



THE SILENT SUFFERING: WOMEN'S OPPRESSION AND THE TRAUMA OF PARTITION IN AMRITA PRITAM'S *PINJAR*

Souvik Sarkar

M.A (English), NET & SET qualified
Independent Research Scholar

Abstract:

Amrita Pritam's novel *Pinjar*, written in the context of the horrific circumstances of partition, not only depicts the difficult and tragic atrocities of partition, but also presents the physical and mental oppression inflicted on women by the so-called patriarchal society. The silent mental affliction of the novel's central character, Pooro, seems to resonate with the hearts of the readers. The reflection of the terrible situation of partition was able to spread its negative impact on the lives of women of that time. Women, plagued by physical and mental torment, seemed to be ensnared deep within the maze of circumstances. The chaos of partition had estranged them from their families, relatives and loved ones, and had also deprived them of their own identity. Women's independent discernment seems to be constrained by the weight of circumstances. Precisely this is the situation that the novel's central character, Pooro falls victim to. Her silent psychological affliction seems to become the central theme of the novel. Pooro's suffering, shackled within the confines of a patriarchal society, remained profoundly silent. Even the language to express her inner sufferings seemed to have been deprived by the patriarchal social system. The agony of Pooro seems to echo, in some form or another, the pain endured by all those women – a suffering that is powerfully portrayed in the novel *Pinjar*. The horrors and madness of partition were not merely a historical event in women's life, but rather a deeply personal, lifelong struggle – one that is often silenced or overlooked. The novel *Pinjar* written by Amrita Pritam, centered on the horrors of partition, repeatedly reminds readers of the silent sufferings and inner resilience that dwell deep within Women's soul.

Keywords: Identity, Trauma, Subjugation, Oppression

1. Introduction:

Amrita Pritam's novel *Pinjar* set against the backdrop of the 1947 partition, does not merely depict the harsh and tragic realities of that time – it also vividly highlights the oppression and abuse inflicted upon women by the so-called patriarchal society. It is as if Women's own identity has been eradicated. The shadow of partition engulfed the entire country and spreading its horror and madness like a wildfire. The reflection of this terrible situation was able to spread its negative impact on the lives of women as well. The tensions of partition and the exploitation by the patriarchal society seemed to have paralyzed women's lives. Women, plagued by physical and mental abuse, seemed to be trapped somewhere in the maze of circumstances. Just as the horrors of partition separated them from their families and relatives, it also usurped their own identity, their language of protest against injustice. They were embroiled in a situation from which it was not at all easy to exemption. Women's ability to think for themselves and the power of making independent judgments was stifled in the disruption of partition by the patriarchal society. By using the horrific circumstances as a tool, iniquities such as abduction, rape and Sexual assault of Women became pervasive. The profound sorrow of losing family and loved ones, coupled with the relentless physical and mental anguish, created a life of suffering for women, leaving them in a constant state of misery. The patriarchal social system which oppressed and exploited them eventually began to disregard them and consider as despicable. On the other hand, out of fear of being isolated from the society, the families of those oppressed and abused women were ostracizing them. Through her novel *Pinjar*, Amrita Pritam has represented the silent mental affliction and trauma of a woman who has lost her family, relatives and her own identity in the terrific circumstances of Partition. The novel repeatedly highlights the silent soreness and physical and mental torment of women trapped in the frenzy kind of situation and oppression by the patriarchal society. As the entire country was divided into two parts during Partition, people abandoned their homelands and everything they owned, enduring the pain of losing their loved ones and moving elsewhere. The situation and

