

Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* (*The Skeleton*): A Metaphor of Violence Against Women

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Abstract

The present paper endeavours to interpret Amrita Pritam's partition classic Pinjar (The Skeleton) as a metaphor of violence against women. It highlights women's suffering, exploitation and sacrifices due to their dislocation and abduction during those riot-torn days. Being a highly sensitive poetess, Amrita Pritam has captured the pains and traumas of partition in her novel Pinjar most compellingly and voiced the agonizing experiences of women through the archetypal story of its protagonist, Pooro. The novel Pinjar is a highly pertinent and apt metaphor of violence against women offering a realistic portraiture of their excruciating suffering, victimization, trapped anguish and traumas. It is a classic example of degradation of human values through the exploitation and violence against women during those tumultuous days of partition.

Keywords:

Victimization, suffering, exploitation, sexual violence, societal abuse, dislocation, mass-rape, partition traumas, abduction, anguish, family vendetta.

*"A single daughter of Punjab had wept,
And you wrote a long drawn elegy of woe,
Today millions of daughters are crying addressing you".*

- Amrita Pritam

Amrita Pritam (1919-2005) is undoubtedly the doyen of Indian literature who has been immortalized as 'one of India's rare literary gems' due to her forceful and heart-rending writings on the tragedy of Pakistan. Her oft-quoted and highly moving poem *Aj Akhhan Waris Shah Nu* (*I Address Waris Shah Today*) composed during the days of partition riots has become a prayer sung with great pathos all over the Punjabi-speaking areas on both sides of the border. The agony and predicament of women in Punjab-whose bodies and souls were full of oozing scars got the most passionate expression in this poem. She hailed Waris Shah (1736-90) who wrote the legendary poem *Heer Ranjha* and articulated the suffering and plight of the heroine 'Heer' in a heart touching manner. She asks, appeals and challenges him to write the tear-soaked tales of thousands of Punjabi girls, the innumerable 'Heers' who paid a heavy toll during the partition holocaust. Most of her works like *Doctor Dev* (1949), *Alhana* (1952),

Pinjar (1956), *Jalawatan* (1970) and *Kore Kagaz* (1982) are tragic tales of good, innocent people – their pains and passions particularly women becoming victims of violence, humiliation and misery. Her spousal despair and the traumatic experience of partition riots helped her to contrive complex metaphors for voicing the multiple agonies of women. The present paper endeavours to interpret Amrita Pritam's partition classic *Pinjar* (*The Skeleton*) as a metaphor of violence against women. It highlights women's suffering, exploitation and sacrifices due to their dislocation and abduction during those riot-torn days. Being a highly sensitive poetess, Amrita Pritam has captured the pains and traumas of partition in her novel *Pinjar* most compellingly and voiced the agonizing experiences of women through the archetypal story of its protagonist, Pooro.

The novel *Pinjar* was originally published in Punjabi in 1956 and later translated into English under the title *The Skeleton* by Khushwant Singh in 1987. It presents the tragic story of Pooro, an innocent and beautiful girl betrothed to a handsome and intelligent youth named Ramchand. Her story has the background of the partition riots between the Hindus and Muslims and the resultant massacre and bloodshed. The locale of the novel is a small village Chhatoani and its neighbouring villages like Rattowal and Sakkar in Gujrat district (now in Pakistani Punjab). The story covers a span of nearly thirteen years i.e. 1935 to 1948. The novel opens on a festive note as the preparations of two marriages – Pooro and Ramchand and Lajo and Trilok are in full swing. Pooro is the daughter of a Hindu moneylender's family in Chhatoani village and Ramchand is the son of another rich moneylender's family of Rattowal. But a little before Pooro's marriage, a Muslim boy Rashid kidnaps and abducts her. After some days, she escapes from Rashid's confinement with great efforts and goes to her parents who refuse to accept her back in the family as a 'defiled woman'. Her mother, instead of solacing her in such a situation, questions her "Who will marry you?" (28) She also tells her in a frightening manner that the Muslims would follow her and kill her father and brother if they accepted her back in the family. Finally, Pooro goes back to Rashid in a totally broken and frustrated condition and tries to adjust herself with him. She lives a compromised life with a new Muslim name, Hamida.

