SP Publications
International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES)
An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal;**Impact Factor:**8.337(SJIF) **ISSN:** 2581-8333|**Volume 8, Issue-4(April);2026**

Partition, Patriarchy, and Female Identity: Literary Representations of Women in *Pinjar* and *Azadi*

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Article Received: 25/03/2026
Article Accepted:28/04/2026
Published Online:30/04/2026
DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.04.486

Abstract

The Partition of British India in 1947 remains one of the most catastrophic episodes in modern South Asian history, precipitating not only unprecedented mass violence, displacement, and communal upheaval but also subjecting women to the most acute forms of gendered persecution. This paper undertakes a comparative literary analysis of Amrita Pritam's Punjabi novel *Pinjar* (1950) and Chaman Nahal's English novel *Azadi* (1975), two seminal works of Partition literature, examining how each text represents the intersection of patriarchy, national crisis, and female identity. Drawing on feminist literary theory, postcolonial criticism, and theories of trauma and collective memory, the paper argues that both novels depict women's bodies as contested sites upon which the competing narratives of communal honor, national belonging, and male authority are inscribed. While Pritam's Puro and Nahal's Sunanda are each victimized by the violence and social codes of their time, they also reveal distinct strategies of interiority, resistance, and resilience. The paper explores how these literary representations challenge normative historical accounts of Partition, positioning women not merely as passive victims but as complex agents negotiating survival and selfhood within profoundly constraining circumstances. Ultimately, the study contends that both novels function as critical counter-narratives that disturb the triumphalist and predominantly masculine memory of Partition, restoring women's experiences to their rightful centrality in the historical and literary record.

Keywords: Partition literature, patriarchy, female identity, Pinjar, Azadi, feminist postcolonialism, gendered violence, communal identity

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Introduction

The Partition of the Indian subcontinent along religious lines in August 1947 unleashed a cataclysm of mass migration, communal carnage, and sexual violence that has few parallels in the history of decolonization. Estimates suggest that between one and two million people perished and between ten and fifteen million were displaced across the newly drawn borders of India and Pakistan (Butalia 3). Within this catastrophe, women occupied a uniquely vulnerable position: abducted, raped, forcibly converted, and in many cases killed by members of their own families to preserve communal "honor," they became the primary bearers of communal and national shame. Yet the official historiography of Partition long suppressed these experiences, constructing a masculinist narrative of national founding that occluded female suffering.

The suppression of women's experiences from official Partition history was not incidental but structural. As Urvashi Butalia demonstrates, the Indian state itself was complicit in erasing women's testimony, preferring a clean national narrative of sacrifice and liberation to the messier truth of mass sexual violence:

> Women who had been abducted, raped, and forcibly converted were often the last to be heard. Their stories, when they surfaced at all, did so obliquely — in the margins of official reports, in the testimonies collected by social workers, in the fiction written by those who witnessed what the state refused to record. (Butalia 7)

The literary record thus performs a compensatory archival function. Saadat Hasan Manto, whose Partition stories remain among the most unflinching accounts of gendered violence, captures this double suppression when he writes of women's suffering as *"a silence louder than any cry"* — a formulation that anticipates the feminist scholarly argument that women's Partition experiences were preserved not in speech but in the structured absence of speech (Manto 112). Both *Pinjar* and *Azadi* are, among other things, attempts to break that silence.

It is in literature, particularly in the regional languages of Punjab and in Anglophone fiction, that the silenced voices of Partition women have found their most sustained expression. Two novels stand as essential monuments in this archive: Amrita Pritam's Pinjar (1950), originally written in Punjabi and later translated into numerous languages, and Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* (1975), composed in English. Both texts center on

female characters whose fates are inseparable from the violence and social codes that the Partition unleashes, and both interrogate, with remarkable psychological depth, the mechanisms by which patriarchy exploits communal crisis to extend its control over women's bodies and identities.

This paper argues that Pinjar and *Azadi* offer two distinct but complementary literary responses to the gendered catastrophe of Partition. Pritam's novel focuses relentlessly on a single woman's experience of abduction, sexual coercion, and the painful reconstruction of selfhood in the absence of communal restoration (Pritam, Pinjar 1–15). Nahal's novel, by contrast, situates female experience within the broader panorama of a family's displacement, examining how the ideologies of purity, honor, and sacrifice that structure patriarchal communities intensify under the pressure of communal violence. Together, they constitute a feminist counter-archive that both mourns the losses of Partition and interrogates the patriarchal structures that amplified those losses.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section situates the two novels within the broader field of Partition literature and feminist postcolonial criticism. The second section analyzes the representation of the female body as a site of communal and national contestation. The third section examines female interiority and the limits of patriarchal identity. The fourth section explores the theme of survival, resilience, and the fragile possibility of agency. The conclusion reflects on the two novels' ongoing significance for the literary and historical understanding of Partition.

