

Women's Body as the site of Encroachment: A Critical Study of Amrita Pritam's Novel *Pinjar*

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Abstract

History has been witnessed physical, sexual and psychological violence strikes women in epidemic proportions worldwide. Violence against women is an age old practice. Woman's body has been a site of contest in India since Vedic ages. Indian epics like Mahabharata and the Ramayana are also the examples of age old maltreatment, torture, suppression, beating and humiliation of women.

*The proposed study tries to explore the gendered violence by examining the novel *Pinjar* which stands as a 'witness' of the violent division. The study tries to delineate the wounded soul of women during the partition of India and Pakistan (1946) through a critical study of Amrita Pritam's novel *Pinjar/The Skeleton*. The study is an attempt to show the fissures that accompany processes of a gendered identity formation during partition. The proposed study voices the gendered violence and traumatized 'Self' of women and their concerns of displacement, marginalization, dual identities and powerlessness.*

The paper also portrays how conflicts between families, communities and nations are so often brutally and mindlessly played out on the bodies and identities of women. The main focus of the paper is on the point that women's body is seen as a site of encroachment which leads to violence against women not only during partition but even today.

The paper critically explores the ways in which the destiny of the novels protagonist Puro eventually threatens the fate of women not only in India and Pakistan but worldwide.

Key Words: Women, Violence, Encroachment, Body, Identity

Violence against women is an age old practice. Woman's body has been a site of contest in India since Vedic ages. Indian epics like Mahabharata and the Ramayana are also the examples of age old maltreatment, torture, suppression, beating and humiliation of women.

Woman has been the victim of different types of violence in all the ages. Violence against women can be of mental or physical nature and can be inflicted at individual, interpersonal or collective levels in social, political, religious or domestic domain. Some causes of violence against woman are sexual harassment, forced marriages, victims of rape, male child preference and suspicion.

Amrita Pritam's Partition novel *Pinjar* is a shattering blow to the hegemonic patriarchal set up where a woman's body is considered as a site of contest and her fidelity is constantly questioned there by subjecting her physical anguish and mental trauma.

The present paper focuses upon the different dimensions of violence and their impact on the female protagonist Puro, who struggles through the pain of abduction, gender violence and displacement. The novel is a saga of violence not only against Puro but for the woman kind.

Amrita Pritam in her novel *Pinjar* (1950) narrates the gendered experience of the trauma and sufferings of partition. The novel is an exact picture of the violence against women during and after the partition of India in 1947. It portrays the plight of women, their struggle and sufferings due to the perpetrators of violence either, in the name of culture, religion or societal norm. The novel was translated into English by Khushwant Singh as *The Skeleton* and into French by Denis Matriage. The cinematic adaptation of the novel was released in 2003, which won the National Award in the best film category conferred by the Indian Government.

Pinjar is a story of abduction of a young girl Puro by a man (Rashid) of rival religion in order to avenge the family enmity. It is a saga of Puro's journey of transformation from Puro to Hamida, her loss of identity and her agony. The novel is a critique of the society at large which considers the woman as a property to be usurped and used according to its wish, as Menon and Dharin rightly pointed out that: "[the] material, symbolic and political significance of abduction of women was not lost....on the women themselves..... their communion or on.....governments. As a retaliatory measure, it was simultaneously as assertion of identity and humiliation of the rival community through the appropriation of its women" (Menon, 3).

Pinjar highlights the women's sufferings, exploitation and sacrifices because of their dislocation and abduction during partition. The novelist critically explores the ways in which the destiny of its protagonist Puro eventually becomes the fate of thousands of women at the time of partition.

In the major part of the first half of the novel we find that Puro's family is a happy family of two sisters and a brother. Puro is an obedient and ideal daughter, the darling of her parents. She unquestioningly accepts what her parents decide for her marriage and dreams about the future she is going to spend with Ramchand, her prospective suitor. Puro's father associates the idea of family honour with women of the family. The turning point in the story arrives when Puro is abducted by Rashid, a Muslim boy who is forced for it, to avenge for the similar act committed by Puro's uncle. Thus portraying how conflicts between families, communities and nation are so often brutally and mindlessly played out on the bodies and identities of women. Rashid does not rape Puro. She after struggling a lot manages to escape and goes home, but she is told by her father that there is no place for her in the family as she had been abducted which now puts her chastity and fidelity to question:

"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"(p.23).

