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## Women And Partition : Reading Amrita Pritam's Pinjar

<sup>1</sup>Moumita Biswas

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor in English, Maharani Kasiswari College, Kolkata

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### Abstract

The issue of violence directed at women during the communal riots that ensued after the Partition of India in 1947 is the primary subject of discussion in this article. The reading of the partition genocide from a gendered perspective makes it easier to have a conversation about the myriad forms of violence that targeted women and the symbolic meanings that underpinned these acts. In her work "Pinjar," published in 1950, Amrita Pritam narrates the gendered experience of the grief and suffering caused by the partition of India. It highlights the predicament of women, their battle, and the anguish of the perpetrators of violence, whether in the name of culture, religion, or the standards of the community. The novel paints a realistic image of violence against women both during and after the partition. The novel might also be interpreted as a story about the powerlessness of women and the struggle of the individual to stay alive. Therefore, Pinjar is an effort to give a voice to this 'other' and their worries of displacement, marginalization, dual identity, and impotence in a culture that is male-oriented and patriarchal. In addition to this, the research investigates the concept of the nation serving as a "mother" and the ideological consequences this concept has for female citizens. When read in its entirety, the paper provides the opportunity for a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which religious and national pride have been used to govern or abuse the sexuality and bodily autonomy of women throughout history and even today. As a consequence of this, women are reduced to the status of mute objects and are deprived of their individual autonomy as well as authority over their bodies and lives.

**Keywords** - Indian Partition, Violence, Patriarchal, Marginalization, Genocide.

### Introduction

Most discussions of violence during Partition center on assaults and killings of women. Much of the bloodshed during Partition was between competing religious factions; this was in large part due to the legacy of British colonialism and the divide and conquer approach they utilized, pitting diverse groups against one another, including economic levels, caste groups, and religious sects. As a way of showing their superiority over one another, the Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims all turned on one another, with women being a particular target. During partition, women were subjected to a wide range of violent attacks, the most common of which was rape. In addition to rape, "tattoos were inscribed on women's bodies", They were paraded naked in sacred spaces such as temples, mosques, and gurudwaras, and their breasts were cut off (Menon 30). All of these heinous deeds were intended to bring shame upon their community as well as suffering to the female victims. The physical act of removing women's breasts "symbolically sever[ed] their role as potential nurturers" and was done as a kind of exhibition. "to other men that these women were second hand" (Menon 45). In addition to removing the women's femininity and the outward indication of their motherhood or potential to carry children, this practise, like tattooing, was meant to permanently label the women as unclean and polluted by their attackers. As Deepika Bahri puts it, the detached body parts denote

“the dehumanization of women and their reduction to ghastly currency” (224)

Women were seen as nothing more than a means to an end in this partition war fought entirely by men. However, there was a striking silence when researchers tried to learn more about women's lives and roles during this time of great ethnic unrest. To say that women played no role whatsoever in the events leading up to and during the partition of India is simply not true. However, they only appear as statistics and "objects of study rather than subjects" in the records of the past. (Menon and Bhasin 1998; 11). This lack of representation and recognition of women's experiences during partition is a reflection of the patriarchal nature of society at the time. Women were often forced to bear the brunt of violence and displacement, yet their stories remain untold. It is important to acknowledge and document the experiences of women during partition, not only for historical accuracy but also for gender equality. By recognizing the role of women in this period, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the impact that partition had on society as a whole. It is time to give voice to those who have been silenced for too long and ensure that their stories are heard and remembered. Only then can we truly understand the complexity and devastation of this moment in history. Over the past few decades, there has been significant progress in this direction with the inclusion of multiple women-centric partition narratives into the historical retelling of partition. For instance, Bhutalia, in her essay “Community, State, and Gender: Some Reflections on the Partition of India” (1994:128 -129) cites a pamphlet by an activist group called Women Against Fundamentalism:

“Violence is almost always instigated by men, but its greatest impact is felt by women. In violent conflict, it is women who are raped, women who are widowed . . . in the name of national integrity and unity . . . We women will have no part of this madness, and we will suffer it no more . . . Those who see their manhood in taking up arms, can be the protectors of no one and nothing.”

Thus, the women-centered accounts of partition not only situate women within the context of partition violence but also speak out strongly against the practice of designating women as the guarantors of "national integrity and unity.

Poet, novelist, short story writer, essayist, and biographer all rolled into one, Amrita Pritam deserves her place among the pantheon of famous women authors. Her eulogy on the division of Punjab is her lasting literary legacy. Many people have referred to her as a goddess of defiance due to how intensely she lived her life. The topic of partition, and in particular the partition of Punjab, is widely studied in India. Punjabi people, which include Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus, were split in two when the Land of Five Rivers was carved up solely on the basis of religious majority.