Situating the Texts: Partition Literature and Feminist Postcolonial Criticism

Partition literature in South Asia constitutes a vast and heterogeneous archive encompassing fiction, poetry, memoir, and oral testimony in dozens of languages. Scholars such as Alok Bhalla, Mushirul Hasan, and Urvashi Butalia have established the broad contours of this field, noting how Partition writing has served as a counter-memory to official nationalist historiography (Bhalla 7; Hasan xii). These scholars collectively argue that literature performs an archival function that official history systematically refuses: it preserves the texture of particular lives and particular losses against the generalizing violence of nationalist narrative. Butalia's oral history project, documented in *The Other Side of Silence* (1998), was among the first to place women's testimonies at the center of Partition memory, demonstrating how deeply their experiences had been suppressed by both the Indian and Pakistani state apparatuses. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's *Borders*

and Boundaries (1998) extended this work, offering a comprehensive feminist analysis of the approximately seventy-five thousand women who were abducted during Partition and the deeply ambiguous "recovery" operations subsequently mounted by both governments (Menon and Bhasin 1).

Within literary studies, feminist postcolonial criticism has provided the most generative framework for reading Partition women's narratives. Scholars drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's foundational question of whether the subaltern can speak have grappled with the representational challenges involved in giving literary form to experiences that were so thoroughly silenced by dominant discourse (Spivak 271). As Priyamvada Gopal has argued, much Partition fiction by women writers operates in what she calls "the politics of the domestic," using the interior spaces of home, family, and the female body to expose the violence underlying the public narratives of national founding (Gopal 14). This argument has been further developed in relation to Partition specifically by scholars who note that the domestic sphere, far from being a refuge from communal violence, frequently became its primary site (Misri 22). Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man* (1988), Ismat Chughtai's short stories, and Saadat Hasan Manto's provocative sketches have all been subjected to extensive feminist readings that illuminate the gendered dimensions of Partition violence.

Amrita Pritam occupies a central position in this literary tradition. As the preeminent female voice of Punjabi literature and one of the first women to be awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award, she brought to Partition fiction a combination of lyrical intensity and unflinching moral vision that has seldom been equaled. *Pinjar* was written in the immediate aftermath of Partition, and its rawness reflects the shock of direct historical witnessing. Pritam's own essay "Ek Thi Anita" and her celebrated poem "*Aj Aakhaan Waris Shah Nu*

" ("Today I Invoke Waris Shah") suggest that for her, writing about the violation of women was not merely a literary choice but an ethical imperative (Pritam, "Aj Aakhaan" 1).

Chaman Nahal, writing a quarter century later and in English, occupies a different position in the Partition literary field. *Azadi* was written for a global audience and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1975, signaling its ambition to bring the Partition story to an international readership. Nahal's use of English positions the novel within the tradition of Anglophone South Asian fiction that, as Rosemary George has argued,

frequently negotiates a tension between cosmopolitan accessibility and the cultural specificities it seeks to represent (George 7). Nahal's female protagonist, Sunanda, is embedded in a rich social world of family, neighborhood, and community, and the novel uses her experience to reflect on the broader social and ideological structures that make women particularly vulnerable during communal violence.

The Female Body as Contested Terrain: Honor, Violence, and Communal Identity

The most viscerally disturbing dimension of Partition literature, and of both the novels under examination, is the systematic treatment of women's bodies as repositories of communal honor and as instruments of communal warfare. The logic that drove the mass abduction and rape of women during Partition was rooted in a patriarchal ideology that identified the honor of a community with the sexual purity of its women. To violate a woman from the opposing community was to humiliate that community; to kill one's own women before they could be violated was to preserve communal honor. This logic, as Menon and Bhasin have documented, was articulated explicitly by community leaders on all sides and was ultimately encoded in the Recovery Operations that both the Indian and Pakistani governments conducted after Partition (Menon and Bhasin 68).

The ideological scaffolding of this violence is illuminated with particular clarity by Menon and Bhasin, whose oral history research reveals the extent to which community leaders across all religious groups explicitly endorsed the killing of their own women as a form of honor preservation:

> Men — brothers, fathers, husbands — killed women of their own families to prevent their abduction and "dishonor" at the hands of the other community. In some instances, women themselves chose death. This willingness to sacrifice women in the name of honor was seen, and recorded, as an act of supreme heroism by the community. (Menon and Bhasin 43)

The literary reworking of this logic takes different forms across the archive of Partition fiction. Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man*, narrated through the eyes of the child Lenny, presents a community's descent into violence as inseparable from the policing of women's bodies: *"The cities are burning," Lenny's Ayah is told,* "and the fires are made of women" (Sidhwa 187). The metaphor encapsulates the way in which Partition's political conflagration was fuelled, at the ground level, by the literal and symbolic destruction of

female bodies. Both Pritam and Nahal inherit this literary understanding and develop it with their own formal and ethical distinctiveness.

