
Women and Partition: A study of Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*

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Abstract

The Partition of India constituted a significant event for the three principal communities—Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs—residing in the subcontinent during that period. On August 15, 1947, the emergence of independence marked a significant historical event, resulting in the establishment of two sovereign nations, India and Pakistan, thereby transforming the geopolitical landscape. The Muslim population of the subcontinent successfully attained a unique homeland, concurrently with the broader Indian independence movement reaching a successful conclusion. The account *amrita* of partition reveals a complex interplay of significant psychological distress and substantial displacement. The traumatic occurrence is retained within a concealed area of the psyche, comparable to a photographic negative. During the critical juncture of the nation's quest for Independence, the country experienced significant fragmentation along religious lines, resulting in the victimisation, oppression, and trauma of women, who suffered solely due to their gender. Numerous authors have illustrated the distressing and traumatic experiences of women in their literary works, emphasizing occurrences that took place during the partition of India and Pakistan. Amrita Pritam, a notable author originating from Punjab, is recognised for her significant contributions to the literature surrounding the partition. The author's writings facilitate a vivid visualisation and comprehension of the profound trauma endured by individuals during the partition (Yadav). She represents the psychological trauma endured by women during that period and the significant effects it had on their mental states. Within the domain of partition literature, the novel *Pinjar* is recognised for its significant contributions and has garnered critical acclaim. The narrative effectively demonstrates the psychological and emotional distress experienced by women as a result of the partition of India (Poudel). The paper analyses how the author, through the perspective of *Pinjar*, provides profound insights into the physical and psychological trauma endured by women during the partition of India.

Keywords: Trauma, Partition, Women, Sexual Violence.

Introduction

When viewed in the light of history, the Partition of the Subcontinent is a momentous and terrible event that was marked by widespread bloodshed and the loss of life. The Partition of India was marked by profoundly traumatic experiences (Sharma). These experiences included physical misery, overwhelming sentiments of loss, and the anguish of separation. In the course of the partition, women were subjected to a large amount of exploitation, which was marked by male dominance, torture, humiliation, and institutional injustice, including gender inequity (Menon and Bhasin). Regardless of the challenges they faced, they continued to fulfil their vital duties as loyal wives, obedient daughters, and loving mothers who sacrificed themselves for their children. The issue of violence against women has been a problem in society for a very long time. The sorrow of India's partition and the ensuing communal riots have inspired the creative brilliance of writers in English, Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu, and Bengali worldwide (Pandey). The tragedy and Holocaust of that era have profoundly influenced the works of Indian authors. The yearning for the forsaken homeland, kin, companions, and culture, with the harrowing experiences of anguish and degradation, profoundly tormented individuals with equal intensity. The narratives of partition have been recounted by authors who personally observed the events, providing fictionalised representations of their experiences. Sadat Hassan Manto, Bapsi Sidhwa, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Khushwant Singh, and Amrita Pritam are notable authors who have effectively conveyed the anguish of division in their literary compositions.

The partition had significant sociological, economic, and political ramifications, while also deeply affecting individuals by inflicting pain and trauma.

Variations on the theme of traumatic experiences

It is common practice to use the term "trauma" to refer to the recurrent inflicting of wounds across the body. However, the term "trauma" is used in medical and psychiatric literature, particularly in the book written by Sigmund Freud, to refer to the infliction of wounds not on the body but on the mind. The wound on the body is easier to heal than the wound on the other part of the body. The mental injury manifests itself in recurring nightmares and causes the survivors to experience the same injury once more as they move through the events that led up to the first occurrence. As a result, the trauma is not fixed in a single event that occurred in the past of an individual; rather, it is something that occurs repeatedly and continues to haunt the survivor in the future (Caruth 4). In spite of the fact that Freud focused on the mental damage as the source of trauma, we cannot ignore the physical hurt when we are talking about the trauma experienced by individuals. Due to the fact that if we establish a connection between trauma and its origins, we will discover that the mind is inextricably tied with the body and the injuries it sustains (Freud 32).Radhika

