



About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



---

ISSN 2278-9529  
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal  
[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## Sufferer to Saviour: Pooro in *The Skeleton*

**Vishnu Ram**

Research Scholar,  
Dept. of English & Foreign Languages,  
MDU, Rohtak, Haryana, India.

### Abstract:

In *Pinjar*, Amrita Pritam has portrayed scores of individuals stranded amid a throng of hostile institutions created by humans themselves. Human happiness is time and again marred by these imagined barriers and binary divisions among people. Whether it is the division of male and female, of rich and poor, of Hindus and Muslims, of native land and foreign land, of family and strangers etc. makes humans to suffer. Left with limited alternatives, the protagonist of the novel, Pooro, and the likes of her expose social and religious institutions are pseudo-saviours posing as saviours. Unfortunately, these scattered individuals fail to come up with a solution of ending these dehumanizing forces working on smaller as well as larger scale. Although we cannot overlook that at least they save themselves from being passive or oppressors themselves and make their surroundings less harsh for others.

**Keywords: survival, uprooted-ness, suffering, dehumanization, ostracism, consummation, saviour, refuge, vulnerable, preordained, victim, syndrome.**

Human beings are like trees and plants. A plant uprooted from soil either withers if left uncared for or lives when nurtured diligently. Same is the case with humans. Native culture and familial ties are like soil to them. This 'soil' gives them sense of belonging and identity. When separated from its soil, one is subjected to acute suffering. Only love and sensitive environment can enhance one's chances of survival. The story of Amrita Pritam's *The Skeleton* also revolves around this theme. The novel chronicles the struggle of Pooro surviving her uprooted-ness and helping others torn up like her.

Originally written in Punjabi by in 1950 as *Pinjar*, it was translated by Khushwant Singh, who himself wrote poignant tales of partition and dehumanization such as *Train to Pakistan*, as *The Skeleton* in English. Born in Gujranwala, now in Pakistan, Amrita Pritam left Lahore after the partition of the country in 1947. Her firsthand experience of the gore and atrocities meted out against innocent people gave her deep insight into the heart of the matter. She heard about the incidents of women's kidnappings and their nude parades after rapes, mutilations of organs and lifelong slavery to dark alien places. She voiced her concern for those victims through *Pinjar*. She sympathetically wrote for the absent, the inarticulate and the secluded from the society, indifferent and thus degenerated institution. About development of the character of Pooro, Pritam herself in an interview to the *Tribune* stated:

The most terrible thing of the times was the partition. Nobody would ever know that the dreams of how many girls of this country were slaughtered, that a woman's experience were universal and irreparable.

It was thus Pooro of *Pinjar* took shape.

*The Skeleton* recounts the journey of Pooro, a young Hindu girl of thirteen, kidnapped by a Muslim boy, Rashida. The novel starts in 1935 in pre-partition days and ends in the post-partition India covering thirteen years of Pooro's life. Throughout all these years, suffering constantly accompanied Pooro. Sometimes she suffers pangs of nostalgia of her own and sometimes miseries of others discomfort her. Deserted by her family fearing communal insecurity and societal dishonor, Pooro has been left with only a few options. In future, she may choose either to suffer passively or to persecute others like she was persecuted or to help others like her. She opts for the last option.

Pooro's suffering is multifaceted. Various vantage points of observing her situation give more clear idea of how inner terrain of her psyche is inflicted by exploitation and oppression at every turn of her life. She suffers as a female in patriarchal setup that allows nominal rights to female, as a member of a family with a history of long-running feud with another family, as a member of a community that is torn apart by years of communal strife with another community, as an individual in a society that suppresses autonomous tendencies, as a believer of a religion and as a citizen of nation captured in gruesome circumstances of division. In aforesaid larger structures, Pooro's condition is akin to that of a marionette. Puppets feel nothing, whereas Pooro is highly sensitive to the infliction of pain. All the structures constituting the world of Pooro enslave and simultaneously disavow this fact of exercising power in this way. Nevertheless, she does not appropriate or internalizes these corrupt ways of practicing power. She fights back to come out of degraded state to somewhat exalted position by not vindicating wrongdoings of society.

Family, community, culture, religion and many more factions work within societal environment that direct lives of individuals. Pooro's first experience as an entity is related to her being a member in her family and then as a part of the society. She feels her existence through familial ties and prospects her family affiliates to her. A family feud from generations between Pooro's family, the Sahukars and Rashida's family, the Sheikhs culminates in her abduction by Rashida reversing everything. In an ethnic group like hers, the safety of whole family is preferred to that of a single member. Even successful in escaping from the clutches of her kidnapper who forewarned she has "no place in that family any more", her family refuses to accept her back, out of fear of ostracism in society (Pritam 8). She is told that this is the "fate" ordained for her and they are "helpless" (Pritam 8).