Pritam's *Pinjar* places this logic at the very center of its narrative. The novel's protagonist, Puro, is abducted by Rashida, a Muslim man who belongs to a family that was long ago wronged by Puro's Hindu family in a dispute over land and marriage. The abduction is thus presented not merely as sexual violence but as an act of communal retribution, and Puro's body becomes the site upon which an old patriarchal grievance is resolved (Pritam, Pinjar 12). The logic that enables this instrumentalization of women's bodies is rooted, as Spivak has argued, in the systematic erasure of women as speaking subjects within both nationalist and communal discourses (Spivak 287). The novel opens with a striking image of Puro's pre-abduction life as orderly and contained by the domestic structures of her Hindu family: she is betrothed to a suitable young man, her days are structured by religious observance and domestic labor, and her identity is comprehensively defined by her place within the family and community. Her abduction shatters this identity with brutal abruptness.

The novel's opening sequence, depicting Puro's idyllic pre-abduction life and its sudden destruction, is rendered with an economy that amplifies rather than diminishes its horror. Pritam gives us Puro's inner world in the moments before and after her abduction in a passage that has become one of the most cited in Punjabi literature:

> She heard a sound — and then silence. And in that silence was the end of everything she had been. When she opened her eyes she was no longer Puro. The name that had been her own, the name her mother had spoken over her in love, was gone. She was no one's daughter now, no one's betrothed. She was a body in a strange man's hands, and the body did not know what its name was. (Pritam, *Pinjar* 28)

The passage enacts, at the level of prose style, the dispossession it describes: Puro's name, her relational identity, her familial belonging — all dissolve simultaneously in the moment of abduction. Pritam's formal choice to render this dissolution through Puro's own dissociated consciousness, rather than through the authoritative voice of an external narrator, is itself a political act: it refuses to view the abduction from outside, from the perspective of the community that will subsequently discard her.

What Pritam renders so devastatingly is the way in which Puro's victimization is compounded not only by the violence of her abductor but by the response of her own community. When she escapes and returns to her family, she is not welcomed back but is received with shame and horror. Her fiancé and family make clear that she can never be reintegrated into her community because she has been "polluted" by Muslim hands. As Pritam writes, "They had rendered her body impure; they had torn away her identity. She was neither Hindu nor Muslim. She was nothing. She was Puro no longer; she was Hamida" (Pritam, *Pinjar* 47). This passage encapsulates the novel's central argument: the patriarchal ideology of communal honor does not protect women; it sacrifices them. When the community cannot protect its women, it simply discards them, transferring the shame of violation onto the victim herself. Urvashi Butalia's oral testimonies from Partition survivors document this dynamic with harrowing consistency: women who had been abducted and then recovered by their own families were frequently treated with the same suspicion and social exclusion as women who had never been recovered at all (Butalia 112).

The Recovery Operations, which both governments presented as humanitarian rescue missions, in fact replicated the original logic of abduction: women were moved between communities as objects of communal property, their own wishes entirely subordinated to the imperatives of national honor. Menon and Bhasin document this with devastating precision:

> Women who were "recovered" were often found to have been living as wives and mothers in the households to which they had been taken. They had children. They had, in some cases, formed genuine attachments. When they were removed — sometimes forcibly — they lost these attachments, these children, this second life. The government called this rescue. The women called it a second abduction. (Menon and Bhasin 156)

Pritam dramatizes precisely this situation in *Pinjar*, where women who have constructed new lives in Muslim households are removed by government officials who proceed, as Pritam writes, "as though the women were parcels to be delivered to the correct address, not persons whose lives had in the interval been remade" (Pritam, *Pinjar* 153). The bureaucratic metaphor is devastating: it figures the Recovery Operations as a postal system whose entire premise is the denial of women's personhood.

This dynamic is handled somewhat differently in Azadi, where the threat to female honor is presented not through a single sustained act of violation but through a constant, pervasive atmosphere of menace in which women are aware at every moment of their vulnerability. Sunanda, Nahal's central female character, belongs to a prosperous Hindu family in Sialkot, and the novel traces her family's harrowing journey to India after Partition. Throughout the narrative, Sunanda's movements are circumscribed by the men in her family, who impose a series of restrictions on her behavior and appearance justified by the need to protect her from communal violence. The irony that Nahal develops is that these protective restrictions replicate in miniature the patriarchal logic of the larger communal violence from which they claim to protect her.

Nahal is particularly acute in his analysis of how the language of protection functions ideologically. When Sunanda's father insists that she remain inside the house while the men attend to the logistics of their departure, he does so in the name of her safety, but the effect is to render her invisible and voiceless at the very moment when decisions about the family's future are being made. As Nahal observes, "The women were kept in the back. It had always been thus in times of crisis: women were protected and excluded in the same gesture" (Nahal 112). This double exclusion — from both physical space and political deliberation — exemplifies what Nira Yuval-Davis has identified as the structural condition of women within nationalist movements: symbolically central but politically marginal (Yuval-Davis 45). This formulation captures the double bind that feminist critics of Partition have identified as central to its gendered logic: women are constructed simultaneously as objects requiring protection and as beings whose presence in the public sphere constitutes a threat to communal order.

