



**The Gendered Experience of Partition and the Politics of Postcolonial Identity
Formation in Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar***

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Abstract

Leela Gandhi in her book *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* argues that the colonial encounter is not simply – “a reservoir of raw political experiences...[it is] characterized by...writing about the cultural and political identities of the colonized subjects”. This paper seeks to analyze Amrita Pritam's Punjabi novel *Pinjar* (1950) or *The Skeleton* in this light. It posits a reading of women's experiences in a postcolonial nation, identifying the potential of feminist articulations of the traumatic Partition of 1947 by drawing upon contemporary scholarship such as the likes of Ritu Menon, Urvashi Butalia and Gyanendra Pandey.

The paper consciously avoids the stereotypical analysis of Partition narrowly conflating it with newly assumed religious identities of the refugees. Through this reading of Pinjar, an attempt is made to show the fissures that accompany processes of a “gendered” identity formation in a postcolonial encounter, the trauma of which does not neatly translate into a purely communal consciousness. By exposing religion as a force that constrains women in the name of “honor” and chastity, Pinjar shows that identity formation in the case of relocated women is highly complex and psychologically nuanced. This psychological and gendered exploration of postcoloniality through Pinjar is radically different, exposing religion as a constraining force and expressive of the frenzy that accompanies arbitrary drawing of borders, the irrational contestation between the powers that be and ultimately woman’s body as the site of its enactment.

Keywords: Partition, religion, nation, women, communal, body, recovery, identity, patriarchy, postcolonial, trauma.

The event of Partition between India and Pakistan in 1947 cast a gloomy shadow over the euphoria that accompanied Indian independence from the clutches of the English domination. The traumatic event had catastrophic ramifications for Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs resulting in bloodshed and mayhem, the legacy of which survives till date in the psyche of people. The documentation of the Partition of India in the historical archives, however, is significantly lacking in terms of a perspective that goes beyond the constitutional and legal understanding of the division of a nation. According to Ravikant, historians’ history could never show Partition as a great human tragedy of the suffering of common men and women—they being always kept out as collective, amorphous mass of population (161). The cross-border exodus of people did not permit to view themselves beyond their religious identities.

Forms of cultural production such as literature, both of Indian and Pakistani origin, however, have sensitively dealt with this aspect of the Partition. Stories about the Partition depict the horror of the event and more importantly, document the emotional effects of it on those who have been unwritten about—

women and children. In other words, Partition literature, as opposed to history writing concerns itself in much greater detail with the ways in which the ordinary people came to terms with their sudden identities as refugees in the postcolonial scenario.

Leela Gandhi in her book *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* argues that the colonial encounter is not simply – “a reservoir of raw political experiences...[it is] characterized by...writing about the cultural and political identities of the colonized subjects” (5). This paper seeks to analyze Amrita Pritam’s Punjabi novel *Pinjar* (1950), translated into English as *The Skeleton* by Khushwant Singh, in this light. It is well established that the processes of empire formation, colonization and decolonization have intimate bearing on cultural formations, and, literature, therefore acts as a potent medium to articulate, question and problematize the same. Pritam’s novel is a narrative of the gendered experience of the traumatic Partition in 1947. The novella depicts how religion becomes a powerful source that constrains women in the name of “honor” and chastity. Pritam’s novella portrays the colonial encounter and its aftermath in all its psychological turbulence. *Pinjar* presents us with, as Gyanendra Pandey suggests—“a survivor’s account, between history and memory”—a protagonist who refuses to assume stereotypical identities assigned along the lines of religion (6). What it depicts powerfully is the gendered experience of the cataclysmic event, the trauma of which does not neatly translate into a purely communal consciousness. It is expressive of the frenzy that accompanies the arbitrary drawing of borders, the irrational contestation between the powers that be and ultimately woman’s body as the site of its enactment.

Pinjar is the story of a Hindu girl, Pooro, who is abducted by a Muslim boy Rashida. The novel captures the period between 1935-1947 portraying the predicament in which the women find themselves, abducted by men of the “rival” religious affiliation in order to quench the thirst of revenge. The female characters in the novel—Pooro, the madwoman, Lajo and Kammo present us with women subjects who are not antagonistic to each other on the basis of religion, but rather share a bond forged through empathy; through a common understanding of their bodies as markers of honor for their communities in the process of tragic and traumatic relocation. Women bear the brunt of communal hostility, for, as Reena Mitra

argues, “it is in the heaping of indignities on women that the power game of rival men in societies lies” (104).