Mohanram argues that physiological harm is the beginning of trauma and is connected to the concept of identity within the context of a psychoanalytic framework. Establishing a link between trauma theory and the experiences of women during the Partition reveals that the violence of the Partition generated a gendered form of trauma. This trauma unfolds in two interrelated dimensions: the physical violation of the body and the psychic injury carried within the mind. While the author is doing an analysis of the trauma that women experience in this chaotic split, she suggests that it is impossible to progress by separating the wounds of the body from the wounds of the psyche. The idea that Radhika Mohanram indicates that we need an integrated approach is correct. At this point, the question that presents itself to the mind is, "How does a wound to the body lead to a wound to the mind?" Here, the author makes the argument that the process of and the wound over their psyche, which is referred to as trauma, is caused by violence that is committed against the body of women. Cathy Caruth and Judith Lewis Herman are two examples of trauma theorists who have proposed Alle's theory that trauma can exist even when there is a lack of coherence and control over the victims' lives and bodies (Mohanram 918). During the time of the partition of India and Pakistan, women were not able to exercise control over their lives and bodies, nor were they able to put up a fight against the brutality that was inflicted against them; as a result, they were victims of trauma.

Characteristics of the trauma that women experienced during the Partition

The phenomenon of violence against women during the partition period can be characterised by two distinct dimensions: first, the violence perpetrated by males belonging to opposing religious communities; and second, the violence enacted by their own familial relations (Dey 104). The partition of India and Pakistan was marked by a series of egregious acts of violence against women, which included abduction, rape, and mutilation of genitalia. Additional forms of violence encompassed public humiliation, the removal of wombs, and the branding or tattooing of religious symbols on women's bodies. Furthermore, women were subjected to naked parades in the streets, amputation of breasts, and the burning of vaginas. These acts were emblematic of the broader violence perpetrated by men from opposing religious groups during this tumultuous period. In addition to the aforementioned instances, there were cases where male family heads coerced their female relatives into committing suicide. Numerous girls and women were subjected to beheading by their male counterparts, driven by adherence to the beliefs surrounding 'purity and pollution' (Menon and Bhasin 45). The perspective was that the integrity of the body, mind, and family name would be compromised if their women were to be in contact with males from the opposing religious group. Furthermore, it is posited within patriarchal societies that the honour of both family and community is contingent upon the actions and conduct of women. The defilement of women by men of a differing religion has significant implications for familial and social honour within the community. Consequently, the male members of the society perpetrated

acts of violence, resulting in fatalities among their female counterparts, with the intention of preserving familial and social honour. The physical injuries inflicted upon women manifested as a form of cultural trauma, as articulated by Jeffrey

C. Alexander in his work, *Trauma: A Social Theory*. Alexander posits that cultural trauma arises when a group of individuals collectively experiences a horrific event that indelibly impacts their consciousness, altering their memories permanently and fundamentally transforming their identity (Alexander 6). Consequently, it can be posited that, from Alexander's viewpoint, the experiences of trauma endured by women during the partition represent a form of cultural trauma that is analogous to collective trauma. Collective trauma indicates a significant disruption to the foundational structure of social life, adversely affecting the connections between individuals and undermining the sense of community (Erikson 187).

Factors contributing to the trauma experienced by women during the partition.