environment underwent a profound transformation when the country, once united by all religions, became divided into two distinct ethnic identities. But despite changes in the environment and surrounding circumstances, the patriarchal social system remained intact. In the new environment, the barriers and boundaries created by the Patriarchal society seemed to confine women's independent thoughts and consciousness with iron chains, and adapting to such circumstances was by no means easy for them. The negative state of affairs had a profound impact on their interior life, which was by no means short-term. In the turbulent circumstances of partition, women's lives became like those of prisoners in a prison who had no rights to do anything freely. The patriarchal rules and regulations, based on ancient beliefs, concepts and superstitions, seemed to be continuously binding them more and more restrictively. The development of traditional or conventional mindset such as maintaining the household, giving birth to children and raising them became a major obstacle to women's independent thought and consciousness. Pooro, the central character of the novel, somehow wanted to break through all kinds of barriers and ignore all the circumstances but fails. Tormented by the grief of being separated from her family and loved ones, Pooro wanted to discover her true self but instead she found disappointment and silent affliction. It was as if the circumstances surrounding her had instantly transformed her exuberance into silence. The terrific situation of partition on one hand and the silent agony of Pooro on the other serve as the central theme of the novel. Pooro's mental quietude and self-struggle are like the struggles of all oppressed and tormented Women who lost their existence and identity under the pressure of harsh predicament. Originally written in Punjabi language, the novel *Pinjar* (1950) was translated into English by Khushwant Singh in 2009 under the title *The Skeleton* which later gained popularity among readers. The central character of the novel *Pinjar* is Pooro, a young woman who lives with her family in chatto, a small village in Punjab. Dreams danced in Pooro's eyes, while her days flowed in the calm current of a life both serene and abundant. Pooro, her three sisters and younger brother were the apple of the eye for the entire family. When pooro's parents decide to marry her to Ramchand, a resident of a village called Rattoval, Pooro agrees to her parent's decision and starts dreaming about her own marriage. But Pooro's dream turned into a nightmare when a Muslim man named Rashida abducted her to avenge a similar act committed by Pooro's uncle. This incident bears witness to how family and communal strife brutally and mindlessly attacked a woman's existence. Some incidents centered around Pooro seem to indicate that her life is about to take a turn in a different direction. Through some incidents, Pritam gives readers an inkling of the extinction of Pooro's existence and identity. While representing the issue of Pooro's abandonment of her inner self, Pritam mentions:

The Girls forcing red ivory Bangles on to her arms; the bigger sliding on easily; the smaller slipping on the left arm but unable to go over the right hand (7).

In this incident Readers witness that When Pooro's friends try to make her wear bangles, they keep slipping from her hands repeatedly, which signifies her loss of identity, tradition and cultural roots. In Indian society, bangles are a symbol of marriage and womanhood, so the repeated slipping of the bangles from Pooro's hands and the unfitting of the bangles on her right hand seem to indicate her inability to return to an independent and spontaneous life after undergoing violence, displacement and the emotional trauma of partition.

As a result of family disputes and conflicts between Hindus and Muslims, When Rashida abducted Pooro before her marriage; Pooro's free-spirited life seemed to become bound in Iron chains. She wanted to escape from this situation but had fallen short of her destiny. The affliction of losing her family and loved ones consumes her like a ragging wildfire. To escape this tribulation, Pooro runs to her family in the dark of night, but the ancient traditional mindset of society stands as a major obstacle in her path. The family which was once the source of her happiness and comfort abandoned her immediately. The grief of being abandoned by her family creates an infinite loneliness in her mind. Pooro was not only separated from her family but she was also estranged from her cultural roots and the identity which she had inherited from her birth.

The turning point in Pooro's life was her marriage to Rashida. This bond of marriage on one hand, had entangled her like a serpent's noose, and on the other, had bestowed upon her a new identity which erased her previous existence. The daughter of a Hindu moneylender, Pooro, had become Hamida, the wife of Rashida. Living in a new environment and adapting to different circumstances seemed to have become a curse in Pooro's life. The environment had changed but the social system, bound by ancient religious ideas remained unchanged. Pooro's inner tension had destroyed her independent being. It was as if she was repeatedly failing to accept her new life and identity. Even though her external transformation involved a change of religion, her mind and inner soul always remained loyal to her own faith. However, in some way or another, she had to cringe to the patriarchal and traditionally bound social system. In a male-dominated social system, a symphony of rules and ideals were forcibly imposed upon Pooro, who was tormented by the agony of losing her identity. Blindly following the ideals created by Patriarchy was the only duty assigned to every woman. An instance of which is mentioned by Pritam in a line of the novel:

Pooro followed him (Rashida) as the blind follows a guide (24).