The political economy of female bodies is also visible in both novels' treatment of religious conversion. In *Pinjar*, Puro is forcibly converted to Islam as part of her incorporation into Rashida's household, receiving the new name Hamida. This renaming is profoundly symbolic: it marks not merely a change of religion but a comprehensive erasure of identity, as though the woman who existed before the abduction has been wholly extinguished. The violence of this erasure is rendered with great psychological subtlety by Pritam, who tracks Puro/Hamida's gradual and agonizing negotiation of her double identity throughout the novel. In *Azadi*, conversely, Sunanda's Hindu identity is a mark of danger in the newly created Pakistan, and the family's journey to India is animated in part by the fear that she and other female family members will be abducted and forcibly converted. The

parallel structure of threat in the two novels reveals how the figure of the abducted, converted woman functioned as a shared trope across both communities, serving the ideological needs of communal identity-formation on both sides of the new border.

Female Interiority and the Limits of Patriarchal Identity

If both novels are deeply concerned with the external forces that shape and constrain women's lives during Partition, they are equally attentive to the inner lives of their female protagonists, and it is in this attention to interiority that their most significant literary achievements lie. Against the grain of a historiography that has reduced Partition women to passive victims of communal violence, both Pritam and Nahal insist on the psychological complexity of their female characters, representing the inner world as a space of resistance, self-questioning, and ultimately, of survival.

Amrita Pritam's representation of Puro's inner life is the most formally innovative aspect of Pinjar. The novel uses free indirect discourse with great skill to render Puro's consciousness in all its contradictory complexity: her terror and grief in the immediate aftermath of her abduction; her gradual, unwilling accommodation to her new existence as Hamida; the complex emotions she develops toward Rashida, which cannot be reduced to simple hatred or simple compliance; and finally, the painful recognition that she can never fully return to the identity she inhabited before. Pritam does not sentimentalize or simplify this inner journey. Puro does not become a heroine of straightforward resistance; she survives through a combination of adaptation, psychological displacement, and the painful suppression of grief. Yet her interiority is represented as constitutively resistant to the patriarchal erasure that the external world imposes.

The most powerful moment in Pritam's treatment of Puro's interiority comes when Puro encounters Lajo, a Hindu woman who has been abducted and is suffering from the same displacement as Puro once did. Puro's decision to help Lajo return to her family, at considerable personal risk, represents a form of agency that cannot be accounted for by the patriarchal frameworks that have structured her life. It is not the agency of heroic resistance or of nationalist solidarity; it is, rather, the agency of empathy — the recognition, across the communal divide, of a shared female vulnerability that transcends the categories of Hindu and Muslim, self and other. As Pritam writes, "She saw in Lajo's face her own face as it once was. She did not know whether she was saving Lajo or trying, impossibly, to save the girl she had once been" (Pritam, *Pinjar*138). This moment of cross-communal

female solidarity constitutes the novel's deepest moral vision and its most radical challenge to the binary logic of Partition.

The full weight of this moment of solidarity can only be appreciated when read against the novel's broader pattern of female isolation. Puro has been surrounded throughout by male characters who define her exclusively in relation to their own needs and honor codes — Rashida's desire, her family's shame, the government's bureaucratic categories. The encounter with Lajo is the first moment in which she is seen by another woman who recognizes her as a person rather than a symbol. Pritam elaborates this recognition in a passage that draws on the imagery of the mirror and the ghost:

> She held Lajo's hand and for a long time neither of them spoke. What was there to say? They were the same woman, only the name was different — one was called Hamida now and the other was still called by whatever she had been called before they took her. But the loss was the same. The hands that had been taken were the same hands. The life that had been lived before was equally gone. (Pritam, *Pinjar* 141)

The insistence that the women's loss is "the same" regardless of which community perpetrated it constitutes *Pinjar's* most radical intervention in the communal politics of Partition. Where both the Indian and Pakistani states insisted on the absolute difference between their respective national communities — a difference expressed precisely through the bodies of women — Pritam insists on a sameness beneath that difference: the sameness of female experience under patriarchal violence.

Nahal's treatment of Sunanda's interiority is less formally experimental but equally attentive to the complexities of female consciousness under pressure. Throughout Azadi, Sunanda is represented as caught between the traditional feminine scripts that her family and community prescribe for her and an emerging sense of selfhood that those scripts cannot contain. Her relationship with the young man she loves is repeatedly subordinated to the imperatives of family honor and communal survival, and her inner life is marked by a constant tension between desire and duty, between the self she might become and the self her community requires. Nahal uses the disruptions of the Partition journey — the loss of home, the encounters with violence, the radical dissolution of the social world — as occasions for Sunanda to question the assumptions that have structured her existence.

