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Amrita Pritam's Pinjar: Trauma, Gendered Violence and Architecture of Survival

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ABSTRACT
The work, Pinjar (1950), which was written in the Punjabi language and translated into several different languages, is one of the more heart-wrenching literary accounts of the tragedy of the Partition of British India into independent states of India and Pakistan in 1947. This paper seeks to provide a critical analysis of how the novel can be read as a tragic saga in which it engages the overlapping terrains of communal violence, gendered suffering, fractured identities, and the psychological toll laid on millions of ordinary people, particularly women, of one of the bloodiest events in modern South Asian history. This paper is based on the theory of postcolonial feminist theory, trauma studies and narrative criticism, so it is to be understood that Pinjar by Pritam is not only a historical fiction but is a serious moral message on humanity, agency and survival. Pooro/Hamida's story is a microcosm of the collective tragedy of Partition, exploring themes of loss and survival, and complexities of belonging. Primary quotations from the text, as well as critical analysis from scholars like Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, are included in the paper.

Introduction: The Historical Canvas of Partition

The Partition of 1947 is one of the biggest tragedies in history of mankind. The British colonial government had partitioned the Indian subcontinent into two sovereign states: dominion of India and the new Islamic Republic of Pakistan, which uprooted approximately fourteen to seventeen million people and forced them to cross the newly established borders. The human toll was terrible: conservative estimates place the figure of deaths in communal violence at two hundred thousand to two million, and the number of women abducted, raped, and forcibly converted, their husbands' men from other communities (Butalia 3). The violence was not arbitrary but gendered and very much a part of the politics of honour, religion and nationalism.

This is the milieu of disintegration and devastation in which Amrita Pritam, having been forced to leave Lahore during Partition, having seen the horrors, wrote Pinjar. It originally appeared in Punjabi in 1950, three years after the events detailed in the novel, and adds to the urgency and

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rawness of the novel as a retrospective account. Pritam's literary move was radical, as at a time when official nationalism was trying to bring together the victorious narratives of independent struggle, she chose to focus on the suffering of women abducted, displaced and rendered homeless in all ways. As the title suggests, Pinjar (or "skeleton" or "bare bones" in Punjabi) is a metaphoric form of the haunting of what Partition left behind for those who survived in 1947.

Historical and Cultural Aspects of the Tragedy of Partition

In fact, one cannot fully appreciate Pinjar without understanding the extent and extent of the tragedy that erupted as a result of Partition. In the past, historians and cultural critics have been fascinated by the unequal relationship between official historiography that has constructed Partition as a political necessity, and the reality of those who suffered it. These were not just communal issues, but the "politics of gender and community" as Urvashi Butalia points out in her landmark book, The Other Side of Silence (Butalia 19): "Women's bodies were...the sites of contestation over communal honour and revenge.

Punjab was the region most ravaged by the Partition violence and was divided up in a religious manner, with families torn apart almost overnight, and relationships based on culture and centuries old were broken. Peace and tranquillity in towns and villages was disrupted and became unmatched in history. As Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin report in Borders and Boundaries, nearly seventy-five thousand women were abducted or raped during Partition and both states of India and Pakistan attempted "recovery" of these women through legislative measures – which also violated their will – of 'recovery' (43). The tragedy, as scholars have noted, was existential in as much as it disrupted the social texture, the sense of place and the vernacular language of the everyday.

The term "home" became a tragic thing itself. The country into which they were invited to reside strangely was an alien land for millions of refugees. But the Punjabi refugees in Pakistan were met by a very different nation than that they had envisioned, and Punjabi Hindus and Punjabi Sikhs who migrated to India were faced with a space of displacement and marginalisation. This double alienation is what happens in Pinjar: the place left and the place arrived is built into the fictional world of Pinjar.

Pooro/Hamida: The Female Body as a Site of Partition

Pinjar is a story about a young girl named Pooro from a decent family of pre-partition Punjab, a young Hindu girl. She is kidnapped by Muslim Rashida whose family harbours an ancient discontent against her family to which Pooro is oblivious. Rashida forces her to marry and makes her a Muslim, and changes her name to Hamida. Left alone, when her own family will not accept her back after she has become untouchable in their sight because of her defilement, she is left without any identity; she belongs completely to neither of them.

