



LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

Trauma Re-lived: Reading Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar/The Skeleton*

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Abstract

The proposed research paper aims to link the trauma of gender with the politics of partition by examining *Pinjar* which stands as a 'witness' of the violent division. This novelette which is written by an applauded Punjabi writer and poet Amrita Pritam, has always been viewed as a seminal text that puts forward the gendered violence and traumatized 'self' of women during the "August Anarchy". This paper critically explores the ways in which the destiny of its protagonist Puro eventually becomes the fate of thousands of women at the time of partition. Puro's life was re-lived by countless women during the partition and the post-partition period and ultimately her story becomes the history of a nation.

Keywords

Partition; Gendered Violence; Amrita Pritam; *Pinjar*; *The Skeleton*; Puro.

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Introduction

Today I implore Waris Shah, to speak from his grave;

And turn over a page of the book of love;
When a daughter of the fabled Punjab wept, he gave tongue to her
silent grief;
Today a millions daughters weep, but where is Waris Shah to give
voice to their woes? (Kumar 40)

These lines written by Amrita Pritam foreground the trauma of abduction and gendered violence which has become synonymous with partition. Her celebrated novel *Pinjar* narrates the violence on women during and after the partition of British India in 1947 which was translated into English by Khushwant Singh as *The Skeleton* and into French by Denis Matringe. The cinematic adaptation of the novel was released in 2003 and won the National Award in India. It poignantly pictures a very long and painful odyssey of its central character Puro.

Post Abduction Trauma

The novel begins with a festive mood, but concludes with a gloomy tone and horrific consequences of the decolonization. Puro's kidnapping and abduction which transforms her life permanently is the turning point and other women characters depicted in this novel are the reflection of Puro's different traumatic phases. Her sister-in-law, Lajo mirrors the first painful phase of Puro's life when she was kidnapped in her abductor's house. There is another woman character, who was sexually assaulted and became pregnant. That mad woman was not even aware of the violence inflicted on her body and a child growing in her but Puro's awareness constantly haunts her. There were many women who were mutilated and impregnated during the tumultuous time of division. The nausea of these women of the child forcibly planted in their womb is the reverberation of Puro's hatred towards Rashid and her fetus. It echoes the period when she got to know that she is carrying the outcome of insensitive act done by Rashid and the realization of a life growing within her, torments her. In a long poem "Tavarikh" (History), Amrita Pritam has penned this ache of abducted and

pregnant woman “whose body is forced into motherhood.” She considers these children as “the symbol of that accident” and calls it “a blackened spot” that is born out of violence. She voices the trauma of rape through the symbol of a mother’s womb which has become a victim of collective madness prevailed during the partition and this womb figures the destitute land of Punjab which is helpless like a woman to save itself from being violated. An abducted girl whom she found in the crops and helps her to reach to the refugee camp reflects the abduction of Puro. She identifies herself with these women and plays the significant role in their lives. Through the medium of these characters, Amrita Pritam attempts to unveil the facets of women’s trauma which the political history has bypassed. She endeavours to rewrite the history by creating a space for women’s stories which has always been denied. Urvashi Butalia painfully remarks about the need to be aware of women’s histories: “As a woman, and a feminist, I would set out to ‘find’ women in Partition, and once I did, I would attempt to make them visible. That would in a sense, complete an incomplete picture” (Butalia 126).