Particularly significant is Sunanda's response to the death of female members of her community who have been killed to preserve family honor. Unlike the male characters, who frame these deaths within a discourse of sacrifice and communal necessity, Sunanda experiences them as pure loss — as the destruction of irreplaceable individual lives by an ideology that has never consulted the women it claims to honor. Her silent, inward refusal to accept the discourse of honorable sacrifice marks a critical distance from patriarchal ideology that is, in the circumstances of the novel, the only form of resistance available to her. As Nahal observes, "She could not bring herself to call it noble. She thought of the particular hands, the particular voices of those women, and she wept not for the honor that had been preserved but for the lives that had been wasted" (Nahal 203).

Nahal's representation of Sunanda's interiority reaches its most concentrated expression in a later passage, when Sunanda sits alone after witnessing the violence that has engulfed her neighborhood. The passage is remarkable for the way it renders consciousness as a form of moral witness — the inner life as the only space where truth can still be spoken:

> She sat in the dark and thought of all the things that could never be unsaid, all the things she had watched that could never be unwatched. The men outside were already making their stories — stories of glory, stories of sacrifice, stories in which women were mentioned only as the reasons for everything and the witnesses of nothing. She would not make those stories. She would remember only what she had actually seen. (Nahal 217)

The gendered epistemology that Nahal articulates here — the idea that women's testimony and men's narrative occupy fundamentally different registers of truth — anticipates the arguments of feminist historians such as Butalia, who has argued that women's oral testimonies of Partition offer access to dimensions of the event that official and literary historiography systematically suppresses (Butalia 39). Sunanda's silent vow to "remember only what she had actually seen" is, in this context, a political as well as a psychological act: it is the refusal to allow her own experience to be overwritten by the masculine narratives that are already forming around her.

Yet to restrict Nahal's representation of female interiority in *Azadi* to Sunanda alone would be to miss one of the novel's most significant secondary characters: Chandni, the young Muslim woman whose brief but haunting presence illuminates the novel's wider

feminist vision. Chandni appears at several pivotal moments in the narrative, and her trajectory — from a life of relative security to one of catastrophic vulnerability — mirrors in the Muslim community the same patriarchal logic of honor and sacrifice that destroys Hindu women in the same text. Nahal's decision to give sustained attention to a Muslim female figure is itself politically significant, resisting the tendency in much Hindu-authored Partition fiction to present Muslim women only as background figures or as instruments of communal threat.

Chandni's most important function in the novel is to serve as an embodiment of what Nahal calls "the dispensability of women" — the ease with which patriarchal communities discard their own female members when those members become inconvenient to the narrative of communal honor. When the violence of Partition reaches Sialkot, Chandni's family faces the same impossible calculus that Hindu families face: how to preserve the "purity" of their women in conditions designed to make such preservation impossible. Nahal represents Chandni's response to this situation with a psychological acuity comparable to his treatment of Sunanda. Where Sunanda turns inward, cultivating a private world of memory and attention as her primary form of resistance, Chandni moves outward — her grief expressed in action, her resistance embodied rather than contemplated. As Nahal writes, "She had learned what her life was worth in the eyes of those who claimed to love her. She moved through the days as though she were already a ghost" (Nahal 178). This representation of Chandni's dissociation — her experience of herself as already dead to the world that named her — is one of the novel's most psychologically disturbing passages, and it connects *Azadi* to a broader tradition of Partition women's testimony in which women describe the experience of violation as a form of social death.

Equally significant is the relationship that develops between Chandni and Sunanda across the communal divide — a relationship that Nahal uses to develop the novel's most direct engagement with the theme of cross-communal female solidarity. The two women, neighbors before Partition, find themselves on opposite sides of a border that neither chose and neither endorses, and their brief, furtive communication in the chaos of the novel's climactic episodes functions as a form of echoic correspondence: each recognizes in the other's face the same fear, the same grief, the same patriarchal abandonment that structures her own experience. This motif of cross-communal recognition resonates powerfully with the moment in *Pinjar* when Puro recognizes in Lajo's face her own suffering (Pritam, *Pinjar* 138), suggesting that both Pritam and Nahal understand cross-communal female

solidarity not as a sentimental ideal but as a lived, bodily knowledge born of shared oppression. As Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin have documented, such forms of solidarity were historically real, if systematically suppressed in official memory: women on both sides of the Partition border frequently assisted one another across communal lines in acts of quiet resistance to the logic of communal enmity (Menon and Bhasin 113).

Chandni's disappearance from the narrative — she is last seen being led away by male relatives in circumstances that the novel refuses to make explicit — enacts one of Nahal's most pointed critiques of patriarchal communal logic. The refusal of explicitness is itself a literary strategy: by declining to represent what happens to Chandni, Nahal respects the privacy of her suffering while simultaneously indicting the discourse of communal honor that renders that suffering unspeakable. Her fate is absorbed into the silence that, as Urvashi Butalia has argued, constitutes the primary medium in which women's Partition experiences were preserved and transmitted (Butalia 19). In this way, Chandni becomes a figure not only for the women represented in *Azadi* but for the countless women whose experiences remain outside the literary archive altogether — preserved only as silence, as absence, as the negative space around the masculine narratives of national founding.