In the aftermath of Partition, there were innumerable cases of women abductions. Ritu Menon suggests that the official estimate of the number of abducted women was placed at 50,000 Muslim women in India and 33,000 non-Muslim ones in Pakistan (49). She further explains that on December 6, 1947, both the governments reached an agreement on the question of “recovering” and “rehabilitating” the abducted women in their native locations. As a result of the Inter- Dominion Treaty, the number of “recovered” women in both the countries was 9632 and 5510 respectively. The Abducted Persons’ Bill was passed on 15 December 1949. What is noticeable is that many women resisted this mechanical “recovery” for the fear of being uprooted again while some could not bring themselves to “face” their native families. Others had come to terms with their new life, being married and having borne children.

Pinjar highlights some of these issues and problematizes the question of what “recovery” could mean for the abducted women. According to Nonica Datta, “[*Pinjar*] serves as an enduring archive on inter-community relations in Punjab, and a Punjabi woman’s ambivalent relationship with ‘colonization’ and ‘communalism’. *Pinjar* is Amrita Pritam’s testimony to the Partition of Punjab” (17).

Pooro is abducted by Rashida who is forced to carry out the act in order to take revenge for the similar act committed by Pooro’s uncle. Later in the novella, Pooro’s sister-in-law, Lajo, too is abducted by the Muslims. The novel describes the tragic situation as follows—“Hamida’s ears burned with rage when she heard of the abduction of Hindu girls by Muslims and of Muslim girls by Hindus. Some had been forced into marriage, some murdered, some stripped and paraded naked in the streets” (34).

In the novel, Pooro asks a straightforward question to Rashida—“If my uncle abducted your aunt, what fault was that of mine?” (8). This apparently simple demand of logic is telling of the mindless spirit of retaliation that numbed any exercise of rationality on people’s part. Being the upholders of a culture’s respectability that rests on their status as chaste, undefiled beings, the violation of women’s bodies becomes the corruption of the community itself. As Ivekovic and Mostov argue—“In the acts of war...communalist rape, women are the instruments of communication between two groups of men” (11).

Pooro marries Rashida after her mother refuses to accept her, reasoning that no one will ever marry her since she has lost her religion and hence her “birthright” (10). Pooro becomes Hamida but the transition is not simple. It leaves a scar on her psyche, and while Rashida is now her husband and protector, it does not erase the fact that—“He had robbed her of her future” (9). The shift from being Pooro to Hamida is felt in deeply psychological terms. Pritam poignantly writes—“It was a double life. Hamida by day, Pooro by night. In reality she was neither one nor the other; she was just a skeleton without a shape or a name” (11).

Nonica Datta aptly suggests that Pooro’s fluid identity problematizes rigidly conceived identities showing how the victims of Partition assume, though not easily, individually and culturally defined roles (3). The figure of the naked madwoman in *Pinjar*, much like Manto’s Toba Tek Singh is meant to be a telling indictment of the lunacy characteristic of the fight across the border. The lust of men have not even spared the madwoman who is “neither young nor attractive; she is just a lump of flesh without a mind to go with it...a living skeleton...a lunatic skeleton...a skeleton picked to its bones by kites and vultures” (22).

The potent imagery of the skeleton is central to the novella and the madwoman’s loosening grip over sanity is symptomatic of the damaging effects of heinous objectification of women. The madwoman is naked and symbolically divests herself of her religious identity—the moot point of all conflict.

Ironically, after the madwoman dies giving birth to an illegitimate child, stamping even a newborn with an either/or religious identity seems inevitable under the conditions of Partition. While the elders of the village warn Hamida—“This is [...] a matter of religion and one should not stand in its way”, the child is innocently drawn to her who nurses it like her own child (26).

