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Skeleton Existence: Gendered Violence Against Women in Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*

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Abstract:

This paper titled 'Skeleton Existence: Gendered Violence Against Women in Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*' is an attempt to identify the gendered violence faced by women who are seen as secondary or 'others' during partition through feminist perspective. Amrita Pritam in her novel *Pinjar* (1950) has narrated the gendered experience of the trauma and sufferings of partition. The novel is an accurate picture of violence against women during and after the partition of India in 1947. It portrays the plight of women, their struggle and the suffering of the perpetrators of violence, either in the name of culture, religion or the norms of the society. It's a saga of Puro's journey of transformation from Puro to Hamida, her loss of identity and agony. The novel can also be seen as a tale of women's helplessness and the individual's fight for survival. *Pinjar* thus is an attempt to give a voice to this 'other' and their concerns of displacement, marginalization, dual identity and powerlessness in a male oriented patriarchal society. The novel is relevant even in the present times because the condition of women and their status of being perpetual 'others' has not changed drastically in the Post Partition India. Their bodies still remain as sites of gendered violence. The objective of this paper is to revisit the wounds of partition in the form of gendered violence on women in the novel *Pinjar* (1950). The partition of India in towards the end of the British colonial rule not only led to a geographical division but also the division of the consciousness of its people.

Keywords: Partition, Violence, Gendered Mutilation, Tradition, Feminism.

The patriarchal India had for long muzzled and intimidated the anguish of women. Women were doubly subjugated as the colonized by the British and by the men of their own land. Women is seen as the postcolonial 'other' or the object of suppression by the dominant power. The British have used the division and rule strategy as a tool to prevail in a nation of rich cultural diversity that has enabled the British to fully and culturally conquer India. This division of people's consciousness contributed to the breakdown of the relationship that existed in the midst of its cultural and religious disparity. As a result, the seeds of competition and hatred sown in people's minds by the British sprang into murder and bloodshed during the partition. The experiences and wounds of Partition have not been healed for those who have witnessed the horrendous aftermath. Millions of households have been displaced and thousands have been killed mercilessly. In the words of PoojaPriyamvada "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 a poet, she was indeed revolution personified" (Priyamvada). *Pinjar* can be called the most celebrated partition novel of Amrita Pritam.

Feminism is a diverse collection of social movements, political behavior and philosophic views, motivated mainly by or through women's experiences, especially in terms of their political and economic status. As a social phenomenon, xenophobia centers mainly on limiting or eradicating gender equality and defending the issues of women's rights and problems in society. Feminism has gradually become more far-reaching, and certain injustices do need to be rectified through its attacks on male-dominated society, but a more down-to-earth, fair and humane view of fellow human beings is still important. One of the principal things Feminist critics do, according to Peter Barry in *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* is "Rethinking the canon, aiming at the discovery of texts written by women." (Barry134). Any component of feminist theory questions the underlying concepts of gender and sexuality and the concept of "women" itself as a structural term, whilst others are primarily interested in questioning the conventional male / female divide. Several forms of feminist theory take women's meaning for granted and provide thorough study and criticism of gender discrimination, and most feminist social movements promote women's rights interests and issues. There are several kinds of xenophobia and every one of them stipulates values and conditions for granting women their rights.

Feminism is not an ideology of the same nature. There have been several subtypes of feminist theory over time. Liberal Feminism may be seen as the mother of all feminist thought while Radical Feminism is a philosophy that argues that sexism is so deeply rooted in culture that the only solution is the abolition of the idea of gender. Socialist Feminism claims that patriarchy reinforces and promotes gender-based structures, as men are the ones that now have power and wealth whereas Cultural Feminism refers to the theory that women and men have various responses to the world around them.

Women's body has been a contested site in India since the Vedic ages. Indian epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are examples of age-old exploitation of women. Violence against women may be of a mental or physical nature and may take place in the social, political, religious or domestic spheres. Amrita Pritam narrated the gendered experience of partition trauma and suffering in her novel *Pinjar* (1950). The novel is an accurate portrayal of violence against women during and after the Indian partition of 1947. It depicts, either in the name of tradition, religion or social norm, the plight of women, their oppression and the suffering of the perpetrators of abuse. Khushwant Singh translated *Pinjar* into English as *The Skeleton*. "The play of love and hate, the complexities of human mind and above all the predicament of the abducted women are depicted in the background of the partition tragedy." (Thenmozhiand Tyagi 399) The novel is an account of abduction of a young girl Puro by a man (Rashid) of a rival religion in order to avenge the family enmity. It is a chronicle of Puro's makeover journey from Puro to Hamida, her loss of individuality and her anguish.