Post-Partition India is the backdrop for Pritam's novel *Pinjar*. It's about the depressing role women have played throughout history and still play in our society. A crime committed against a woman holds her responsible for it. So that the family's reputation is not tarnished, she must take responsibility for herself and bear the burden of her existence. In the novel *Pinjar*, Rashida, a Muslim man seeking vengeance for a previous tragedy, kidnaps Pooro, the central character:

“Did you know that our families, the Shaikhs and the Shahukars, have been at loggerheads for many generations? Your grandfather had advanced us Rs. 500 on compound interest and taken our house as a mortgage. We could not redeem the mortgage. He attacked the entire Shaikh family.” (Pritam 17)

The fact that Pooro's parents have abandoned her makes the mournful abduction process worse. When her father decided not to accept her because he was afraid that doing so would serve as a catalyst for genocide, she broke down psychologically.

"Daughter this fate was ordained for you, we are helpless" Her mother asserts, "Who will marry you now? You are defiled! Your religion is polluted. Daughter, it would have been better if you had died at birth." (Pritam 28)

However, Rashida is deeply in love with her and promises to keep her happy throughout his lifetime, in spite of the fact that he forcefully married her.

"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 prodding of the Shaikh Clan that made me do so." (Pritam 8)

A greater blow of pain than her kidnapping was rejection. Puro's persona drastically changes. Through marriage, she was changed into Hamida, who is a "skeleton" without a soul. Pooro is a young Hindu woman who is forced to live with Rashida and his family. She is subjected to physical and emotional abuse, and her identity is constantly questioned. The novel explores the themes of identity, gender, and religion in a society that is deeply divided along these lines. Through Pooro's experiences, Pritam highlights the struggles of women who are caught in the crossfire of communal violence. She shows how women are often used as pawns in the larger political game and how their lives are shaped by the prejudices of their communities. Pinjar is a powerful commentary on the human cost of war and conflict and a reminder that women's voices must be heard if we are to build a more just and equitable society. They serve only as a symbol of sex for the gratification of men. Amrita Pritam treated the novel's delicate subject matter with the utmost care because she appreciated its significance. She elaborates on the entire situation at the time. Many women lost their husbands or children, and others were kidnapped and sexually assaulted. The widespread fervor among communities prior to the partition provided an additional benefit. It had been decided that Rashida, from the Shaikh family, would play a role in leaving an indelible impression on the Sahukars. He was forced to swear on the Koran that he would abduct Pooro before her wedding in order to settle old scores

In the course of the narrative, Hamida comes across three additional females who have experienced marginalization due to culture and time. These folks don't count as human beings; they're only bodies. Taro's spouse has left her because of some mysterious illness. Her husband forced her into prostitution by moving in with another woman. Since her illness and her husband's treatment are awful, she wishes to die to be released from prison. What she tells Puro is:

"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?" I had to sell my body for a cup of porridge and a few rags for two years. I am like a whore or 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". (Pritam 37-38).

The second female Puro meets is a motherless youngster named Kammo, who was reared by her aunt after her father abandoned her. Kammo is abused and mistreated by her aunt. Her aunt bans Kammo

and Hamida from ever meeting since Kammo sees Hamida as a Muslim replica of her mother. Hamida is aware that in all conflicts, women suffer the most casualties;

"It was a sin to be alive in this world full of evil, thought Hamida. It was a crime to be born a woman" (Pritam 65).

The third woman, Pagali, is a mentally ill woman who has endured sexual harassment and mockery from the village's aristocratic men. The woman was deranged and was not even aware of the physical violence being inflicted on her or the child growing inside of her. In addition, many women during the difficult time of the division were deformed and pregnant. Puro's resentment against Rashid and the growing embryo inside her haunts and torments her. Physical pressure, emotional distress, and mental anguish have generated a tsunami of despondency for Puro.

Another example of the cruel treatment of women that can be found in this book is the humiliation and display of naked women throughout the cities and villages.

"One day, Puro saw that a young girl was paraded naked while ten youths in the form of a procession accompanied by drums passed by their village," Puro explains:

"The procession was passing by their community." (Pritam 91).

The women of the town were helpless bystanders as they witnessed such a heinous crime, and none of them had the courage to speak up more. The book details the widespread violence perpetrated against women during the time of the partition. In those days, women had no guarantee of safety anywhere, not even in camps for displaced people. Military personnel providing security completely encircled refugee camps intended to be safe havens for women:

"There was a refugee camp in the adjoining village set up for the Hindus and Sikhs. The military guarded the camp. But daily, the Muslim hooligans would come and take away young girls from the camp at night and bring them back the next morning". (Pritam 91-92)

This made it difficult for women to seek help or report any incidents of violence. The lack of protection and justice for women during the partition is a heartbreaking reality that is still felt today.