Her father refuses to accept her saying that he cannot keep her as nobody will marry her because she has lost her status and identity. Rejection from her own family to accept her is another form of violence she goes through. Rejection was a bigger blow of pain than her abduction.

She has been doubly violated: firstly by abductor (Rashid) who violates her physically and secondly she's being violated emotionally by her own family.

“.....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” (p.16)

Puro is devastated and returns to Rashid to lead a life which is akin to that of a skeleton (Pinjar). Puro's identity undergoes a drastic change. Rashid forces marriage on her and changes her to Hamida from Puro. 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 Puro's abduction and seeks redemption. He tries to provide love and care to Puro, but Puro is unrelenting as the wounds inflicted by Rashid are unforgivable. Puro as Hamida comes in contact with three females who were also the victim of gendered violence. All the three characters are treated merely as body, not as humans. Taro is suffering with some unknown disease and is disowned by her husband. Her husband has brought another woman to live with him and forces Taro to become a prostitute. Her illness and her husband's attitude towards her are unbearable she wants death to free her from the cage of life. She says to Puro: “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. God's fetter were me and only for my feet” (p.36-38).

Through this episode Amrita Pritam highlights that women are considered merely bodies nothing more than bodies and violation of women's bodies becomes the moral perversion of the community itself.

Second female Puro meets is Kammo a motherless young girl, who is disowned by her father and she stays at her aunt's house. Kammo is illtreated and exploited by her aunt. Kammo sees Hamida as her mother figure but her aunt stops her to meet Hamida as Hamida is muslim. Hamida(Puro) 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 crime to be born a woman” (p.65).

Puro's dilemma is repeated when Lajo (Puro's sister-in-law) is abducted by Muslims and kept in capture in her own house and Ramchand comes to Puro seeking her help to relieve Lajo. Puro convinces Rashid to help Lajo return back to her home. Puro depicts immense strength in the hour of crisis to help Lajo, escape the clutches of her abductors. Almost all the female characters in the novel are victim of one or the other type of violence. They are oppressed by double yoke of patriarchy and dislocation.

Puro is not only disowned by her own father but her fiancé Ramchand also questions the chastity, purity and dignity by ignoring to recognize Puro after her abduction.

Through the characters; Puro, Lajo, Taro, Kammo Amrita tries to unveil the facets of violence against women and her trauma. Here Amrita highlights the fact that women had to constantly prove their innocence and assert their right to dignity in our patriarchal society.

Another form of violence against women portrayed in the novel is the parading a women naked through the village and towns. One such incident is mentioned in the novel, where a young girl was paraded naked, “One day Puro saw that a young girl was paraded naked while ten youths in the form of procession accompanied by drum passed by their village...” (p. 91).

There is another women character, who was sexually assaulted and becomes pregnant. The woman was mad and was not even aware of the violence inflicted on her body and a child growing in her. There were many women who were mutilated and impregnated during the tremulous time of partition.

The agony of the child forcibly planted in their womb is the reverberation of Puro's hatred towards Rashid and her foetus. Puro's awareness of the fact that a life is growing within her haunts and torments her. Puro is not only physically, emotionally violated but she's been violated mentally also. Amrita Pritam voices the trauma of rape through the symbol of mother's womb which has become the victim of violence.

The novel depicts different dimensions of violence against women; on religious, social and most prominently physical and mental levels. Amrita Pritam through her violated women characters in the novel brings forth the fact that women have been the prime victims in every communal strife, riots and wars. As Dr Archana Sinha puts it, "It has been quite disturbing experience all over the world that any conflict, a war, civil strife, communal riots or disturbance women and children became the prime victims of violence. Children are orphaned and women are not only widowed but also become victim of rape and abduction" (p.43)

Whether it was Puro or Hamida, Lajo, Taro, Kammo or the mad women or the naked women, woman becomes the 'other' not only during partition even today. That 'other' whose lives did not matter, whose voices are silenced, whose identities were subjugated and who remained at the periphery of power struggle and power equation and continue to be marginalized and displaced at the cost of the self. Pinjar thus gives a voice to this 'other' and their concerns of displacement, marginalization, dual identity and powerlessness.

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