Amrita Pritam juxtaposes the situation 'before' and 'after' the partition of India into two separate nations – India and Pakistan in the novel. After the partition, the Hindu-Muslim equations in the villages like Chhatoani, Rattowal and Sakkar which were included in the Pakistani territory changed totally. Before partition, the Hindu moneylenders dominated the Muslim people of the villages. There are numerous references to the atrocities of Hindu moneylenders against the Muslims in the novel. They even abducted and raped Muslim girls. Rashid's confession to Pooro that he was compelled by his uncles to kidnap her makes the fact clear that Pooro has to drown her innocence and accept imprisoned life like a

caged bird due to the sins of her grandfather and his brothers. They had kidnapped and raped one of the daughters of Rashid's family. His speech after Pooro's abduction gives a clue to this:

I suppose they cried and beat their breasts in the same way as my grandfather and my uncles must have done when my aunt was taken.
(14)

Amrita Pritam here seems to say that in either cases women have to pay a heavy prize for the hostilities between the Hindus and Muslims. Pooro is thus a perennial victim of the 'family vendetta' between the Shaikhs and Shahukars. Through Pooro's tragedy, the novelist has highlighted that women had to suffer for no fault of their own. The so-called 'social stigma' created by the patriarchal society demands the continual surrender of innocence and other sacrifices by women only. Amrita Pritam criticises severally the convenient religious and social practices which became "so accommodating" after the government proclamation and not at the time of Pooro's abduction. When Pooro and Rashid rescued Lajo from the one of the Muslim houses, she expressed her doubt that she would not be accepted back in the family as they had not accepted Pooro in the past. Pooro's highly consoling reply hints at the 'accommodative' nature of religious and socio-cultural norms changing with the passage of time: "Then they were afraid of society. Now there are thousands and thousands families whose young girls have been kidnapped. When the tragedy expands to this vast dimension, social norms change. Attitudes change. They will definitely accept you back". (85) As visualized by Pooro, the parents of abducted girls started accepting them back in their families after the partition turmoil is over. Amrita Pritam proves how the same parents, who had rejected Pooro, were forced to accept Lajo, their daughter-in-law in the changed circumstances.

Amrita Pritam depicts the monstrous atrocities of the Muslims against the Hindus as they formed the majority in the Western Punjab. The houses of Hindus and Sikhs were burnt and they were slaughtered in large numbers. The Muslims used to shout in those days that they would not let a trace of Hindu/Sikh blood remain in their newly formed country. Women are the worst sufferers as they are abducted and subjected to gang rape. The violence and atrocities against women took on additional forms like molestation, chopping of the breasts, parading of naked women in the form of processions and bartering them for the safety of the male members of the family. All these forms of violence against women are rooted in sexuality which makes women a miserable lot and mere objects of sex. Therefore, the violence against women can rightly be termed as 'sexual violence' reaching the levels of brutality. Women were repeatedly subjected to mass rape and other cruelties leading even to death. Those who withstood all tortures were kept as prostitutes useful for regular sexual harassment. Finally they were given to the aged men who could not get a wife. Amrita Pritam has described all these forms of

violence against women in the novel in great detail. The parading of naked women in the form of processions is one of the worst forms of the inhuman atrocities portrayed in the novel. Amrita Pritam narrates one such incident of parading naked of a young girl in the village Rattowal :

One day Hamida (Pooro) sees a band of a dozen or more goondas pushing a young girl before them. She had not a stitch of clothing on her person. The goondas beat drums and danced about the girl. (35)

Such incidents of processions, molestation and mass rape were not sporadic instances but were large-scale happenings. There are also many references to the killings of women by their own fathers or brothers in order to save their honour. They were also encouraged to commit suicide to avoid dishonour after abduction.

Amrita Pritam also portrays how the abduction and victimization of women become a way of dishonouring the whole community in those fateful days. Therefore, the mass rape and abduction of the women of one community by the men of other community was a common way of vengeance. Dr. Bhagyashree Varma, an authority on Amrita Pritam observes rightly:

Pinjar is a story of riots, mirroring the times during Indo-Pak partition, the history that displaced families and uprooted religious faith. The worst part of those historical riots was the victimization of women, trapped in communal tensions. (113)

What the eminent critic implies here is nothing but the displacement of several families of both Hindus and Muslims in the Eastern and Western parts of Punjab. She has highlighted the victimization of women during those historical riots. The plight of the convoys of refugees passing through Chhatto is quite suggestive of the gruesome violence against women in those days. The tragedy of the girl hiding in the sugarcane field of Pooro and Rashid highlights the grim reality of the refugee camps protected by military guards. She tells her tragic story of victimization thus:

The camp was guarded by Pakistani soldiers. After the sunset, bands of goondas stole in picked out women they liked and took them for the night; they were returned to the encampment in the morning. The girl had been forced to spend the preceding nine nights with different men. (35)

This worst form of women's exploitation and helplessness is delineated in a highly realistic manner in the novel. Pooro becomes annoyed whenever she hears or comes across the abducted girls living in wretched conditions due to her personal tragedy and sensitivity. The girls like Kammo, Taro and the mad woman suffered miserably like Pooro. She tries to help such grief-stricken girls of the village and gets some sense of satisfaction and solace through it. Her decision to bring home the newly-born child of the dead mad woman suggests her genuine sympathy for ill-fated women around her.