The novel focuses on the Gujarat district and nearby villages such as Chhatoani and Rattoval. The novel spans a ten-year cycle from 1935 to 1947. In 1947, the British divided unified India into India and Pakistan. Both the villages of Puro and Ramchand fell in the Pakistani territory. The novel focuses on the pre-and post-partition situation. The novelist bitterly satirizes the political leaders and their decision to divide Hindus from Muslims. The turning point in the story comes when Puro is kidnapped by Rashid, a Muslim boy who is pushed into revenge for a similar act committed by Puro's uncle. The country has lost the very values on which it stands, writes the author. Pritam portrays how conflicts between families, communities and nations are so often brutally and thoughtlessly played out in the bodies and identities of women. Puro was unable to grasp the reason for her abduction. Rashid clears his intention behind the abduction "Allah is my

witness that on the very first day I cast my eyes on you I fell in love with you. It was my love and the prodding of the Shaikh clan that made me do this. But I cannot bear to see you so sad.” (8). Puro tries to make Rashid understand the injustice of his vengeance on her for the sins committed by her relatives, but it was all in vain. Rashid cites the religious objections that would crop up if she went back to her parents: “Good woman you have no place in that family anymore! If they let you in even once, not one of their Hindu friends and relatives will take a drop of water in their house. And you have been with me for fifteen days.” (8) .Eventually his words came true when after struggling a lot Puro manages to escape and go home, but is told by her father Mohanlal, 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” (23). Rejection from her own family is another type of abuse she goes through. Her father is reluctant to embrace her. Not only does her own father disown Puro, but her fiancé Ramchand also challenges her chastity, modesty, and honor by denying Puro’s explanation of her abduction. She is doubly violated- firstly by the abductor (Rashid) who violated her physical space by kidnapping her and secondly the emotional violence 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 a lot of hope. Now she had no hope, nor any fear” (16).

Puro is depressed and returns to her kidnapper, Rashid, to lead a life close to that of a skeleton (Pinjar). The identity of Puro changes dramatically as Rashid forces her to convert to Islam and marry her. Puro is to become Hamida. Rashid, on the other hand, repents for the abduction of Puro and seeks salvation. He tries to give Puro love and happiness, but Puro is stubborn as Rashid's wounds are unforgivable. Hamida comes into contact with three women who have also been victims of gender-based violence. All the three characters were treated merely as bodies, not as human beings. Taro is a woman who is disowned by her husband as she suffers from some unknown disease. Her husband brought another woman to live with him and forced Taro to become a prostitute. Her illness and her husband's attitude towards her are unbearable and she wants death to free her from the cage of life. She tells 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 porridge 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 fetters were for me and only for my feet. (37-38).

The second female Puro (Hamida) meets is a motherless young girl named Kammo, who is disowned by her father and lives in her aunt's house. Kammo is ill-treated and abused by her aunt. Kammo sees Hamida as the image of her mother, but her aunt prevents her from meeting Hamida as a Muslim. Hamida knows that women are the main losers of all conflict; "It was a sin to be alive in this world full of evil, thought Hamida, It was crime to be born a woman" (65). The third woman is Pagali, a mentally unstable woman, scoffed at, but sexually assaulted by the noble men of the village. The woman was mad, and she was not even aware of the violence inflicted on her body and the child growing up in her.

There were a lot of women who were mutilated and impregnated during the tremulous period of partition. Puro's hatred of Rashid and the foetus growing in her haunts and torments her. The reverberation of despondency within Puro is not just due to physical duress, but also emotional and mental anguish. Absolute shaming and parading of naked women across villages and towns is another form of violence against women in the novel. "One day Puro saw that a young girl was paraded naked while ten youths in the form of procession accompanied by drums passed by their village." (91). The women in the village were helpless, silent spectators to such a horrible act. None of them dared to raise their voice.

