

## From Skeleton to Substance: Reading *Therapeutic Spaces* in Amrita Pritam's *The Skeleton*

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**Abstract:** This article probes the silence surrounding the gendered violence experienced by abducted women, it also discusses, the author Amrita Pritam's role through her creative genius to re-narrativize the violated women's relationship to their loved ones, and their own identities in order to make sense of the inscriptions that the violence has left on their bodies and through this, arbitrate their survival. *The Skeleton*, redefines parameters of honour and chastity for the abducted woman who has been looked as 'a symbol of honour' since ages by patriarchy.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Misogyny, Active agency, Sexual objectification.

### I

Comparative literature comes out of the premise that a literature is to be studied with reference to other literatures within and outside the country, to transcend the narrowness, provinciality and parochialism of national and general literatures. Translation can be used as a tool for the study of comparative literature. Women's texts in regional literature are as accommodable within western feminist literary criticism, as are the texts in English literature, because the oppressive forces of patriarchy and the dominant phallocentric culture are equally, if not more, recognizable in the Indian regional literature. Gender is seen as a construct of society, designed to facilitate the smooth running of institutions to the advantage of men. Feminist criticism is two- fold, first representing women in literature, and second, changing women's position in society by freeing them from repression. All feminist criticism starts from one fundamental perception that society is patriarchal and misogynistic, and this is the central premise of two of the seminal works of feminism, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1928) and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949). *The Second Sex* suggests the basic asymmetry between the terms "masculine and feminine", since both these terms represent social constructs – patterns of sexuality and behaviour-imposed by cultural and social norms. Beauvoir asserts that: "One is not born but rather becomes a woman" (6). She further states: "Since patriarchal times, woman have in general been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men and this secondary standing is not imposed of necessity by natural 'feminine' characteristics but rather by strong environmental forces of educational and social tradition under the purposeful control of men. This is sexual politics. Man is superior, God-like: female is inert, passive, "doomed to immanence" by man" (16).

This article focuses on Amrita Pritam's women-centred novelette written as *Pinjar* in Punjabi in 1950, and translated as *The Skeleton* in 1973 by Khushwant Singh. Amrita Pritam (1919-2005), is a household name in

the sphere of Punjabi literature, her poem "Aj Akhan Waris Shah Noo" brought her fame across both sides of the Punjab border. It refers to the situation after the partition of India in 1947, when thousands of people were uprooted from their homes, and rape, loot and violence was everywhere. Amrita's poignant articulation of the devastating dehumanization of women in the context of large scale communal conflagration is stellar, and exemplary. Her rich literary corpus is astounding, Amrita Pritam has to her credit twenty-four novels, fifteen collections of short stories and twenty-three volumes of prose. Most of her writings are in Hindi, and in Punjabi, her mother tongue, and are also translated in English and in more than thirty-four languages, Indian and European. Writings on partition by women are subjective and personal in comparison to the political accounts of male writers. *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) by Indian English novelist Attia Hosain, *Ice-Candy Man* (1988) by Bapsi Sidhwa, Krishna Sobti's magnum opus *Zindginama* (1979) in Hindi, *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* (1967) by Jyotirmoyee Devi in Bengali and Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* are an attempt to demolish the opposition between the personal and the political and to voice the silences surrounding the gendered violence experienced by the 'abducted women.' Amrita Pritam's agony found expression in, *The Skeleton*, and she became the voice of the numerous speechless ones, who were muted by society, bound by its parameters of honour and chastity. Amrita blends her strong sense of history with compelling human feelings in *The Skeleton*. Amrita Pritam portrayed the predicament of all abducted women during the partition through Pooro's character. She aspires to feature the exploitation of the abducted women, who have to kill their feelings and desires, resolve with their abductors, and are bound to move in the world like mere skeletons, totally sapped out, and devoid of any zest for life. The title of the novelette is quite symbolic with Pooro, the main female protagonist symbolizing a skeleton that struggles to survive amidst adversities. Women as national emblems, usually cast as mothers or wives are called upon literally and symbolically to reproduce the nation. A blemish on the sanctity of its women leaves the nation scarred. In this discourse woman is not seen as a complete person endowed with creativity, rationality and intelligence. She is 'a thing' that can be destroyed, 'a commodity' and 'a property' that can be plundered, sold and bought. Ila Rathore in an article, "Gender Psyche and the Politics of Power in Partition Literature," comments on the double standards of society that are exposed during times of crisis. She is of the belief that:

Sexual violence during times of war and political disturbances reflect the tendency of culture to make women feel ashamed of their bodies and sexuality, teaching men to disrespect it and see women as objects of sexual targeting and this disrespect towards women is also a way of imposing the male sense of honour. Women repeatedly become victim of human rage and all records of partition mention sexual violence or fear of it. Rape, regarded as manifestation of aggression against the victim, is also seen as an attempt to grind women and their men into submission. (qtd. in Bande 24)

Helene Cixous in her essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa" focuses on the need for a female writing at both personal and societal level. Laughing is a

symbolic mode of rejecting, 'history', as merely 'his story', Cixous asserts that a 'feminine text' is framed to, "Smash everything to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the 'truth' with laughter" (292). The significance of "body" in this context, is far reaching, since it is the body, the female body that has been repressed historically by the apparatus of male theology, philosophy, social systems and even psychoanalysis (284). This article addresses the traumatic dislocation of women in the background of religious and clan feuds during the days of partition of India and the period prior to it. The dislocated and abducted women's ties with their families were broken and the physical and emotional support they got from their natal homes was also appropriated. Women were doubly displaced- from the home and from the family. *The Skeleton* is Amrita's salutation to the female will for survival and her progression from being homeless to an active agency, from a skeleton to substance, from self to others. *The Skeleton* is also evaluated as an approach to deconstruct patriarchy's notions of female chastity and to strike hard at its habit of associating loss of sexual purity in the female with defilement of male honour. Feminists in all the post-colonial nation states have questioned the particular context of constructing womanhood, which makes her a mute victim of sexual aggression by enemies or a victim of her own community, which tries to preserve its honour by pre-empting her defilement by killing her themselves. Honour killings are acts of vengeance perpetrated by member of a family or social group due to the belief of the perpetrators that the victim has brought dishonour upon the family or community.

## II

The story *The Skeleton* has a main plot which revolves around the prime protagonist, Pooro's immediate life. There is a sub- plot in the form of stories of other women like Kammo, Taro, the mad woman, all living in wretched conditions. Through their ugly exploitation, the writer reinforces the main theme of victimisation of women in a patriarchal society. Simultaneously she also creates a niche for Pooro's role as an active agency contributing to emancipation of other women around her, in the background of the partition of India. The novel is a horrendous tale of the protagonist, Pooro, a Hindu woman, who is abducted and forcibly married into a Muslim family. There is a family feud linked with this, which coerced the duty bound Rashida to kidnap Pooro to retrieve his family's honour. Pooro manages to come out of Rashida's confinement and returns to her family, but her parents shun her and refuse to accept her. It is the social stigma of abduction that is responsible for Pooro's ostracisation. Hence, *The Skeleton*, at this level can be accepted as Amrita's attempt to highlight that women have to constantly prove their innocence and thereby win their right to live with dignity in our patriarchal society.