Amrita Pritam makes the prototype of the predicament and suffering of Pooro by presenting '*many pinjars like her*'. The connotative force of the title *Pinjar* conveys the ghost-like appearance of what remains after an

individual has lost vitality, hope and dreams-a skeleton of bones without flesh and blood. Pooro identifies herself with the madwoman being raped and made pregnant and voices her pitiable condition thus:

She is neither young nor attractive; she is just a lump of flesh without a mind to go with it...a living skeleton...a lunatic skeleton...a skeleton picked to its bones by kites and vultures. (36)

Through Pooro's symbolic character, the novelist proves that the agony of dislocation was far greater and intense for women than it was for men. Women were dislocated from their home, family, society, culture and even religion which resulted into the loss of identity and slavish survivalism. They remain 'dangling' between their past and present, the old identity and the newly assumed identity and have to live the double life of a Hindu daughter and Muslim wife. Pooro exemplifies this trapped dilemma of women by living with Rashid- "*Hamida by day and Pooro by night. In reality, she was just a lifeless and sapless skeleton, without a shape or a name*"(11). She gives birth to Rashid's son 'a slimy slug', an unwanted child born out of a forced, unwanted relation. This pitiable condition of Pooro is an example of women's tremendous potential for tolerance, suffering and sacrifices.

Towards the end of the novel, Amrita Pritam describes Pooro's final reconciliation and her choice of the present reality-her husband and son with great pathos and heights of idealism. When she meets her brother and her fiancé Ramchand, she undergoes a deep emotional crisis- the dilemma of choice between her parental home- her 'lost paradise' and 'the husband's hell'. She experiences a typical split condition full of tests and finally decides to live with her husband and son, Javed. She thus denies the golden opportunity of going back to India like the thousands of other abducted women. She tries to forget her sorrow and devotes herself to the new mission of recovering and sending abducted girls like Lajo back to their parents. Rashid helps her in this mission and they send several girls to the security of an evacuee camp of Hindus and Sikhs. When her brother Trilok urges her to come back with them, she consoles him in the stoical manner thus :

When Lajo is welcomed back in her home then you can take it that Pooro has also returned to you...And she sums up 'any girl that reaches destination may be, Hindu or Muslim, think that my soul is reaching its destination'. (84)

This reconciliation seems a compromise on Pooro's part, but it adds different dimensions to her character. She gives the message of living life in the face of adversities also. The novel thus ends on a note of harmony and the triumph of love over hatred and violence.

To conclude, the novel *Pinjar* is a highly pertinent and apt metaphor of violence against women offering a realistic portraiture of their excruciating suffering, victimization, trapped anguish and traumas. It is, in the words of Jagdev Singh, "*the woman's lyric cry is prose against her existential fate and societal abuse*" (27). It is a classic example of degradation of human values through the exploitation and violence against women during those tumultuous days of partition. It deserves to

be ranked with the immortal masterpieces of partition literature like Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956), Qurratul-ain Hyder's *Aag Ka Dariya* (1959), Bhisma Sahani's *Tamas* (1973), Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* (1975) and Bapsi Sidwa's *Ice-candy man* (1988). The film version of the novel with the same title directed by Dr. Chandrapraksh Dwivedi with the actors like Urmila Matodkar as Pooro and Manoj Vajpai as Rashid proved a blockbuster movie and succeeded in recreating the black episode of Indian history with all its pain, suffering and partition violence in a poignant and appealing manner.

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Minu Jasdanwala

Past and Present

Remembering, the salty flood flows
On the temples over my brows.

In the lousy offices I spend my time
With those whom I hardly like
The sweet birdsongs have vanished in tyrants' coarseness.
The freedom of the dust
Is fettered by the hands of the clock.

The setting, the place, the yard where I grew
Is dumped under something new
The joy of plucking roses
Is concealed in the caskets of my memories
The old faces which are rarely to find
Have shattered all over on the lines of the map
The wanderlust, the bees and the butterflies
Where have they gone?
Are they there?
Where they used to be
Or I am forced astray?