In a completely unfamiliar situation and amidst a crowd of new people, Pooro seemed to be experiencing a deep sense of helplessness and loneliness. Pritam states:

Nevertheless, Pooro felt like a stray calf in a strange herd of cows (25).

Although her name and identity changed in the unfamiliar circumstances, her inner self remained unchanged, always dreaming of going back to the past to rediscover her independent life. While expressing Pooro's dream, Pritam states:

In her dreams, when she met her old friends and played in her parents' home, everyone still called her Pooro. At other times she was Hamida. It was a double life: Hamida by day, Pooro by night. In reality, she was neither one nor the other, she was neither one nor the other, and she was just a skeleton, without a shape or a name (25).

Pritam has represented every stage of Pooro's life and the unbearable silent affliction and sufferings in great detail. The horrors, frenzy and despondency of partition seem to have become a wall between Pooro's life before marriage and after marriage when she is impregnated. Pregnancy is a moment of happiness in every woman's life but in the life of Pooro/Hamida, it was like a burden that made her depressed. For Pooro, who was plagued by cultural and political tensions, her pregnancy seemed less like a beacon of hope and more like a curse. The feeling of a mother after giving birth to a child is always very happy and joyful, but Pooro's feeling was a bit exceptional in this matter. While explaining this, Pritam mentions:

She felt her son's soft face nuzzling into her bare arm. A cold, clammy feeling ran through her body- as if a slimy slug was clambering over her. She clenched her teeth; she wanted to shake the slug off her arm, flick it away from her side, draw it out as one draws out a thorn by taking its head between one's nails, pluck it out of her flesh like a tick or a leech and cast it away..... (34).

The baby was a symbol of affliction to her, reminding her of the destruction of her identity, her shattered dreams. Pooro had no emotional connection with her child because her motherhood built by force rather than love. The thought that the baby, that Pooro/Hamida had given birth, was merely Rashida's child, whom she had forcibly conceived in her womb, repeatedly consumed her inner self. While expressing such contemplation by Hamida, Pritam states:

The thought went round and round in her head with insidious insistence: This boy...this boy's father...all mankind...all men...men who gnaw a woman's body like a dog gnawing a bone and like a dog consuming it (35).

The novel highlights the vulnerability and painful sufferings of women of that time through the life stories of three other minor characters, along with the tribulations of Pooro. The first figure deserving of our attention is Kammo, a resident of Chatto village. Her residence was in the same lane of Chatto where Pooro's parents lived. Kammo, like Pooro, seemed to be tightly bound by the age-old traditional norms and rules of the social system.

When Pooro/Hamida met Kammo by the side of the well and asks for permission to carry Kammo's pitcher to lighten her loads, Kammo clearly tells her: "You will pollute my pitcher". This incident seems to emphasize the influence and significance of the ethnocentric and superstitious belief-driven social system of that time. After the death of Kammo's mother, her father abandoned her and moved to another city. Kammo, having been deserted by her father, exhibited a profound longing for social integration and identity. The affliction of losing her parents seems to consume her completely. However, during her state of helplessness Pooro comes forward to stand by her. Kammo's silent sufferings, like an unspoken affliction, seem to be something that Pooro could truly comprehend in the depths of her being as a woman. The realization of this suffering is able to remove the ethnic prejudice within the bosom of Kammo who is initiated in Hindu ideals, and Hamida, who is initiated in Muslim faith and a harmonious relationship developed between Hamida and Kammo. By expressing this relationship, Pritam states:

Hamida and Kammo beloved towards each other like mother and daughter, as well as like two close friends (41).