What more could life take from her, heartbroken Pooro returns back from her parents' home and meets Rashida on the way, who marries her, and gives her the security of a home. This is how; Pooro becomes Hamida, Rashida's legal wife. Social and political upheavals endured by women during personal and national tragedies of such kind forces one to juxtapose the pre-requisites of human existence like freedom, nation,

religion, home, friend and foe, self and the Other with other greater themes like loss, exile, death and destruction, displacement and violence, challenging concepts like borders and boundaries, nation and religion, shame and honour. The skeleton of Pooro lives "a double life: Hamida by day, Pooro by night. In reality, she was neither one nor the other; she was just a skeleton, without a shape or a name" (11). During the times of communal animosity, women were being bartered for the safety of the male members of a particular community. Pooro's mother's comments are self-explanatory in this context: "If we dare to help you, we will be wiped out without a trace of blood left behind to tell of our fate" (10). The novelist's daring opening to the novelette at once conveys Pooro's reaction to the 'enforced pregnancy' on her. She feels disgusted at the mere thought of becoming the mother of an unwanted child: "She felt as if her body was a pea-pod inside which she carried a slimy water caterpillar. Her body was unclean. If only she could take the worm out of her womb and fling it away! Pick it out with her nails as if it were a thorn! Pluck it off as if it were a maggot or a leech...!" (1). When the boy is born she compares his act of sucking her milk with his father's forceful act of abducting her for his family's honour:

All said and done, he was his father's son. He had been planted inside her by force, nourished inside her womb against her will... and now sucking the milk from her breast whether she liked it or not. .... This boy...this boy's father...all mankind... all men... men who gnaw a woman's body like a dog gnawing a bone... (15)

Pooro suffers at the hands of socio-religious ideologies but she emerges victorious in her battle against society. She assists other women like Kammo, Taro, Lajo, the mad woman and the girl found in the sugarcane field, on their path towards freedom and dignity. Though she herself was a victim of familial revenge and religious fanaticism, yet she chooses human relations above religion. Religion in no way becomes a hindrance to her socialization with both the communities. Pooro's dual identity as a woman born in Hindu family, settled after marriage in Muslim environs, help her to adjust with people of both cultures with exemplary ease, poise and equanimity. Pooro is portrayed as an apostle of love and motherhood by Amrita Pritam, with Kammo becoming the first repository of her motherly instincts. Kammo is a motherless young girl of twelve years whose father takes another woman and leaves the village. She is at the mercy of her aunt who maltreats her. Pooro fed her and gave her new clothes and slippers. She spent a lot of time with Kammo, washed her hair, oiled and plaited them. Pooro sees her own self in Kammo, she wishes to mother the unwanted child, pamper and spoil her, take her in her arms and kiss her. Life had really been cruel to Pooro, as she too like Kammo was disowned and abandoned by her parents. Amrita raises the question of 'sexual objectification of women' through the experiences of the various female characters like Lajo, Taro, the madwoman, and the girl hiding in the sugarcane field in *The Skeleton*. Sexual objectification refers to the practice of regarding or treating another person merely as an instrument or an object of sexual pleasure. Objectification is an attitude that regards a person as a commodity or as an object for use, with insufficient regard for a person's personality seen simply as a body. Such

objectification can give women a negative self image because of the belief that their intelligence and competence are currently not being, or will never be, acknowledged by society. The stories of Taro, the mad woman, the girl hiding in the sugarcane field and Lajo are narrated one after the other by the novelist to emphasize 'the sexual objectification of women in a patriarchal society.' Taro, who had been married for two years, is ill since her wedding day. She is disgusted with life as her husband takes another woman as his wife. She does not get any support from her parents, as her insensitive parents believe that a married woman should accept her fate in a tight-lipped manner. Here, the author ventures into the conventional mindset of people, which dwells on the outdated idea that the daughters are in their natal homes only on a temporary basis and they must eventually leave for their 'real home', i.e. the marital home. Further they should stay there amidst all challenges, until death. The story of the mad woman is the most tragic example of sexual exploitation of women. She came to *Sakkar*, half clad and starving, her body was caked with dirt and appeared unwashed since the day of her birth. *Sakkar* roared with her hysterical laughter and ghoulis shrieks; however the villagers accepted her and she was clad and fed regularly by the village women. She did not harm anyone, just ran about and laughed in her madness. She too becomes a victim of man's utter brutality and tribal passion, and gets impregnated by somebody. With the passage of time, she delivers a child and dies in a pitiable condition. This incident stirs Pooro's soul as she identifies herself with the mad woman in a dream, where Rashida throws her out, after keeping her in the gardener's hut for three nights. She dreamt that she too had turned insane and ran around the village madly and gave birth to a child under the shade of a tree. Her innocent self was brimming with many queries, as she was perturbed at the atrocities committed on the mad woman:

What wretch could have lusted after the charred body of the mad woman.... Did she consent to the act or was she raped? Did the man realize what he was perpetrating on a lunatic woman? Did he know what would happen to the seed he had implanted in the vagrant's womb? The poor woman was not even aware of the fact that she was going to give birth to a boy. How did she suffer the pains of labour? Did no midwife feel compassion for her? Her shrieks must have been lost in the loneliness of the dark night; she must have wrestled with the gusts of wind and writhed in agony on the cold, hard ground! But nature's laws are immutable. The child ignored its mother's agony and came out into the world. And its mother perished in the final process of giving it birth. (23)

The author here proclaims the barbarity of the world demanding from the woman the wages of sin perpetrated by man: "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..." (22). Pooro and Rashida, adopt the child of the mad woman. The villagers try to make an issue of Pooro's adoption of a Hindu boy since she was to them, a Muslim woman, Hamida. In the midst of ugly exploitation of these women, Pooro finds herself comfortably placed, she had seen other people's sorrow; this made her own troubles appear very small. Now she wanted to get rid of the feeling that Rashida had

kidnapped her. She glanced fervently towards Rashida and wanted to make love to him, her heart was overwhelmed with emotions. With time she had mellowed towards her husband who had always treated her with kindness, "He had not left her, nor thrown her out. She was safely installed in his house. He was a kind husband. He had given her the handsome, curly headed Javed" (23). So, Pooro, who had been living like an imprisoned bird in cage with Rashida, always wanting to be free, now begins to see domesticity as a haven of refuge in Rashida's loving and secure custody. Amrita Pritam's splendid creative genius lies in epitomizing female will to survive amidst all circumstances through a poignant portrayal of Pooro, the complete woman. Hindu – Muslim riots crop up in the heat of religious fanaticism, after the declaration of independence in 1947, Pooro burnt with rage when she heard about the abduction of Hindu girls by Muslims and Muslim girls by Hindus. Few were forced into marriage, some were murdered and others stripped and paraded naked in the streets. Pooro's mind was agitated over the plight of women, in the middle of this cycle of hatred amongst the two communities. Hatred is a chameleon that can change its colours, under the behest of politics, on the pretexts of religion, ethnic origins and languages.

During the days of partition and communal riots, Pooro discovers a girl hiding in their sugarcane field. The girl was from a refugee encampment in the neighbouring village and was waiting for her turn to be evacuated to India, through her woeful ballad; the lacerating tale of the camp women is brought to the fore: "The camp was guarded by Pakistani soldiers. After 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" (35). Amrita Pritam brings about a realistic and faithful narrative of predicament of abducted women, especially during partition and society's biased attitude towards women in general, which is responsible for their exploitation. The girl managed to escape from the clutches of her ravishers. Pooro took her home and hid her in the backyard of her house, later she left the girl in Ram Chand's custody, whom she spots in a convoy moving to India. Ram Chand was given the responsibility of locating her parents in India and handing over the girl to them. Pooro learns from Ram Chand about the abduction of her brother, Trilok's wife, and Ram Chand's sister Lajo by some Muslim goons as the Hindu convoy was passing through Rattoval. The onus of rescuing her now rests with Pooro. Rashida shares with Pooro, the government's proclamation, ordering people to hand over all abducted women, so that they could be exchanged for others similarly abducted by Indians. Amrita Pritam sensitively portrays the inexplicable plight of the abducted women during the times of this communal inferno, when they were bartered like oranges and apples; divided between countries according to the official classification of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh; minor or major; legitimate or illegitimate; abducted or not; forcibly converted versus voluntarily married. Women with no choice or rights in the matter, not only had no country, they couldn't even call their bodies their own. Parents had been exhorted to receive back their abducted daughters. Hearing this, a sense of resentment surged Pooro's mind: "When it had happened to her,

religion had become an insurmountable obstacle; neither her parents nor her-in-laws- to- be had been willing to accept her. And now, the same religion had become so accommodating!” (39). Pooro brushed aside her personal feelings and thought of Lajo's future, whom she wanted to rescue by all means.