Rejection and Reconciliation

The peripeteia of Puro’s character was the most tragic point and the same page turned again at the time of vivisection creating violent chapter of the history. Puro gets a haunch of her upcoming awful life through her dream and intuitions. There are several instances skillfully pictured in the cinematic adaptation of this novel which foreshadow the imminent changes. In the movie, Ramchand’s song which talks about Sita’s suffering allegorically forecasts Puro’s exile from her family and nation. The image of Sita, a character in the Indian epic *Ramayana*, sets the norms for an ideal womanhood in India and an emblem of victimized woman, often emerge in Partition literature. Women of all religion could relate themselves with Sita suggesting that a woman’s pain transcends religious and national borders. Like Sita, Puro and many abducted women like her pass through the trauma of rejection and exile. Puro refuses to return but

this refusal does not relieve her from the agony of her appalling past. Her refuge comes in a form of reconciliation with her fate and her abductor. After the division, the husbands were also silent like Rama who hesitated and even abandoned their wives to their sad fate. They had to live in eternal exile and move on with their battered body and wounded heart. This reminds the nameless protagonist-narrator of Jamila Hashmi's short story "Banished" who is destined to accept her abductor as her husband. She sorrowfully remarks: "Who has the time or inclination to listen to Sitaji's lament in this country? The pain of loneliness is hard to bear. And life so difficult...One just can't go on forever. Especially when there is nowhere to go" (Hashmi 93). The author uses the image of 'exiled Sita' to depict the pain of her Muslim protagonist. Like a leading character of Amrita's novel, the denouement comes with her acceptance of the never-ending banishment and her doomed life:

Life's caravan moves along. Even if there is no one in particular to go as one meanders through life's straight or crooked paths, one still must go on, never stopping, on and on, even if one's feet are bruised, one's heart totally empty. (Hashmi 89)

It resonates the mental state of Puro and other women who were confined in the kingdom of Ravana, their abductor and this excruciating pain of abduction and a heavy exile turns them into a sapless skeleton.

Pinjar depicts the journey of its protagonist Puro; her abduction and rejection which ends up with reconciliation with her abductor-husband Rashid. After eleven years of that awful incident, there were numberless women who underwent the same trials which turned their life into the never-ending journey where there was not even a ray of hope for salvation. The tragedy reverts in the form of division which grabbed all the women in its clutches. For these women too, it was a sudden and unexpected change like Puro which darkened their life. Amrita Pritam has touched the deepest recesses of their broken psyche and portrays the inner world of these violated and victimized women. Abduction does

not end in itself but a beginning of misery as their post-abduction phase was more miserable and they had to undergo the greater torment when they were cast-off by family and society. The post-traumatic painful lives of these women are the re-enactment of Puro's life of suffering.

Cruelty of society can be seen when women were recovered in the nation but could not be restored in their home. The stigma of 'impurity' attached to them leaves them ineligible to regain their place and position. Violation on women's body also marks the violation of her private and national space. They crossed the geographical border but they could not cross communal and social boundaries. These recovered yet rejected women did not have any place to call their own and belonged neither to India nor to Pakistan. Many women chose to embrace death because of the fear of abduction or their own family killed them by giving it glorious names like sacrifice and martyrdom. Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin states in *Borders and Boundaries*:

Women occupy a special place-and space-in such enactments of violence...Each one of the violent acts...has specific symbolic meaning physical consequences, and all of them treat women's bodies as territory to be conquered, claimed and marked by the assailants. (Menon and Bhasin 40, 43)

Instead of rejoicing at her return and comforting Puro, her parents made her feel that she does not deserve to be part of a family and even to live. Her mother weeps saying if she had died at birth and her father welcomes her with these harsh words: "You have lost your faith and birthright. If we dare to help you, we will be wiped out without the trace of blood left behind to tell of our fate" (Pritam 16). Her father denies granting her earlier place saying how he will keep her and nobody will marry her as she has lost her status and identity. Rejection is another form of violence she goes through and later many women sees this hideous face of the society. Through recovery operation, many women entered into the nation but failed to re-enter in their family. And if they were

rehabilitated, they were alienated by their own people because of the lack of complete acceptance. They silently reconciles with this changed life because this silence imposed by the patriarchy was the requirement to survive, a condition to live in a house. Their isolation was the constant reminder of their violated past which never let them come out from the trauma.