The partition served as a significant catalyst for women's trauma, particularly through the lens of motherhood's expansion. The association of women with the concept of the nation is a prevalent notion. For example, India is often called "Bharatmata" or "Mother India." Consequently, safeguarding the nation, regarded as the mother, from external threats and preserving her honour and integrity is considered the foremost responsibility of every individual in India. The woman, or the mother, finds herself devoid of agency over her own body and sexuality. It is the male gender that assumes the exclusive role of safeguarding women. Consequently, women emerged as the most profound victims of trauma during the partition. Furthermore, this broadened notion of motherhood heightened the men on both sides' inclination towards retribution. Consequently, the levels of violence and counter-violence directed towards women were exceedingly high. For instance, when Hindu women were subjected to sexual violence by Muslim men, it was viewed as an affront to Mother India. In retaliation for what was seen as the defilement of Bharatmata's womb, Muslim women became victims of similar acts perpetrated by Hindu men. This represents the broader context of women's trauma, whether collective or cultural, which was instigated by the perpetration of violence against women. The author's objective in this context is to elucidate the interplay between collective trauma and the individual experiences of women. Moreover, the personal trauma experienced by women remains inadequately recorded in comparison to the collective trauma. Consequently, understanding individual trauma proves challenging without a comprehensive perspective of that tumultuous era. A select group of scholars is endeavouring to explore the personal traumas endured by women during the partition through the medium of oral history; however, this research remains largely inaccessible to the broader public. Consequently, contemporary literary works serve as a significant resource for examining the personal traumas experienced by individuals. The novel *Pinjar* represents a modern narrative centred around the theme of partition.

Consequently, an examination of *Pinjar* is essential in the context of understanding sexual violence against women and the trauma resulting from partition (Yadav 42).

***Pinjar* as a Trauma Narrative**

Amrita Pritam was an Indian novelist, essayist, and poet, recognised for her versatility in writing in both Punjabi and Hindi (Datta). She enjoys a significant level of affection from individuals residing on both sides of India-Pakistan border (Butalia 210). Amrita Pritam, a prominent figure in Indian literature, had a distinguished career that spanned over fifty years. Amrita Pritam was born on August 31, 1919, in Gujranwala, a city located in the Punjab region, which is currently part of Pakistan. The individual's father held the position of a Sikh preacher and served as the editor of a literary journal (Datta).

Amrita Pritam articulates a feminist perspective through the portrayal of her female characters in the novel *Pinjar* (The Skeleton) (Nabar 67). The author articulates the diminishing standard of humanity in her novels (Nabar 69). The subject exhibits a comprehensive and unique perspective on feminism, which can be attributed to her experiences as a victim of Partition. The novel *Pinjar* illustrates that communal animosity was fundamentally and profoundly entrenched in the psyche of both Hindus and Muslims (Talbot and Singh 124).

Pinjar narrates the abduction of a young girl, 'Puro', by an individual named Rashid, who belongs to a rival religious group, as a means of enacting revenge for familial enmity (Pritam 11-13). The comprehensive examination of the transition from Puro to Hamida reveals a narrative characterised by themes of despair and melancholy. The narrative investigates and delineates the challenges encountered by the protagonist, Puro, during the period of Partition. The narrative critically examines the mechanisms through which the destiny of the protagonist, Puro, ultimately reflects the collective fate of numerous women during the period of Partition. The narrative presented by Pritam in *Pinjar* underscores the protagonist's life journey following her displacement from her native environment and subsequent relocation to a foreign territory. The narrative presents a comprehensive exploration of the themes of suffering and psychological trauma as experienced by women from opposing factions. Pritam's novels illustrate the experiences of women who have endured significant hardships as a result of societal norms and beliefs. The novel examines the mechanisms through which men assert their masculine authority and satisfy their desires through acts of violence against women. The literary work *Pinjar* underwent translation into English by Khushwant Singh, who rendered it as *Skeleton* (Singh vii), while a French translation was executed by Denis Matriage. The cinematic adaptation of the novel was released in 2003 and subsequently received the National Award for Best Film, as conferred by the Government of India (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 231). The novel *Pinjar* presents a narrative that explores the complexities of communal and religious conflict during the