Calamities can also create opportunities for women, when the breakdown of normalcy requires them to step outside the boundaries of home and hearth. Pooro works with gusto and courage, as an angelic rescuer of the abducted woman. She intensified her search for Lajo, Rashida, too, puts his own life in dire peril and helped Hamida in locating Lajo. He ignores the fact that Pooro's brother and Lajo's husband, Trilok, had put his entire harvest on fire. In a very artful and crafty manner, Pooro moved from house to house on the pretext of selling blankets and bed sheets to the women of Rattoval. But throughout, her sleepless eyes were searching for Lajo in the Muslim habitations. Finally she becomes successful in spotting her in an old woman's courtyard, whose son had abducted Lajo. Pooro presses Rashida into service with the words, “I leave the rest to you; you know how best to act, lift her away just as you, lifted me on your saddle” (39). Rashida compensates for his sin of abducting Pooro by relieving Lajo from the clutches of her abductor. Though a Muslim, he goes against his own men to rescue Lajo from the Muslim youth. Throughout the novelette Rashida moves with a sense of guilt of Pooro's abduction, but now he could hold his head high with pride and humility and walk tall in life, “he felt that he had partly redeemed the debt of honour he owed on that score” (49). Rashida stands by Pooro through thick and thin, though he abducted Pooro at his uncles' behest, but he could not bear to see Pooro sad and heartbroken. He nurses Pooro, in her sickness and wins over her through his gentlemanly actions. He is a die-hard romantic, and a good human being par excellence. When Pooro delivers Rashida's child, his heart is overwhelmed with emotions: “He had won over the Hindu girl. The gamble had paid off. Pooro was no longer the girl he had abducted and made his mistress ...not a woman he had brought in as a housekeeper. She was Hamida, the mother of his son (14). The writer pours open his heart and probes deep into his psyche: “He remembered that when he had abducted Pooro, his conscience had weighed like a stone, which had become heavier and heavier. It had weighed on his mind for long. That night as the mare sped through the starlit countryside, the weight seemed to lift and he felt as light as a flower speeding in the fragrant breeze” (43). On being rescued, Lajo was apprehensive about her fate. She feels her husband, parents and in-laws would discard her, as she had become unclean and was of no use to anybody. Pooro assured her that times had changed and people were taking back their daughters, sisters and wives. Lajo is still doubtful and feels that no one would ever come for her. She bemoans: “So far our families have been mourning the loss of one, now they can mourn the death of two....What face will I show to anyone....” (47). Pooro bids adieu to Lajo as if one sends one's own daughter to her husband's home. The final parting scene establishes her as a woman of substance, grit and integrity. Life had offered her a golden chance to be 'Pooro' again and join back her family in India, “Like Lajo, like thousands of other women in the

country, she too could....” (49). But Pooro's heart bows before Rashida's love and she takes the decision of spending her entire life with her loving husband and sons in her new home, Pakistan. In the reconciliation of Pooro lies Rashida's victory, the human kindness and goodness inherent in him emerged victorious. Pooro's acceptance of Rashida and rejection of her brother's request to return to the family is a befitting reply to her parents who deserted her under the influence of socio-religious factors. The novelist succeeds in bridging the gap between the two communities by binding Pooro and Rashida in a sacred thread of human emotions, ushering in new hope in the form of a stronger marital bond as a source of sustenance for her. The plot of the novelette at the behest of the author chooses broad humanism as an antidote to communalism; religious fanaticism succumbs before human emotions, which reign supreme.

