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**Unveiling Identity and Sexuality: Analyzing Sexual Violence,
Trauma, and Alienation in Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* as a Lens on the
Partition of India**

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Abstract:

A notable name in the field of partition literature, Amrita Pritam is well known for her insightful writings that capture the spirit of India's turbulent division. She expertly portrays the live history of this historic event in her creative works, giving readers a clear picture of the terrifying ordeals that its victims went through. One of her best-known novels, *Pinjar* (The Skeleton), was first published in Punjabi in 1950 and was later translated into English by Khushwant Singh. It is a moving account of the difficulties encountered by women during India's division. Through the lens of *Pinjar* Amrita Pritam sheds light on important aspects of women's identity and sexuality against the backdrop of the division. This essay aims to investigate this. This dissertation undertakes a comprehensive examination of the writer's creative depiction of sexual assault against women, the subsequent pain they faced, and the deep sense of alienation they felt as a result of the division. The study analyzes the many difficulties that women encountered during this turbulent time by using the story of *Pinjar* as a potent lens. This research aims to provide insight on the significant effects of division on women's life by analyzing Pritam's nuanced description of sexual abuse, the psychological scars it left behind, and the fragmentation of identity. The study dissects the intricacies of women's experiences by thoroughly examining Pritam's literary skill, emphasizing the women's tenacity, autonomy, and fight to regain their identity in the midst of the turmoil of division. Additionally, it looks at how the division influenced how society norms and personal identities were shaped, especially in relation to women's autonomy and sexuality. This research paper emphasizes the historical and literary value of Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* as well as the author's remarkable ability to capture the long-lasting effects of the trauma, sexual violence, and alienation that women in India endured during the partition. By exploring these important topics, the article advances knowledge of the sociocultural, psychological, and permanent effects of this significant juncture in the history of the country on women's lives.

Keywords: Partition, Sexual Violence, Women, Trauma, Alienation, Self

Lead In:

For nationalists and the citizens of the newly divided countries, the 1947 division of India and Pakistan was a glorious occasion. This incident was also one of the worst periods in South Asian history, if not all of human history. The split caused excruciating suffering to the women in particular, both individually and collectively. Due to the disparity between public and private spheres, feminist scholars like as Urvashi



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Butalia, Ritu Menon, and Kamla Bhasin have called attention to the concerns of women's suffering and trauma during the partition via their publications, yet this chapter is neutral or absent in historical sources. Women are excluded from history because history is the expression of politics, and women are assumed to be outsiders in both public and political life (Dey 106). Therefore, it is imperative to identify the damage inflicted upon women throughout the history of division. Women's trauma may be interpreted or located within partition by interacting with the theoretical framework of "trauma." The term 'trauma' generally refers to repeated infliction of wound over body. But in medical and psychiatric literature, especially in Sigmund Freud's text, the word 'trauma' suggests the infliction of wounds not upon body but in the mind (Caruth 3). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud argued that the wound of mind is not like the wound of body. While the wound of the body is easily healable, the latter is not. The wound of mind appears repeatedly in nightmares and inflicts again the same wound to the survivors as they pass through the original event. Thus, the trauma is not located simply in the past event of an individual but it repeats again and again to haunt the survivor later on (Caruth 4). Though Freud concentrated on wound of mind as trauma, but we cannot exclude the wound on the body, while discussing trauma of individual. Because, if we link trauma with its etymology, we will find that wound of mind is explicitly linked with body and its injuries. Radhika Mohanram, in her article "Trauma, Cultural Memory and the India Partition" argues that bodily injury inaugurates trauma and is linked to the notion of identity within a psychoanalytic framework (Mohanram 926). By linking the nature of the trauma of women in partition with the theoretical ground, it can be said that the trauma experienced by women during the partition are of two folds- bodily wound and wound over the mind. While analysing women's trauma in this chaotic partition, the author suggests that it is impossible to proceed by relegating bodily wound from the wounds of mind. We need an integrated approach as Radhika Mohanram too suggests. Now the question that comes to the mind is, "How bodily wound leads to the wound of mind?" Here the author argues that it is violence over the women's body that leads to the process of the wound over their mind i.e. trauma. Trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Judith Lewis Herman suggest that while there is absence of coherency and control over life and body of the victims, trauma occurs (Mohanram 918). As during partition of India and Pakistan, the women had neither control over their lives and bodies, nor they could resist the infliction of violence over them, thus they were made victims of trauma. The nature of violence on women was two folds during the period of partition – the violence inflicted on women by the males of the opposite religious faith and violence inflicted by their own family members (Dey 104). Abduction, rape, mutilation of genitalia, public humiliation, ripping out the



wombs, branding sexual organs with religious symbols or tattooing religious symbols on the private part of the women's body, naked parade on the streets, amputating breasts, burning vaginas –were the sinister violence inflicted on women's body during the partition of India and Pakistan in general as the form of 'violence inflicted by the opposite religious group of men'.