The novel illustrates the large-scale onslaught on women during partition. Women were not safe in any place during these days, even in refugee camps. Women's supposedly safe places called refugee camps were completely secured by military guards. The author recounts the accurate condition in the refugee camps:

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 Muslim hooligans would come and take away young girls from the camp at night and bring them

back the next morning. (91-92)

Puro's dilemma is repeated when Lajo (Puro's sister-in-law) is abducted by Muslims and held in captivity in her own home, and Ramchand comes to Puro to seek her help to get Lajo back. Puro persuades Rashid to help Lajo return home. In the hour of crisis, Puro portrays tremendous power to help Lajo escape the clutches of her kidnappers. With the support of Rashid (who sees this act of releasing Lajo as a kind of repentance) she manages to free Lajo. Puro was happy to see that her sister-in-law did not suffer her fate and that her family welcomed Lajo back. Thus, finally Puro got a chance to get back to her family again. Her brother Trilok wanted her to get back with Lajo.

Hamida understood what he was saying and for a brief moment was overcome by temptation. She knew that she only had to say that she was a Hindu and they would put her in the bus and take her back to her people. Like Lajo, like thousands of other women in the country she too could... But she made her brother release her arm, turned back to where Rashid was standing and clasped her son to her bosom. (49).

Totawad Nagnath Ramrao has opined "Rashid changed his nature in the course of time beyond imagination and became a very kind and considerable man." (Ramrao 5). Rashid is sincere to Puro and in order to start a new life he decided to relocate to a new village called Sakkar. Rashid's relatives there posed no trouble but Puro felt like "a stray calf in a strange herd of cows" (10). With the change of name and everyone calling her Hamida, her life assumed a surrealistic appearance. It was a double life she was leading "Hamida by day, Puro by night" (11). She found it extremely difficult to reconcile herself completely of her dual existence as Hamida, the wife of Rashid and the mother of his son: or as Puro whose heart still longed for her first love Ramchand. She was unable to identify herself with either one or the other of her double life and considered herself "just a skeleton, without a shape or name" (11).

Amrita Pritam highlights in *Pinjar* the abuses committed against women during partition, and women like Puro's resolution to face life boldly. Puro, the main character represents the

fearless timbre of a woman who despite living a skeletal existence survives in the face of adversity. Almost all the female characters in the novel are relegated to the status of skeletons, victims of one kind of violence or another. They are marginalized by the double yoke and dislocation of the patriarchy.

Conclusion

Conflicts between families, cultures and nations on women's bodies and roles are too frequently carried out violently and thoughtlessly. Women's bodies are used as a site for assault. *Pinjar* reflects women's bravery and sacrifice at partition time. It also deals with animosity and friendship, love and sorrow, loss and women's gain. This novel can also be seen as a tale of women's helplessness and an individual's fight for survival in the midst of socio-political and cultural turmoil. The loss of women's aspirations and stifled desires is indicative of the skeleton life they were forced to live after partition.

Whether it is Puro or Hamida, Lajo, Taro, Kammo, mad Pagali or an unnamed naked woman, Amrita Pritam strongly portrays the traditional status of women as 'others,' particularly during partition times. The 'other' whose lives did not matter, whose voices were silenced, whose personalities were subjugated and who remained on the periphery of power struggle and balance of power remained marginalized and displaced at the expense of self. Even after years of independence a substantial number of women are still subject to violent crimes inside and outside marriage. The plight is quickly circumvented and taken for granted as something natural. Probably the chief explanation for the miserable condition of women in many households during partition and even today is the socio-economic dependence of women on males.

Tradition and religion are also largely responsible for the plight of women in India. Sometimes they end up sanctifying male aggression. Women are more or less made as pure objects, playthings whose importance is dictated by external beauty, feelings and desires which are not essential to life. Therefore, *Pinjar* is an effort to give this 'other' a voice and raise awareness about displacement, marginalization, dual identity and powerlessness in a patriarchal male-oriented society. The novel assumes importance even today, because in Post Partition India the situation of women and their status as eternal 'others' has not changed dramatically. Their bodies still remain as sites of gendered violence.

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