The tentacles of communal conflict spread deep and wide all over Punjab. In the novel, Pritam describes, “Just as a peeled orange falls apart into many segments, the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs of the Punjab broke away from each other” (33). However, the way women characters in the novella exhibit solidarity that cuts across religious divides is noticeable. While Kammo, the Hindu girl, resists interacting with Hamida, the two women ultimately bond together. Another woman, Taro, abandoned both by her

parents and husband defiantly critiques the patriarchal institution of marriage in the following words—“When parents give away a daughter in marriage, they put a noose around her neck and hand the other end of the rope to the man of their choice” (18).

All three are women oppressed by the double yoke of patriarchy and aftermath of colonialism. Their narratives strongly challenge a single-dimensional, essentializing notion of a nation that is based upon fixity of religious, gendered and national identities. The solidarity exhibited by women characters in *Pinjar* at once renders the boundaries of religion porous and projects the relation between them as complex and nuanced rather than as pre-determined by biases.

Pritam shows Pooro as a courageous woman rather than a helpless victim who boldly convinces her husband to help Lajo get back to her family across the border. Pooro ironically comments on the new government policy of recovery carried across the lines of religion. One is told that “When it had happened [to Hamida], religion had become an insurmountable obstacle; ...And now, the same religion had become so accommodating” (39).

Urvashi Butalia has argued that “Women have often played out multiple and overlapping identities. An understanding of agency... needs to take into account ...the moral order which is sought to be preserved when women act” (12).

Taking into account Butalia’s argument, one can spot various maternal figures such as Pooro’s mother and Kammo’s aunt who maintain the patriarchal status quo. When given the last chance to return to her family, Pooro exercises her agency and decides to stay back as Rashida’s wife. In her last gesture to her brother, she says—“Whether one is a Hindu girl or a Muslim one, whosoever reaches her destination, she carries along my soul also” (50).

Pooro’s case is illustrative of the naïve way in which the project of “recovering” women across the border was carried out—her identity being defined solely in religious and communal terms rather than being based on any individualistic factors. The space for the subjective experiences of women, who are raped, abducted, relocated and then “recovered” inevitably leads to a crisis of identity. The bills passed to recover abducted women clearly spelt out that the wishes of the people in question were irrelevant and

need not be taken into account. This anxiety over the question of abduction and consequent “recovery” was not a simple gesture of humanity but one inflected with the upheaval caused by the corruption of the “pure” Hindu culture. These forcible conversions (in many cases), as Menon powerfully argues “ [...] of “their” women, if not land, became a powerful assertion of Hindu manhood, at the same time as it demonstrated the moral high ground occupied by the Indian state” (Menon 51).

Pritam herself had been uprooted from Lahore and had rehabilitated herself at Dehradun. In her autobiography *The Revenue Stamp*, she describes the spirit of 1947—“...when all the ... values came crashing down ...I wrote my hymns for the suffering of those who were abducted and raped. The passion of those monstrous moments has been with me since, like some consuming fire” (21). Pritam’s prolific writings on the travails of Partition seem to be a way of coping with her own anguish of migration to Dehradun.

Pinjar in its depiction of the experience of Partition specifically from the point of view of women makes a scathing critique of the society at large which sees the woman’s body as a site of crazy battle for land and territories. Menon and Bhasin argue that:

[the] material, symbolic and political significance of the abduction of women was not lost ...on the women themselves ...their communities or on ... governments. As a retaliatory measure, it was simultaneously an assertion of identity and humiliation of the rival community through the appropriation of its women (3).

It is the women’s bodies that are reduced to skeletons—living skeletons, lunatic skeletons. *Pinjar*, through the characters of Pooro and Taro emphasizes the fact that one’s identity is not simply and easily defined on the basis of one’s affiliation to a particular religion. The process of identity formation especially under the circumstances as sensitive and challenging as the Partition, is complex and problematic.

Women in *Pinjar* bond with each other irrespective of their religious faith and embody unity in heterogeneity in the true sense of the word. As Kavita Daiya suggests, *Pinjar* challenges the communalist production of conflict between the Hindus and Muslims as “always already a site of conflict” (175). It

posits a gendered experience of the Partition offering the ways to read the assumption of identities by women subjects which are not necessarily adopted or propelled due to religious influence, but more importantly, defined and shaped by cultural and psychosocial factors as well as their subjective experience of trauma and sometimes, through the ultimate reconciliation with their faith.

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