However, not the vague idea of providence but her cultural structure is responsible for the making of her "fate". As a part of the system and being its female member, her parents decide almost everything for her: manner of upbringing, education, marriage and other similar things according to the norms of society. Pooro, subconsciously aware, also goes along with every proceeding. From the very beginning, her parents hurry to marry her signifying the burdensomeness of this task for them. Although Pooro happily imagines about her married life but thought of leaving parental home after marriage becomes reason of her woe. A folk song about daughter's lament explicitly protests discrimination in patriarchal system and questions the privileges given to males:

To sons are given homes and palaces;

Daughters are exiled to foreign lands. (Pritam 5)

As Pritam stated in aforementioned interview to the *Tribune*, Pooro is one of those girls whose dreams get destroyed in communal turmoil. Unexpected turns of events compound Pooro's troubles. Pooro was forced into an unwanted marriage followed by undesirable conception. Marital consummation immediately after marriage is thought to be appropriate and natural even in marriages sanctioned by society and religion. No consent, especially from bride, is considered important. In forced marriages, consent-seeking is absolutely out of question. Therefore, in a way every conjugal consummation would be a forced consummation for a naïve girl of thirteen whether arranged marriage as Pooro's canceled marriage to Ramchand or her forced marriage to Rashida. Ramchand also would not have taken permission of Pooro to consummate their marriage and Pooro also would have acquiesced to his wishes thinking it as her wifely duty. The very institution of religion supposed to work for universal benefit reduces a woman, for example Pooro, to a body, to a mere structure of bone, to a *pinjar*.

The fact of conceiving a child by a person of other religion torments Pooro. All her aversion concentrates on her unborn child. Her agony is multi-dimensional since the child is the only bond between her lost identity and present identity. Pooro is renamed as Hamida when married to Rashida. Pooro concretizes her aversion to the child as she subconsciously thinks the child as the living manifestation of all the wrong doings carried out against her. Her antagonism towards Rashida and male-centeredness of societal setup is at heights in the below mentioned stream of her conscious "this boy...this boy's father...all mankind...all men... men who gnaw a woman's body like a dog gnawing a bone and like a dog consuming it (Pritam 15)."

This very focal point of Pooro's hatred also acts as a hinge around which her initial bitterness changes into tenderness. After fierce conflict in the feelings of hate and love in Pooro's mind, the latter become victorious. She begins to think the child really belongs to her if not anyone else from her family or Rashida's family. She consoles herself thinking "she would gaze at the face of her son in whose veins mingled the blood of her parents" (Pritam 14). Moreover, she gradually harmonizes with her 'new family' and starts soothing others in distress. She considers all who are unguarded against exploitation as skeletons or *pinjars* feeling a deep sense of humanity towards them. She turns her feelings into action and emerges as messiah or saviour for the doomed.

Furthermore, there is striking likeness between Pooro and the persons whom she rescues or somehow soothes. Kammo, Taro, a mad woman and her infant, an unnamed Hindu girl and Lajo are the characters whom Pooro helps in one way or the other. Kammo in her abandonment, Taro in her forced marriage, the madwoman in her ostracism, the madwoman's infant and the unnamed refugee girl in their vulnerability and Lajo in her trapped existence are strikingly similar in situation to Pooro. To begin with Kammo, dependent on her aunt for living, is deserted by her insensitive father and stepmother. Pooro's desertion by her family makes them in parallel condition. Pooro develops motherly feelings for Kammo. She wants "to mother the unwanted Kammo: to spoil her, to let her to be petulant" like an indulgent parent revealing what Pooro did not get in her own life—happiness and acceptance from parents— She wants Kammo to downpour with all that (Pritam 16).

Initially hesitant because of communal barriers between them, Pooro manages to befriend Taro. Taro, on the verge of nervous breakdown, has been getting fits often since her marriage two years ago. When treated sensitively, Taro reveals to Pooro that her husband, already having a “low-caste woman” as his wife, married to her only for his parents who wanted a “daughter-in-law of their own caste” (Pritam 19). Taro represents hundreds of thousands of suffering women trapped in hapless circumstances. She indignantly questions the justness of system and presence of indiscriminating providence:

Only my lips are sealed and my feet put in fetters. There is no justice in the world; nor any God. He can do what he likes; there is no God to stop. God’s fetters were meant only for my feet. (Pritam 19)

The madwoman is not claimed by society or religious faction when she was living in inhuman condition. Awful treatment to her by others represents the nature of unsympathetic dealing of society and religion towards an individual in vulnerable state. Rather she is mentally and sexually abused. Only a few sensitive persons like Pooro are exceptions who give her clothes to wear and food to eat. An unknown person impregnates the madwoman and then leaves thereafter on her own. She dies during an unattended childbirth. Pooro adopts her infant and starts rearing the baby as her own. Hindu communal factions, instead of appreciating her good deed, try to blame her of damaging their religion by calling this adoption as an act of sacrilege. However, the figure of Pooro as a messiah comes as triumphant overcoming all such obstacles.