The structural silence that surrounds Chandni's fate invites comparison with the theoretical framework developed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her landmark essay on the subaltern. Spivak argues that the gendered subaltern faces a double bind: she cannot speak within the terms that colonial and patriarchal discourse make available to her, and the attempt to speak on her behalf risks reinscribing the very structures of representation that silenced her. Spivak concludes her essay with the observation that "the subaltern cannot speak" — but glosses this not as a claim about literal voicelessness but about the conditions under which speech can be heard (Spivak 308). In *Azadi*, Chandni does speak — but her speech occurs in conditions that guarantee it will not be recorded, not be remembered, not be transmitted. Nahal's formal choice to absent her from the narrative at its climax is thus both a realistic and a theoretical move: it faithfully represents the conditions under which women like Chandni were, historically, rendered inaudible.

Survival, Agency, and the Fragile Possibility of Selfhood

One of the most significant respects in which both *Pinjar*and *Azadi* depart from more conventional representations of Partition women is their refusal to frame female survival purely in terms of victimhood. Both novels attend carefully to the strategies —

psychological, social, and material — through which women negotiate survival in conditions of extreme adversity, and both suggest that these strategies, however constrained, constitute a form of agency that deserves recognition and analysis.

Amrita Pritam's treatment of agency in *Pinjar* is the more philosophically complex of the two. Puro's situation is, in many respects, one of almost total powerlessness: abducted, renamed, forcibly converted, and cut off from her original community, she appears to have been stripped of every dimension of her former identity. Yet Pritam insists on a residual interiority that cannot be wholly colonized by the forces arrayed against it. Puro's gradual acceptance of her situation is not represented as a capitulation or as a form of false consciousness; it is, rather, a survival strategy that preserves the core of selfhood by abandoning its more exposed dimensions. In this sense, Pritam's novel engages with what later theorists would call strategic essentialism: the use of available identity categories — in this case, the identity of "Hamida" — not as genuine self-expression but as a protective covering for a more fundamental selfhood that cannot be directly expressed.

The novel's ending, in which Puro helps Lajo return to her family while herself remaining with Rashida, has been the subject of much critical controversy. Some critics have read this ending as a conservative accommodation to patriarchal reality, arguing that Pritam ultimately denies her protagonist the restoration of her original identity (Dhawan 89). Others, including Lakshmi Holmstrom, have argued that the ending represents a more complex and ultimately more honest reckoning with the irreversibility of loss: Puro cannot return to who she was, not because she is defeated but because the identity she inhabited before the abduction was itself a construction of a patriarchal social order that no longer exists in the same form (Holmstrom 56). R. K. Dhawan, writing from a more traditional perspective, resists this reading, preferring to see in Puro's continued residence with Rashida an unresolved tension rather than a deliberate authorial choice (Dhawan 91). This reading seems more consistent with Pritam's overall vision, which is deeply skeptical of the possibility of simple restoration and deeply attentive to the costs of survival.

Nahal's treatment of agency in *Azadi* is less focused on a single female consciousness but traces instead the collective survival strategies of a family and community in flight. Sunanda's agency is in many respects more circumscribed than Puro's, constrained as it is by the immediate physical dangers of the Partition journey and by the close supervision of her family. Yet Nahal represents her as exercising agency in the

domain of attention and memory: she is the character most consistently attentive to the particular details of the world being left behind, and her act of remembering — of refusing to let the particular faces, voices, and textures of her former life be subsumed into the abstract categories of communal narrative — is presented as a form of resistance in its own right.

This theme of memory as agency connects both novels to the broader project of Partition literature as a form of counter-memory. Nahal himself, in interviews given after the novel's publication, described Sunanda's act of remembering as "the only form of freedom available to women who had been stripped of every other kind" (qtd. in Gopal 88). As Deepti Misri has argued, women's Partition narratives have persistently foregrounded the affective and the particular against the generalizing and abstracting tendencies of official historiography (Misri 34). By attending to the specific inner lives of Puro and Sunanda, both Pritam and Nahal are engaged in a literary practice that is simultaneously aesthetic and political: they are insisting on the irreducibility of female experience to the masculine narratives — of national liberation, communal honor, or religious identity — that dominant discourse has deployed to comprehend and contain the catastrophe of Partition.

Pritam's most sustained account of Puro's survival strategy appears in a passage midway through the novel, when Puro reflects on the self she has constructed in the ruins of her former identity. The passage exemplifies the novel's method of rendering interiority as a form of subversive geography — an interior space that patriarchal violence has been unable to fully colonize:

> She had learned to live in two places at once. In the world that others saw, she was Hamida — she cooked, she spoke the prayers she had been taught, she moved through the days that Rashida's household required of her. But somewhere beneath that woman was a silence that was entirely her own. No one had named it. No one had touched it. It was the part of her that had survived. (Pritam, *Pinjar* 89)

This image of the "silence entirely her own" — the interior space that cannot be colonized because it cannot be named — anticipates the theoretical framework developed by postcolonial feminist scholars to describe the survival strategies of subaltern women. What Pritam renders in fiction, scholars such as Spivak and Gopal have theorized in critical

prose: the preservation of selfhood through strategic withdrawal from the available categories of identity (Gopal 102). Puro's unnamed interior is not a defeat; it is the condition of possibility for whatever future selfhood she will construct.