Pritam's portrayal of the above dislocation is very psychological. The most leaving moment in the novel is the moment when Pooro is first made aware of her own alienation from her own Hindu

identity, as expressed in the passage at the beginning of Part 1:

> "Pooro felt the Pooro who had been born to her parents in her house, who had been given to her child Ramchand was dead. He was gone, the woman living in Rashida's house was another one, a stranger who had taken her name Hamida. (Pritam 47)

The discussion of the body of women as a field of communal contestation in the book is not flattering. However, Pinjar's women are not the passive ones either, Pritam has a complex interiority assigned to them which defies the dichotomy of victim and agency. Pooro/Hamida's character is an ever-evolving one, and she emerges as something akin to a pragmatically resilient not quite acceptance, not quite defiance, the most nuanced psychological space in the novel. Pritam, unlike other women writers of her time did not write women's stories as just stories of victimisation, but also as complicated survival (Butalia 89).

The Entrapment, Identity, and Belonging

A skeleton named Pinjar is a reoccurring character in the novel and a symbol of an emptiness. Pooro/Hamida is a woman emptied, stripped bare to the bare bones of survival. But that's not all Pritam has to offer, the novel's strength is that she does not stand as a symbol, but is actually given flesh, the novel is granular in its portrayal of her, in how she is revealed, how she is built, how she is torn apart in unimaginable circumstances.

There are a number of registers that cover the theme of entrapment. Pooro's forced marriage is a literal marriage, but the entrapment of the communal identity is a metaphoric marriage too. In one of the most philosophically-charged scenes of the novel, Pritam speaks out about the irony of being at home in a world that is split by religion:

> "What does it mean to belong? She had been a member of her parents but they had given her away, a member of Ramchand but he didn't come to receive her, a member of her religion but her religion hadn't come for her; she had been a member of Rashida who had stolen her and now she was a member of Rashida who had stolen her. Perhaps it was always some sort of stealing, perhaps that was what it meant to be part of. (Pritam 73)

It is an exceptional philosophical passage. The structures of family, community, religion, nation are themselves coercive and it is in the process of which women are placed in categories they did not select and choose, Pritam's protagonist comes to a dark, yet very penetrating conclusion. This is the irony of the woman whose body was taken the one place left for her to take her body is with her radical homelessness for women was imposed by Partition. Menon and Bhasin note that one of the hallmarks of the Partition story in women's hands is the consciousness of home as a "space of constraint rather than safety" (Menon and Bhasin 67)., and the "negotiation of power".

Most importantly, Pritam doesn't opt for a romantic redemption or communal reconciliation in order to solve this paradox. The novel's final scenes, in which Pooro/Hamida assists her Hindu sister-in-law Lajo to elude her abductors, but herself can't go back, exemplify humanity transcending communal boundaries, at the price of Pooro's

permanent exile. A corpse in what is not her life, Pinjar keeps her. A critic, Sumanyu Satpathy reads this ending as Pritam's intentional rejection of "comfort and closure": "The novel does not provide for consolation and healing but an affirmation of loss 'irreparables,' and a call for 'moral witness' from the reader (134).

The communal violence and failure of masculine nationalism in the Indian subcontinent.

One of the most salient features of Pinjar is that it constructs an implicit critique in its very being, which is being born from the male-nationalist structures that were the birthplace of the tragedy of Partition. The novel exposes the idea of communal honour that was defined and monitored by men almost solely, is a way to make women dispensable. Pooro is not only picked on by Rashida, but is abandoned by the men of her own community, which treat her more as a myth than a woman.

In the scene where Pooro is discovered in Rashida's house by her brother and father, Pritam paints a haunting picture of their deliberate distance, through her brother and father's specific reaction.

> "Her father looked at her as one looks at something dead. Her brother turned his face away. 'She is lost to us,' he said. 'It is better to have no sister than a sister who has been touched by another man's hands.' The words fell on Pooro like stones, and she understood at last that she had not been stolen by Rashida — she had been surrendered by her own family." (Pritam 59)

Pritam has skillfully depicted the character of Rashida in a neutral manner. He is not only a one-dimensional bad guy, he's also the creation of a social system that gives men rights to women. He is torn between his feelings for Pooro and family pressure, social customs, and a true but possessive love that he develops as he goes. It does not excuse him, it is only that it is a novel that cannot be boiled down to a communal polarity, the evil one religion, the innocent one another. This is an ethical complexity that is one of the most significant literary efforts of the novel: "Pritam does not want to indulge in communal allegory and instead insists on the commonalities of the male-dominated structures that facilitated the violence on both sides of the border" (Menon and Bhasin 89).

Theories of Trauma, Memory, and Narrative

The form of Pinjar reflects and replays the traumatic experience described. In a deceptively simple prose style, spare, precise, bereft of ornament, Pritam creates a consciousness purged to the essentials by shock and grief. Both past and present are intertwined; Pooro's memories of her life before Partition and her current life as Hamida, allowing the formal expression of the traumatic disconnection of past and present from a coherent life.

Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth has theorized that a characteristic of traumatic experience is its resistance to being incorporated into a narrative and that the traumatized subject is haunted by an event that has not yet been incorporated or

mourned (Caruth 4). This formulation is useful when applied to Pinjar. Pooro/Hamida can't grieve for all her old life, she's stuck living amongst its ruins in the same landscape, some of the same social relationships, the memory of a self that was. This hauntedness of trauma is evident in the novel's time, its past and present.

In one of the most lyrical passages in the novel, Pritam says:

> "The past was a country she could see from across a river its shapes familiar, its colours recognisable but no boat would carry her back. She was learning to live on this bank, in this strange soil, but at night her dreams were still in Punjabi, still in her mother's house, still called Pooro." (Pritam 88)

The river-metaphor of boundary, barrier and border is deployed very effectively. It is a psychological geography which reflects the real rivers (the Ravi, the Sutlej) that partly delineated the Partition boundary. Pooro's subjectivity is split, too: her conscious waking self struggles to survive in the present, her dreaming self carries on in a lost past. This dual temporality, as Urvashi Butalia states, "They lived simultaneously in two times the before and the after and no amount of material settlement could close the gap between them" (Butalia 102), is a characteristic of Partition survivors' testimony.

Solidarity across Communal Divide: An Act of Humanity

In the face of the overwhelming darkness of the novel's narrative, Pritam writes a countermovement of human solidarity, which cannot be completely despairing. This solidarity is most clearly manifested in Pooro/Hamida's relationship to her original husband Ramchand who is reunited with her after Partition and whose wife Lajo is kidnapped by Muslim men. In a touch of supreme moral integrity and terrible irony, Pooro is an abducted woman who can neither recover her past life nor resume her new one to her rightful home, except by helping someone else do it.

In a polite manner, Pritam joins in this act of solidarity:

> "She couldn't find out why she did it, but she knew that the look in Lajo's eyes was a look she knew – the look of a woman who has been taken from herself. She couldn't take back what had been taken from her, but she could give back Lajo to Ramchand." (Pritam 121)

The moral vision of the novel is embodied in this text passage. Pooro/Hamida's action is not purely ideology, religion or abstractly principled but it is based on the knowledge of suffering—the condition of humankind that moves across communal boundaries. According to Sumanyu Satpathy, Pritam's "most radical claim is that the communities that had been destroyed by Partition could only be 'rebuilt, albeit partially and painfully, by the very women who had been given the task of marking the boundaries of the communities' (Satpathy 156). The women, that is, who were instruments of communal war, are agents of communal healing through their solidarity.

The theme is highly relevant to the general postcolonial feminist studies. Frantz Fanon to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, writers and scholars have been trying to understand how the colonial and communal categories cater to the interests of

power and how they separate colonised and partitioned people from each other. In the particular figure of the abducted woman in Pritam's novel, who by restoring another woman, does a quiet decolonising, is a prefiguring and dramatizing of this argument.

Conclusion

Pinjar is Amrita Pritam's most morally weighty and artistically accomplished literary response to the tragedy of the Partition of India. The novel highlights the experience of abduction, displacement and impossible survival of a woman at the heart of its story, thereby questioning the triumphalist nationalism of its times and the communal categories which gave rise to the violence it portrays. Pritam makes the tragedy of history come alive in the broken, indomitable character of Pooro/Hamida and illuminates the ideas of identity and belonging, and of the universal humanity that persecution does its utmost to annihilate.

It is also a formally innovative and disjointed narrative of traumatic memory as well as a critical examination of Hindu and Muslim patriarchy and rejection of consoling communal allegory, and in all its respects, one of the most sophisticated literary renditions of Partition in any language. The pinjar is its central metaphor: the skeleton is a stark reminder of the violence of 1947, of the stripped naked flesh of the survivors, of the absence of home or the comfortable certainties of communal identity, of the need to rebuild human lives from the bare bones of endurance.

Pinjar is not just a novel about an historical catastrophe for the twenty first century reader, it's an ethical mirror. In a world where communal violence, refugee crisis, weaponizing women's body in politics are alarmingly contemporary, Pritam's novel is one book that will never become dated. To read Pinjar is to be asked, as Sumanyu Satpathy compellingly argues, not merely to sympathise with its protagonist but to bear moral witness to the structural conditions that produced her suffering and to consider our own responsibility toward the Pooros of our present moment (Satpathy 167).

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