Pooro-Hamida's personality displays various shades throughout the novelette, first a romantic girl dreaming of her wedding ceremonies, dying to have a glance of her future husband Ram Chand, and then an agitated, abducted woman whose heart is full of hatred for Rashida, her abductor. Next a jilted, abandoned daughter whose parents discard her, Pooro, who identifies herself with a sapless, lifeless skeleton, Pooro the mother of Rashida's son, whose feelings of hatred for Rashida are transformed into love. Later Pooro, the rescuer of abducted women, an active agency who does the task of consciousness-raising. Finally Pooro, a brave heart who reconciles with her present, burying the dead past, moving ahead in life, accepting wholeheartedly Rashida as her husband and Pakistan as her home. Pooro's realistic and artful portrayal by Amrita Pritam is amongst the finest sketches of a woman in literature. Throughout the novelette, Amrita uses many similes and metaphors to orchestrate the multiple agonies of the violated and dislocated women. Pooro alias Hamida's dual identity is reflected in the expression, “Nevertheless, Pooro felt like a stray cattle in a strange herd of cows” (10). Describing Pooro's near death existence, the novelist refers Pooro's sapless body to a 'frame': “Six month later a tiny life began to stir inside her frame” (11). Pooro curses Rashida for her dislocation and homelessness in a metaphoric language: “You have reduced me to a homeless vagrant” (8). The most moving expression is in the context of the mad woman, delivering her baby unattended under the trunk of a tree: “She was as dead as a block of stone and between her legs was a new-born baby, still attached to its mother by the umbilical cord” (22).

### III

Violent atrocities produce a collapse of meaning in women narratives leaving them muted. Jill Didur interprets that the silences are not merely an attempt to conceal a socially damaging experience but a woman's inability to find an expression to articulate her experience without invoking metaphors of purity and pollution (11). The need of the hour is to unveil and recover these silences to understand the female point of view. Good literature interprets the silences found in women's accounts of sectarian violence that accompanied partition, their sexual assault, abduction and displacement from their families. The fact that literature manages to talk about partition, is sensitive to the pain of abducted and violated women, and looks at it beyond the concept of 'shame and honour'

brings out the difference between history and literature. While history documents, literature seeks to understand and reconcile. Veena Das points out with regard to partition: “no public space was created in which society could confront the event, in which it could hear from women the nature of their experiences.... Neither was it possible to hear of exemplary instances of altruism that could have offered redemptive possibilities” (12). In a modest way, Amrita Pritam's *The Skeleton* is an effort towards creating those 'therapeutic spaces.'

Amrita Pritam, through her novelette, performs the task of bringing the marginalized into the centre. Pooro, Lajo and other women characters of *The Skeleton* are a deviation from the idealized notion of womanhood. By making the abducted women acceptable, the novelist has deconstructed the patriarchy's concept of female chastity and honour. Amrita deconstructed the stereotypes in her writings as she did personally in life. She deserves all praises for chartering Pooro's transformation from victimhood to an active agency of consciousness raising. Pooro identifies herself with other women who have been sinned against, women married off to cruel husbands by equally insensitive fathers; women ostracised for alleged immorality; women starving, and dying of disease; women abducted and dislocated during the time of partition. The list is endless but Pooro does not accept defeat in fighting for the emancipation of other women around her. Her actions are a counter to the flag-bearers of patriarchy and religious fanaticism. The journey from Pooro to Hamida is a transformation from victimization to active agency. Amrita Pritam boldly and fearlessly took on institutions and conventions which trapped women in a passive image. Her work does not fall into the category of 'image of women writing' but is to be studied under the genre of 'consciousness raising writing' as it encourages women to throw off the chains of bondage and live truly empowered lives. Amrita's feminism embodies that the “personal is political” and it is only when women start making choices at a personal level that they become active agency for social transformation. Her literary creations are feminist bildungsroman which present the journey of a passive, meek woman to an assertive liberated one, who attains self actualization and individuation in the midst of life's struggles.

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