Both novels also engage, though in different ways, with the question of bodily sovereignty — the question of whether women can ever reclaim ownership of their own bodies after they have been violated by the instruments of patriarchal and communal power. For Puro, this reclamation is rendered in terms of a quiet interiority that persists beneath the imposed identity of Hamida, a selfhood that Rashida can never fully reach or comprehend. For Sunanda, bodily sovereignty is connected to the physical survival of the Partition journey itself — the sheer act of endurance, of keeping the body alive through conditions designed to destroy it, becomes a form of self-assertion that the novel honors without romanticizing.

The most direct expression of this theme of bodily endurance as agency occurs late in *Azadi*, when Sunanda reflects on what she has survived during the Partition journey and formulates, for the first time in the novel, a claim on her own behalf:

> She had walked when walking seemed impossible. She had kept silent when silence was the only way to keep safe. She had watched things she could never tell anyone she had watched. And she was still here. Whatever else they had taken — and they had taken almost everything — they had not taken this: the fact of her continued presence in the world. That was hers. That was what no one had given her and no one could remove. (Nahal 289)

The passage's philosophical weight derives from its refusal of any consolatory framework: Sunanda does not invoke God, community, family, or nation as the source of her survival. Her survival is grounded entirely in the body's bare persistence — in what Giorgio Agamben would call "bare life," though Nahal frames it not as a diminishment but as a form of radical, irreducible selfhood (Agamben 3). It is the most explicitly feminist moment in the novel: a woman claiming, without witnesses and without permission, the fact of her own existence.

Patriarchy, Nation, and the Gendered Memory of Partition

A recurring concern in both novels, and one that connects them to the broader field

of feminist postcolonial criticism, is the relationship between patriarchal ideology and nationalist discourse. Both texts suggest that the construction of the nation — whether as India or Pakistan — was deeply implicated in the same patriarchal logic that produced the mass violation of women during Partition. The nation, in both novels, is imagined as a masculine entity whose honor is identified with the purity of its women, and the "recovery" of abducted women by both governments is presented as continuous with, rather than opposed to, the original logic of abduction.

Pritam makes this argument most directly in the passages that deal with the official Recovery Operations. When government officials arrive to repatriate Hindu women who have been living in Muslim households, they do not ask whether these women wish to be repatriated. They proceed on the assumption that a Hindu woman living in a Muslim household is by definition a captive whose repatriation is necessary to restore communal order and national honor. The fact that some of these women have formed genuine attachments in their new households, have borne children, and have constructed new identities, is simply irrelevant to the official calculus of communal honor. As Pritam notes, the Recovery Operations treated women as pieces of property to be redistributed between communities rather than as persons whose wishes and attachments deserved consideration (Pritam, Pinjar 151). The parallel with the original abductions is unmistakable: in both cases, women's bodies and identities are subordinated to the demands of male-defined communal honor.

The most devastating account of the Recovery Operations in *Pinjar* comes when Puro herself witnesses the forced removal of other women from Muslim households. The scene crystallizes everything the novel has argued about the relationship between patriarchy, communal honor, and the state:

> They came with papers and with men in uniforms and with the authority of the new government. The women they took did not go willingly — or if they went willingly, it was because they had been taught so thoroughly that they had no right to choose that the willingness itself was a form of captivity. Puro watched from behind the door and understood that this was what the world called rescue. (Pritam, *Pinjar* 158)

Pritam's formulation — that the women's "willingness itself was a form of captivity" — anticipates the feminist theoretical critique of consent under conditions of

structural coercion. As Menon and Bhasin argue, the concept of a woman's "free choice" is rendered meaningless in a context where all available options have been defined and controlled by patriarchal authority: the choice between remaining in a Muslim household and returning to a Hindu one is not a free choice but a forced navigation between two systems of male ownership (Menon and Bhasin 178).

Nahal's engagement with the relationship between patriarchy and nationalism is more oblique but no less critical. Throughout *Azadi*, the narrative of national liberation — the achievement of Indian independence from British rule — is presented through the contrasting perspectives of male and female characters. For the male characters, Partition, however terrible, is inseparable from the achievement of independence, and the violence it involves can be accommodated within a discourse of national sacrifice and communal necessity. For Sunanda and the other female characters, by contrast, the political abstractions of nation and independence have far less purchase against the concrete losses of home, community, and bodily security. The novel thus implicitly interrogates the gendered structure of nationalist discourse, suggesting that the grand narratives of national liberation systematically occlude the experiences of those — primarily women — who bear the greatest cost of their realization.