Partition, ultimately undermining the essence of human identity. The female protagonist of the novel Pinjar, Pooro, is identified as the offspring of a Sahukar residing in the village of Chattoani, located in Punjab. The subject in question is the eldest among six siblings, currently aged fourteen years. At this juncture, it is noteworthy that her mother is anticipating the arrival of another child in the near future (Pritam 3). The initial occurrence of gender discrimination is observed when a mother expresses a preference for the birth of a son over a daughter, as evidenced by her desire for her subsequent child to be male: "...she wished that her next child should be another son." The individual engaged in the act of offering prayers to the Holy Mother (Pritam 3-4). Within the familial structure, the maternal figure, as a woman, perceives the female offspring as a liability to the household and expresses a preference for male progeny. In India, it has been a prevailing societal norm to perceive girls as a burden, with the birth of a female child often regarded as an unfortunate event (Chakravarti 54). The early marriage of Pooro serves as a pertinent illustration of male centric ideology. In this context, her parents actively seek a suitor from a wealthy family, ostensibly to alleviate the perceived burden associated with her marriage. Ramchand, the individual to whom she is engaged, is a young and intellectually capable man hailing from the adjacent village of Rattowal. The subject experiences a series of adverse events following her abduction by an individual named Rashid, who is identified as a Muslim youth from the same village. This action is motivated by a longstanding ancestral conflict between the two families of Pooro and Rashid, which symbolise the Sahukars and Sheikhs, respectively. The abduction in question can be traced back to a previous egregious act committed by the individual's uncle. This uncle, several years prior, unlawfully seized the sister of Rashid's father, detaining her for a duration of three nights. Rashid, motivated by the provocations of his clan and driven by a desire for retribution for his aunt, as well as an aspiration to attain his concealed affection for Pooro, is compelled to orchestrate her abduction. Pooro, following a period of two weeks, successfully returns to her residence one evening; however, she is met with unexpected rejection from her parents, who perceive her as a woman who has defied societal norms. Given that she has been abducted by an individual of the Muslim faith, it is commonly assumed that her chastity has been compromised. However, it is important to note that Rashid does not engage in the act of rape against her at any point.

The individual implores her parents for acceptance, asserting that Rashid has not inflicted any sexual harm upon her; however, to her dismay, her request is met with immediate rejection. The potential humiliation experienced by her family members, the associated disgrace to the family honour, and the imminent threat of violence from the Sheikhs if they accept her, collectively contributed to her father's decision to refuse her return.

The narrative further illustrates the transformation of motherhood into a traumatic experience. When Pooro became the mother of her husband's son, her consent was notably absent. Consequently, she perceived her son as a repugnant entity, asserting that she would not provide care for him unless he possessed the bloodline of her ancestors (Pritam 34). Moreover, when her son engaged in the act of tugging at her breast, she experienced a sensation akin to that of her milk being extracted with undue force, reminiscent of the coercive actions imposed by his father. The subject expressed the belief that Javed was solely the property of her husband, as he was forcibly implanted within her and sustained in her womb contrary to her consent (Pritam 35).

In the narrative, the author delineates the circumstances surrounding Lajo, Pooro's sister-in-law, who experienced a dislocation from her familial ties during the partition while residing in her maternal home at Rtoval. The individual in question was forcibly taken and held within her maternal residence by a family of Muslim affiliation, who had assumed control of her domicile. Lajo experienced a profound sense of alienation within her own residence, compelled to undertake all domestic responsibilities. She was consistently under their surveillance, which effectively prevented any possibility of escape. The individual in question was compelled to share living quarters with the male occupant of her residence; however, she declined to comply with this arrangement. The author draws a comparison between her residence and a coffin (Pritam 105). Despite being rescued by Pooro, she declined to align herself with her husband's family. The individual experienced a sensation of contamination. Consequently, it can be inferred that she would not receive a warm reception in her husband's household. However, Pooro assured her that she would receive acceptance from her brother and her in-laws in India. Although Pooro is not directly impacted by the communal violence, Pritam has engaged her with other female characters in the novel who serve as direct victims of the conflicts that arose during Partition. Pooro, as the protagonist of the narrative, facilitates the reintegration of these female characters into their familial units. The abduction of Pooro exhibits parallels to the abductions of numerous other women, which have occurred as a consequence of communal conflicts. The trauma experienced by Pooro parallels that of the women who have been victimised. The deprivation of one's home, familial connections, community ties, friendships, personal identity, and freedom significantly diminishes the motivation to persist in the face of adversity. Numerous women opt to embrace death rather than face abduction and exploitation, with some instances involving familial involvement in their demise. This act is often glorified as a form of martyrdom and sacrifice, aimed at preserving the honour of both the family and the community. "The concept of honour is pivotal in this transaction: by engaging in the act of abduction, the perpetrator would undermine the honour and, consequently, the masculinity of the opposing community, thereby augmenting his own status in relation to it" (Misri 39; Mallik 28).