Puro comes back to face another blow as her rejection was a bigger pain than her abduction. She was violated twice, first by her abductor who violates her physically and then her own people emotionally violate her by rejecting and eliminating her from the family. "...she had believed she was returning to life; she had wanted to live again, to be with her father and mother. She had come with full of hope. Now she had no hope, nor any fear..." (Pritam 16)

Puro rescues Lajo from the clutches of her kidnappers and successfully sends to India with her brother and husband. She assures her of the acceptance and reunion with her family. Recovering Lajo was an attempt to recover her own 'self' and identity as she views the rehabilitation of other women as the restoration of her 'self'. She refuses to leave Rashid and Pakistan stating: "My home is now Pakistan."

Lajo was recovered and rehabilitated in her home but there were many women who had to face rejection or they reconciled with their abductor like Puro. Rashid plays two contradictory roles in a novel, first he acts as a perpetrator and later the same man turns into a saviour and protector. This transformation occurs because of Puro's constant rejection which makes him aware of his crime and aroused the sense of guilt which ended up as penance. Many maltreated women made their victimizer realize about their senseless act which turned them into a kind-hearted men. Like Puro, who became the target of revenge, mutilation became the way to take revenge with the women of other community and religion. Abduction became the common scenario and there were women who bore the brunt of revenge between communities and paid the heavy price in this cruel game of partition.

Refashioning of Identity

She was uprooted another time after rejection. Her abduction changes and alters her identity. After several years, partition brings these losses back in the lives of women which cannot be compensated. The old identity was wiped after abduction and altered in that era of violent transition and transformation. “The figure of the abducted women became symbolic of crossing borders, of violating social, cultural and political boundaries” (Menon and Bhasin 20). Tattooing her new identity on her forearm was an attempt to complete her act of transformation by entirely erasing her old identity which only adds her pain. She fluctuates between her two identities after getting a new name as Hamida and this dual life, the split of self gives her unbearable pain. It was a double life; Hamida by day, Puro by night. In reality, she was neither one nor the other; she was just a skeleton, without a shape or a name” (Pritam 17-18).

The trauma of multiple losses leaves her as mere a skeleton showing even a skeleton has to survive in this hostile world. The leading character, Puro becomes the victim of oppressive patriarchal institution. At the end, she chooses to live with her abductor living in a country which eventually becomes Pakistan. Many mutilated women had to pass through conversion and forcefully married or they became unwed wives of their abductors. Gradually, they accepted their destiny and decide to move ahead in life with their abductor as Puro did. Earlier when she returned home, her parents rejected her and at the end, when she gets an opportunity, she herself refuses to return and rejects her former ethnicity. It was not only Puro but there were quite a lot of women who denied returning to their original home and their denial marks the beginning of the acceptance of their present life which they previously found excruciating.

Each woman character in the novel presents how women were agonized during the violent hours, the sufferings which have always been remained invisible in the history. “...the memory of the violence and abduction remains both an object of horrified curiosity and a site of silence unnarrativised in South

Asian history” (Daiya 76). This novel depicts the violence on various levels; on religious, social and most prominently on biological level through different women characters. The protagonist Puro signifies the collective trauma of abducted women and their distressed life.

Conclusion

Puro’s past repeated itself in a life of innumerable women whose ‘self’ was also divided in the partition when the identity of ‘other’ was thrust upon them. Their broken self symbolises broken nation, the ‘cracking India’. There were thousands of such women, who turned into a lifeless skeleton and their sobs and sighs signify mourning of the nation. Puro could perceive herself in these partitioned selves of women who are victims of man’s insanity. The cruel drama was re-performed which left women on another shore by separating them with their root and leaving them incapable to be rooted again. These women are re-manifestation of the each episode of Puro’s tormenting life. History repeats itself and enacted on a larger ground when a country is partitioned.

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MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

Chauhan, Mansi. "Trauma Re-lived: Reading Amrita Pritam's Pinjar/The Skeleton." *Literary Quest* 1.9 (2015): 34-42. Web. DoA.

DoA – Date of Access

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.