Beyond Pooro and Kammo, the story unveils another feminine soul – Taro, quietly stepping into the reader's gaze. Taro's life, plagued by helplessness, mental agony and unknown illness seemed no less exceptional. The flickering flames of internal tension and excruciating affliction seemed to consume her as well. Yet, somewhere deep within, Taro seemed able to express her despair and inner torment-subtly, perhaps unknowingly, but unmistakably so and it was this ability of hers that made her somewhat different from all other female characters. After being once bound in the marital bond with her husband, she harshly criticizes her husband and the sacred bond of marriage itself in order to marry Taro for the second time, roaring in protest by saying:

Mother, if, Allah was a witness to my wedding, then Allah perjured himself. I was never wed...never.... (48).

Despite the fact that a woman's protesting language is tantamount to a crime in a patriarchal society, Taro strongly condemns this social system, which seems to surprise Hamida:

Hamida wondered how Taro, who could dare to say such things, was yet unable to break out of the perfidious institution of marriage (49).

Taro's protest seemed to be a protest against the long cries that had been simmering in the hearts of all women entangled in the tensions of that time. Pritam also represented the character of a mad woman who was also a victim of the cultural and political complexities of that time through her outstanding narrative. The nameless mad woman too cannot escape the claws of lust in such a male dominated society. In a chaotic and unrestrained society, she died during childbirth – her final breath swallowed by a world too wild to shield her. Was this death merely the death of a mad woman? This Brutal and cruel death is somehow a manifestation

of the weakness of the social system, which was constantly engaging in injustice under the guise of a patriarchal hegemony.

The novel *Pinjar* represents the ingrained caste-based prejudices of the social system alongside the harrowing depiction of violence against women and their silent sufferings. After the death of the mad woman, Hamida began to care for the motherless child with utmost love and affection. But the society steeped in ethnic prejudice seems to stand in the way of her motherhood. It seems that being a Muslim and raising a child who has been initiated to Hinduism is considered a heinous act in the social system. Pooro, burdened by the tensions of ethnic prejudices and motherhood, seems to break down in agony. The people living in this chaotic society ignore Pooro's affliction and take the child away from her. An innocent, inconsolable soul seems to be deprived of the happiness of motherhood. While expressing this pain of Hamida, Pritam mentions:

Hamida sank to the ground. She heard the boy's crying recede further and further down the lane. Milk continued to ooze from her breasts and wet her shirt (66 – 67).

The situation becomes even more terrifying when the brutal upheaval of partition, along with ethnic subjugation, completely engulfs the social system. A country unified by all religions becoming divided makes the cultural and political situation even more complicated. While describing this situation, Pritam states:

Just as a peeled orange falls apart into many segments, the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs of the Punjab broke away from each other (83 – 84).

The entire nation bears witness to one community's hostile attitude, resentment and intense anger towards another community. This distressing period brought immense suffering to women, worsening their already difficult lives. By representing the marginalized, tormented lives of Women from Hamida's perspective, Pritam mentions:

Hamida's ears burned with rage when she heard of the abduction of Hindu girls by Muslim and Muslim girls by Hindus. Some had been forced into marriage, some murdered, some stripped and paraded naked in the streets (85).

In this turbulent situation, Hamida received news that a convoy of refugees passed through Chatto village and the convoy had come from the direction of Rattoval, where her ex beloved Ramchand lived and the one to whom their marriage was previously arranged. Holding the dreams she had about Ramchand in her bosom, she rushed to the refugee camp, eager to meet Ramchand one last time. There, she learns from Ramchand that her younger brother is married to Ramchand's sister Lajo, who has been abducted and detained by the Muslim community. Lajo's abduction seems to remind Pooro of her own abduction and the story of the loss of her identity. Lajo's sufferings and abduction and the realization of her affliction seem to give Hamida courage and she becomes determined to find Lajo. Later Hamida found Lajo with the help of her husband Rashida. The burden of sin in Rashida's heart is reduced after this. May Lajo's rescue redeems him from the sin which he committed by abducting Pooro. Pritam, while expressing Rashida's sinless mind, mentions:

Ya Allah! Muttered Rashida, as he helped Lajo on the back of the mare. He mounted the saddle and dug his heels into the animal's flanks. It broke into a first gallop. Rashida could not help recalling the time he had picked up Pooro from the dusty track. He was no longer as he had been then, but he still had strength in his arms. He remembered that when he had abducted Pooro, his conscience had weighed like a stone, which had become heavier and heavier. It had weighed on his mind for long. That night as the mare sped through the starlit countryside, the weight seemed to lift and he felt as light as a flower speeding in the fragrant breeze (109 – 110).

At the end of the novel, it seems that infinite courage is awakened in the bosom of Hamida and relying on this, she disregards the dire situation of partition and returns Lajo to her brother Ramchand and her husband (Pooro's younger brother). After a long hiatus, Pooro reunites with her brother. Although the horrific circumstances of partition engulfed the entire social system, it could not erase the enduring affection between a brother and sister. Even though there was a broke down in the social structure and national identity, its fierce flames seemed to fail in breaking the bond between brother and sister. But finally, When Pooro's brother requested her to return to her family, she refused her brother's plea. The social system which had taken away her existence, the family that had once ignored her sufferings and abandoned her, somehow or other,

Pooro finally seemed to retract the influence of society and her family. Her determination to forsake her family seemed to be her final response in this novel. Holding the pain of not being able to return to her family, Pooro replies to her brother:

When Lajo is welcomed back in her home, then you can take it that Pooro has also returned to you (127).

She seems to accept the change in her being that happened against her will, despite the thousands of pains she endured. Even as the world she once knew cries out for her return, its doors have quietly closed to her. For she is no longer Pooro, the girl she used to be, but Hamida, bound by love and fate to Rashida, and devoted mother to her son, Javed. It was as if Pooro's existence had been abandoned as soon as she became Hamida. But even though the social system and circumstances changed her identity, they could never change her inner self. The transformation touched only her outward form; her soul remained untouched, unchanged. As evidence of which, Pritam mentions from Pooro's perspective:

Whether one is a Hindu girl or a Muslim one, whoever reaches her destination, she carries along my soul also (127).

Inter - community tensions in the Indian subcontinent reached a terrifying peak in the 1940s. Hostilities between Hindus and Sikhs on the one hand, and Muslims, on the other, escalated rapidly to a horrific climax in the partition of August 1947. By expressing this dire situation, poet Jibanananda Das articulated in his poetry collection *Ruposhi Bangla (Beautiful Bengal)* as follows:

If I call, he will surge forth from the river of blood, Come near and say, I'm Yaseen,
 Haneef, Muhammad, Maqbul, Kareem, Aziz – and you?' Putting his hand on my heart he will ask,
 Eyes raised from the face of a corpse –
 The swollen river of blood will say, 'Gagan, Bipin, Sasi
 Of Pathuriaghata, Maniktala, Syambazar, Galiff street, Entali –' Who knows where they're from? Men, after all,
 From the baser ranks of life, in worn- out shoes.

The places mentioned here were engulfed in turmoil during the 1940s, with circumstances turning increasingly dreadful and terrifying as the decade unfolded. The city is strewn with corpses and bordered by rivers of blood, caused by rivalries between "Yaseem, Haneef, Muhammad, Maqbul, Kareem, and Aziz" on the one hand, and "Gagan, Bipin, Sasi" on the other. Many ordinary or common people were the victims of this situation. The turbulent situation of partition and inter community tension had a devastating impact on their regular lifestyle. In the aftermath of British decolonization, the situation became more complicated when the entire country was divided into two different nations, India and Pakistan. Just as the entire Hindu community lost everything and took refuge in India, similarly the people of the Muslim community made Pakistan their homeland. Many Hindus and Muslims lost their lives in this terrible situation. As estimated 12 to 15 million people left their homelands and crossed the international border to join their respective religious communities. It was the largest migration in modern history. In the course of the upheaval, some 75,000 women were abducted and/or violated by men from rival religious communities. Taking the advantage of this dire situation, the patriarchal society oppresses women, revealing a display of brutality. Poet Jibanananda Das represents such a situation in his prose poem 1946 – 47:

Indescribable bank notes in the hands of one or two persons. And these high ranking persons of the world demand
 And take everything, even Women (12 – 14).