The women who have endured the atrocities are able to return to their nation via rehabilitation camps and recovery operations; however, they encounter difficulties in reintegrating into their families. The rejection experienced by individuals following their rehabilitation and reintegration into their respective countries serves as a persistent reminder of their past, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of ongoing trauma. The experience of being rejected by loved ones is perceived as more emotionally devastating than the experience of abduction. In the narrative of *Pinjar*, the character Pooro experiences a dual violation; initially through the act of abduction and subsequently through the actions of her parents. This is encapsulated in her sentiment:

“...she had believed she was returning to life; she had wanted to live again, to be with Her father and mother.”

The individual arrived with a sense of optimism. At this juncture, she experienced an absence of both hope and fear. (Pritam, 2016).

Pooro's character engages in the act of rescuing the displaced woman amidst the context of communal conflicts. Through her actions, she attains her own destination alongside each girl she assists in reaching her respective homeland. In the novel, a notable instance is the portrayal of the challenges faced by women refugees, who, lacking alternatives, are compelled to reside in refugee camps. Pooro undertakes the rescue of a young girl situated within the refugee camps of the adjacent village, discovering her concealed presence amidst the sugarcane fields. The Hindu female participant presents a depiction of the exploitative conditions faced by women within the camps. The individual informs her that the camp is under the surveillance of Pakistani soldiers, and subsequent to sunset, groups of individuals known as goondas frequent the camp, selecting any girl of their preference for the night and returning her in the morning. The female subject is compelled to endure a sequence of nine consecutive nights in the company of nine distinct male individuals. Subsequently, she successfully orchestrates her escape during the night and seeks refuge within the confines of the sugarcane fields. This elicits significant anger in Pooro and reflects a profound sense of shame on humanity.

Pooro successfully facilitates the rescue of the girl by integrating her into a refugee convoy that is traversing their village. This represents the initial occurrence in which Pooro rescues a female individual and facilitates her return to India. The act of violating female bodies serves as a strategic weapon employed against opposing communities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be asserted that *Pinjar* provides a lens to examine the harrowing depictions of sexual violence against women and their traumatic experiences during the partition. In addition, the author, through the perspective of *Pinjar*, illuminates significant

aspects concerning the identity and sexuality of women. The concept of nationalism receives limited attention in Amrita Pritam's work, as the narrative primarily focusses on the dynamics of patriarchal oppression and the impact of communal violence on women. The author posits that violence and trauma carry detrimental implications for the overarching concept of nationalism. The emergence of nationalist sentiment can lead to impulsive behaviours, culminating in acts of violence and the proliferation of hatred. During the Partition, the phenomenon manifests in its most extreme form, as it seeks the obliteration of women in order to fulfil an individual's warped sense of nationalism. The concept of nationalism is fundamentally associated with principles such as unity, harmony, love, dignity, respect, and integrity. However, an examination of the events surrounding the Partition of India and Pakistan reveals a stark contrast, as these ideals were not upheld in practice during this period. Unfortunately, some people's mistaken feeling of patriotism leads them to commit violent crimes, offences, murder, sexual assault, kidnapping, forced marriages, and religious conversion.

Amrita Pritam effectively articulates these elements in her novel *Pinjar*. The author elucidates the detrimental effects of misguided perceptions and treatments of nationalism, which can result in egregious acts and crimes that inflict enduring trauma and existential crises upon women.

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