Communal and societal forces play a pivotal role in shaping the situations of ups and downs occurring Pooro’s life. However, the plight of Pooro is addressed by these very institutions as her “fate” or a kind of payback for sins committed in past life. Pooro gradually realizes miserable state of anybody is not outcome of some obscure preordained fate. She notes towards the end that transgressions against the workings of fate are overlooked when it affects in large-scale and majority of the society. Nevertheless, Pooro is not one of them who leave one to one’s “fate”. To her even a single person’s affliction equally matters. Among many others including Pooro herself, the young Hindu girl whom she finds in sugarcane fields represent such innocent victims of so-called fate. Pooro’s giving refuge to that girl is more humane than leaving her alone to face her “predestined destiny”.

The complexity of the relationship of Pooro and Rashida is used by Pritam to redefine the meaning of love. Both are not the same persons in the end as they were before when they started with negative reactions to each other. Rashida’s lustful gaze betrays absence of feelings of love in their early encounters. His constant stalking incurs Pooro’s revulsion for him. Later vast changes take place, when Pooro is kidnapped and compelled to live a life of a captive as his wife. Strong symptoms of Stockholm syndrome and Lima Syndrome can easily be seen in Pooro and Rashida respectively. In Stockholm syndrome, a kidnapped person empathizes and sympathizes to their kidnapper. Lima syndrome denotes the development of sympathy in abductors for their hostages or captives. Abuser or kidnapper feels bad to continue hurting their captives. Pooro’s change of her feelings towards Rashida from hate to love is evidently inspired by supposed small acts of kindness from his side. Pooro comes to think Rashida as benevolent for not to ruining her physically and for not leaving her to live as social pariah like her grand uncle left his grand aunt after treating her as concubine. Rashida also comes to understand that crimes done under the

pretext of family vendetta with backup of communal power of majority are not condonable. Pooro's internalization of the values of Rashida's community is a survival tactic. All the same, she has loosened her defense mechanism later realizing both are somehow victimized by their circumstances created by society.

Pooro's transformation to a saviour takes a long time but it occurs in a slow and psychologically convincing manner. In 1935, Pooro, an inexperienced teen, after totally numbed by overwhelming pain and has "followed him [Rashida] as the blind" when she has had consoled herself thinking "what more could anyone take from her than life?" (Pritam 10). Nevertheless, with the passage of time, she overcomes from her trauma and contemplates about her life deeply and tacitly decides to spread love and compassion to the wretched sufferers like her. In 1947, the same tame girl saves another (Lajo) from a more disastrous fate than that of her, thus emerging as a saviour who once was a sufferer. She even has chance to return to her family which once refused to accept her back. Like a nearly withered plant, Pooro resurrects to life with determination and creates a healthy environment that helps positively other plants (like that of Rashida) who are indispensable to grow timid plants (like that of Lajo) as well. In the end, her reply to her brother regarding her decision to stay in Pakistan with Rashida is worth mentioning:

When Lajo is welcomed back in her home than you can take it that

Pooro has also returned to you...whosoever reaches her destination,

she carries along my soul. (Pritam 49, 50)

Pritam's Pooro is a saviour on a very small scale. Pritam shows woman's suffering is caused by the forces of religion, society and gender. Pooro fights back but not with a colossal objective. She aims to acquire a niche to make it easy for her to live. She challenges norms but not to alter them or destroy them. She condones her family's injustice and falls in love with the perpetrator of her devastation. Pooro is a miniature of a saviour. She does not achieve saviour figure at sublime scale. Nevertheless, her fight as an individual is important. She acquires meaningfulness through refusing to remain sufferer, passive and thus meaningless. She gives message that if an individual refuses to remain a sufferer and fights back, tries to find his/her moorings in changed circumstances by molding the circumstances rather than being changed by them, then there will be no need of a saviour.

### **Works Cited:**

Pritam, Amrita. Interview. *Tribune* 20 Feb. 2009. Print

---. *Pinjar*. Trans. Khushwant Singh. *The Skeleton and That Man*. New Delhi:

Sterling Publishers, 1992. 1-50. Print.