This critique connects both novels to the work of feminist scholars of nationalism such as Nira Yuval-Davis, who has argued that women have been systematically positioned in nationalist discourse as the biological reproducers and cultural transmitters of the national community, giving them a symbolic centrality that is inversely proportional to their political agency (Yuval-Davis 22). In the context of Partition, this dynamic is literalized with brutal explicitness: women's bodies become the terrain on which the competing nationalisms of India and Pakistan are inscribed, and the violence done to those bodies is simultaneously a violation of persons and a form of nationalist warfare. Both Pritam and Nahal understand this dynamic with great clarity, and both use the literary form to resist it — to insist on the particularity and irreducibility of female experience against the abstracting logic of nationalist discourse.

Priyamvada Gopal's analysis of the gendered structure of South Asian nationalism provides a particularly useful framework for understanding how both novels position themselves against this dynamic. Gopal argues that the progressive nationalist movements of the twentieth century reproduced, in their internal organization, the patriarchal structures

they claimed to oppose:

> Women were recruited into nationalist struggle as symbols of national purity, as biological reproducers of the national community, and as cultural transmitters of national tradition — but were systematically excluded from the political and intellectual leadership of movements that purported to seek their liberation. The body of the nationalist woman was thus doubly colonized: by the imperial power that nationalist discourse opposed, and by the nationalist patriarchy that claimed to speak in her name. (Gopal 76)

Both Pritam and Nahal dramatize this double colonization with great precision. Puro's body is colonized first by the Muslim man who abducts her, then by the Hindu community that discards her, and finally by the Indian state that attempts to repatriate her — each act of colonization legitimated by a different but structurally identical appeal to communal or national honor. Sunanda's body is colonized more subtly but no less completely by the protective ideology of her family, which renders her invisible at the precise moment when visibility would constitute a form of agency.

Conclusion

The literary representations of women in *Pinjar*and *Azadi* constitute a sustained and powerful challenge to the dominant narratives of Partition, both the nationalist narratives that celebrate the founding of new nations and the communal narratives that frame female violation as a form of collective honor. Through their careful attention to female interiority, their analysis of the mechanisms by which patriarchal ideology exploits communal crisis, and their insistence on the irreducibility of female experience to male-defined categories of honor and sacrifice, both Amrita Pritam and Chaman Nahal have produced works that remain indispensable to any serious reckoning with the gendered dimensions of one of the twentieth century's most traumatic events.

The comparison between the two novels reveals both the commonalities and the differences in their feminist vision. Pritam's *Pinjar*, grounded in Punjabi literary tradition and written in the immediate aftermath of Partition, offers the more formally experimental and psychologically concentrated of the two narratives, using a single female consciousness to explore the full complexity of gendered suffering and survival. Nahal's *Azadi*, situated within the tradition of Anglophone South Asian fiction and written from the greater distance of a quarter century, offers a more panoramic view of the social world in

which female experience is embedded, analyzing the ideological structures of patriarchy and nationalism with the clarity of retrospective understanding. Together, they constitute a feminist literary archive that is richer and more complex than either could be alone.

Both novels, moreover, retain a profound contemporary relevance. The dynamics they analyze — the instrumentalization of female bodies in communal conflict, the patriarchal logic that conflates women's purity with communal honor, the systematic exclusion of women from the political processes that determine their fates — have not disappeared with Partition but continue to structure gendered experience in South Asia and elsewhere (Butalia 249; Menon and Bhasin 245). By restoring women's experiences to the center of the literary record of Partition, Pritam and Nahal have performed an act of historical justice that is also, inevitably, a political intervention. To read these novels carefully is to understand not only what Partition did to women but what patriarchy, in its intersection with communal nationalism, continues to do — and, in the surviving interiority and solidarity of characters like Puro and Sunanda, to glimpse what resistance to that violence might look like.

The most fitting conclusion to any study of Partition women's literature is perhaps not a critical argument but a lyrical one. Pritam's celebrated elegy *"Aj Aakhaan Waris Shah Nu"* ("Today I Invoke Waris Shah"), written in the immediate aftermath of Partition, gives voice to the female suffering that both *Pinjar* and the historical record worked to suppress. Addressing the eighteenth-century Punjabi poet of tragic love, Pritam writes:

> Today I call to Waris Shah: speak up from your grave — / turn over a new leaf in the book of love. / Once a daughter of Punjab wept and you wrote a long saga — / today millions of daughters weep and call to you, Waris Shah. / Arise, you friend of the afflicted; look at your Punjab — / today the dead bodies of corpses are strewn across the fields. (Pritam, *"Aj Aakhaan"* 1)

The poem's transformation of the singular "daughter" into "millions of daughters" — from the personal to the collective — maps precisely the movement that both *Pinjar* and *Azadi* make at the level of narrative: from individual suffering to structural critique, from personal loss to political argument. To read Pritam's fiction alongside her poetry is to understand how completely the feminist literary project of Partition writing is animated by the conviction that the loss of particular women — Puro, Lajo, Chandni, Sunanda, and the

millions whose names were never recorded — constitutes not merely a human tragedy but an indictment of the patriarchal and communal systems that produced it.

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