar 65).

## Conclusion

In conclusion it is apt to quote Paola Baccheta to understand moral bankruptcy of the masculinity of men, patriarchal yardsticks regarding women’s existence in times of revenge and outburst of vengeance, she writes in her book titled “Reinterrogating Partition Violence”:

“The symbolic meanings of these brutalities rely upon the gendering and sexualizing of intermale relations of domination and subordination. In this logic, stripping and parading women naked ultimately signals the feminization of the women’s male counterparts who prove incapable of protecting “their’ women/community/nation’. Killing fetuses, knifing, and opening the unpregnant womb constitute offences against the father/husband, but these acts also signify genocide.” [10]

Amrita Pritam carefully weaves the intricacies of partition with the help of Pooro. Pooro is not the name of a mere woman, rather infact, she is the metaphor of manifesting valour, compassion and insight of thousands of women, who became the saviours of the victims of the disgrace and brutality.

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