When Pooro learns one day from Ramchand that his sister, Lajo, who is now her brother's wife, has been kidnapped in a nearby village, the novel carves out a very powerful image of a woman during partition. Immediately, Lajo decides to find Pooro so that she won't have to experience the same bitterness and dejection that Pooro did because of her family's and society's rejection of her based on societal norms. This is the result of Pooro's suppressed anger towards her family and society. In an effort to track down Lajo, she decides to go from village to village as a saleswoman (bunker). She subtly inquires about the girl and learns who she is from the people. Then, despite all the so-called feminine laws of fragility, she manages to bring her back to her house after devising a plan for her escape from the kidnappers. By doing this, Pooro asserts that women who were kidnapped during the partition were victims of intergroup strife at the hands of men rather than the criminals who were supposed to be hated by society. She informs Lajo.

"You will certainly go back to your home. You were not to blame for what happened to you". (Pritam 117)

Pooro's actions in rescuing Lajo from her abductors are a testament to the strength and resilience of women in the face of adversity. By defying societal expectations of fragility and weakness, Pooro proves that women are capable of taking control of their own lives and fighting back against injustice. Her words to Lajo also highlight the unfairness of blaming women for the violence perpetrated against them during times of communal strife. Instead, it is important to hold those responsible accountable for their actions and work towards creating a society where all individuals are treated with respect and dignity. Pooro's bravery serves as an inspiration for all women who have faced similar challenges, reminding them that they too have the power to overcome adversity and reclaim their agency.

Following the partition of the two nations in 1947, the governments of the two nations decided to relocate the abducted women by launching a programme known as the "Central Recovery Operation" that sought to rescue and rehabilitate women who had been kidnapped while migrating. Female social workers would find these women and, with the help of the police, would return them to their native country. Since the women were not given the option to make their own decision, this act appeared to be forced. Because they worried about being accepted by their families, women did not always want to go back, even though sometimes they were content with their new husbands and families. Despite their wishes, they were compelled to go back to their hometown. Male citizens had the option to select their country of residence, but abducted women did not. In actuality, they were denied a number of citizenship rights. Butalia in her book asserts:

“... the woman as a person did not count, her wishes were of little consequence, she had no right to resist, defy or even to appeal, for the Act denied even that basic freedom.” (Butalia 208-241)

Pooro grants Lajo to Ramchand, demonstrating that she is the same person he had forgotten and refused to accept back. When Pooro's brother realizes that this is her last opportunity, he asks her to go back to India:

“Pooro! ... This is your last chance ...” (Pritam 125)

Even Pooro knew that by simply claiming to be a Hindu, she could go back to her family. But she challenges the laws of the government, asserting her choice with confidence: "My home is now in Pakistan." (Pritam 125) In order to reject the offer of inclusion and interpolation into her family, community, and country, which was previously denied to her, Pooro makes the non-normative choice. She re-creates her own identity, "Hamida," which had previously been imposed upon her. Additionally, she creates a new space for the abducted women, for whom moving would mean being uprooted twice. Pooro, the main character, effectively uses her agency to critique the reality of partition by making the decision to remain in Pakistan and exercising her free will, defying patriarchal and territorial boundaries. Pooro's decision to stay in Pakistan also challenges the dominant narrative of the partition, which often portrays women as passive victims. Her agency and resilience serve as a powerful reminder of the complex ways in which individuals negotiate their identities and relationships in times of conflict and displacement.

**Conclusion-** In conclusion, it's possible to assert that women's linkage to a nation does not only stem from their biological function of creating citizens of a nation but also from the way in which their bodies serve as national and ethnic boundaries. Women are also seen as symbols of religious or cultural



ideology. The myths about the violence and suffering of partition are not clarified in the official history. Instead of a single, accepted truth, the gendered interpretation of the event has revealed multiple truths. Additionally, this alternative history highlights the harm that gender-specific torture causes to one's physical and mental health. Women's narratives like Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* account for what the subjective division of history chooses to ignore. The book provides a harrowing account of how women were subjected to rape, abduction, and forced marriage. It highlights the fact that women's bodies were used as tools of power and control by men who sought to assert their dominance over them. The partition not only resulted in the physical separation of people but also created a deep divide between different communities based on religious and cultural differences. This led to the creation of two separate nations, India and Pakistan, which continue to struggle with issues related to identity, nationalism, and communalism. The legacy of partition continues to haunt both countries even today as they grapple with issues related to border disputes, terrorism, and political instability.

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