The patriarchal society considered women as commodities. Women's honor, their very existence, was being trampled into dust. Here, in this novel *Pinjar*, Amrita Pritam portrays the life story of a woman who lost her existence and identity in the turbulence of partition. The silent sufferings of the novel's central character, Pooro, seem to have become the affliction and sufferings of all the oppressed and neglected women who were the victims of the circumstances of that time.

Urvashi Butalia, in her book, *The Other Side of Silence*, while highlighting the unbearable afflictions and miserable conditions of women during the partition period, mentions:

Nearly 75,000 women had been raped and abducted on both sides of the border at partition. This figure would probably have been higher if Kashmir had been taken into account – perhaps close to 100,000. Apart from the rapes, other, specific kinds of violence had been visited on women. Many were paraded naked in the streets, several had their breasts cut off, their bodies were tattooed with marks of the 'other' religion; in a bid to defile the so-called 'Purity' of the race women were forced to have sex with men of the other religion, many were impregnated. They bore children, often only to have them taken away forcibly. Sometimes families traded in their women, in exchange for freedom, at other times the women simply disappeared, abducted from camps, or as caravans of people marched across the border on foot. But that hundreds, indeed thousands, of Women had been subjected to rape, and abduction, was now clear (100).

Pritam's novel *Pinjar* was written using exactly such a horrific situation as a backdrop, where the novel's central character, Pooro, was a victim of patriarchal brutality and the horrors of partition. There is no outward expression of the pain which accumulated in Pooro's inner self. It was a

silent anguish that scorched her soul at every moment. It seemed impossible to express these silent sufferings through words. In this context, Butalia remarks:

How do we reach beyond the stories into the silences they hide; how can we assume that speech, the breaking of silence, is in itself a good thing? There are a hundred such questions (10).

While the novel represents the horrors of partition, it also sheds light on themes such as identity, trauma and gender complexity. In her book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler states that gender is not innate and cannot be determined by biological means. Gender is performative act which is constructed through repeated actions and cultural practices.

The central character of the novel, Pooro, seems to reflect Judith Butler's idealism that gender is not stable but rather something that is shaped by external circumstances. The trauma and displacement caused by Pooro's abduction erased her previous identity and imposed the burden of a new existence on her. This identity was not the identity she was born with, but rather was imposed on her by the social system plagued by the horrors and madness of partition. The burden of a new existence imposed by the patriarchal social system had apparently manifested itself in the form of Hamida, leading to Pooro's conversion. Pooro's premarital and postmarital identities seem to prove that gender identities are not fixed, but performative and subject to the forces of power and societal expectations.

Finally, it can be said that partition not only created communal divisions, but its horror and madness also had a profound impact on the lives of women of that time as well. The impact of partition on women's lives was not just immediate – it was enduring, etched deep into the fabric of their existence. The struggle became personal and lifelong but was often silenced, dismissed or simply overlooked by the society. The novel *Pinjar* written by Amrita Pritam, centered on the horrors of partition, repeatedly reminds readers of the silent sufferings and inner resilience that dwell deep within Women's soul.

Works cited

Pritam, Amrita. *Pinjar: The Skeleton and Other Stories*. Translated by Khushwant Singh, Tara Indian Research Press, 2009.

Mookerjee- Leonard, Debali. *Literature, Gender and the Trauma of Partition: The Paradox of Independence*. Routledge, 2017.

Butalia, Urvashi. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. New Delhi, Viking, 1998.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1999.