Critiquing Pinjar:

There have been instances where family heads have forced their ladies to end their lives; many girls and women have been decapitated by their own men because they adhere to the belief that "purity and pollution" are harmful. They believed that if their women came into contact with men from the opposing religion, it would contaminate their bodies, minds, and family name. Furthermore, in a patriarchal society, women are seen as the primary guardians of family and society's honour. Therefore, it would have an impact on their family and social honour if their women were defiled by males of a different religion. To preserve their families and social standing, the men of the community therefore beat their own wives till they died. In *Trauma: A Social Theory*, Jeffrey C. Alexander contends that the trauma inflicted on the women by their physical wounds was cultural trauma. According to Alexander, cultural trauma happens when a large number of individuals believe that they have all been through a terrible incident that permanently alters their memory and transforms their sense of self (Alexander 6). According to Alexander, the pain experienced by the women during the partition may thus be attributed to cultural trauma, which is the same as collective trauma. Collective trauma is, as the name implies, a blow to people's fundamental social structure that weakens interpersonal relationships and destroys a feeling of community (Erikson 187).

In partition, there was an important cause of women's trauma, i.e. extension of the motherhood. Women are usually equated to the nation. For instance, India is commonly referred to as "*Bharatmata*" or "Mother India". Thus, the protection of nation i.e. mother from the external threats and protection of her honour and purity is deemed the prime duty of each and every individual of India. Here the women or the mother has no control over her 'self'- body and sexuality. It is the men who are the sole protectors of women. Therefore, women were the worst sufferers of trauma during in partition. Moreover, this extended concept of motherhood made the men of both sides keener towards revenge. Hence, violence and counter- violence on women were in extreme level. For example if Hindu women were raped by the Islam men, then it was perceived that Mother India was raped and to take revenge of polluting the womb of *Bharatmata*, the Islam



women were raped by their Hindu male counterparts.

This was the greater scenario of women's trauma (collective or cultural trauma) which was initiated by the infliction of violence over women. The aim of the author here is to bring the collective trauma and to connect it to the individual trauma of women. Further, the individual trauma of the women is not properly documented as the collective trauma. Hence, it is difficult to access to the individual trauma without knowing the greater view of that turbulent period. A few scholars are engaged to penetrate to the individual trauma of the women experienced during partition through oral history but it is not accessible to all. Thus, its contemporary literary works are important source to study individual trauma of the people. The novel *Pinjar* is a contemporary fiction of partition. Therefore, *Pinjar* is worth analysing while studying sexual violence against women and trauma unleashed by partition.

Beyond its associations with medicine and mental health, trauma may be defined as a person's life experiences. But the nature of experience must be catastrophic so that the individual cannot respond to that immediately. Further such experiences are uncontrolled and their repetitive appearances are like that of hallucinations, as Cathy Caruth argues (Caruth 11). Following the same tract, Kai Erikson argues that trauma means a blow to the psyche that destroys one's capacity of defence against the blow. Further, the victim can't react to the blow effectively (Erikson 187). The trauma signifies a state of helplessness, lack of 'the fight-or-flight response', loss of 'volume control', activation of 'on-or-off' switch of the trauma experienced by individual (Bloom 1-14). In the novel *Pinjar*, the female characters are exposed to such experiences in their lives, and the novelist crafts all these quite faithfully.

Pooro, a Hindu girl, from the 'Shahukar' family was abducted by Rashida, a young Islam boy of 'Sheikh' family to take the family revenge before her already fixed wedding with Ramchan. Though one-night Pooro successfully escaped to her natal family, her parents refused to accept her. The next day a 'maulvi' performed Rashida's 'nikah' with Pooro. The name of Pooro was changed into Hamida and it was tattooed in her arm. With the passing of time Pooro became the mother Javed. During partition, their village Sakkar got included in Pakistan and Pooro's entire family remained in India. In case of Pooro, the novelist shows that she had no control over all these circumstances. Though she entered into 'nikah' with Rasida, there was not her consent; rather she was helpless. Her family refusal compelled her to do so and consequently she was alienated from her family and birthplace. The traumatic cause behind her family refusal was in religion



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and the notion of being polluted. If her family accepted her, they would be killed.

Pooro's new identity i.e. Hamida left her in a trauma of dualism. She had no control over her body when her new name was tattooed. It so happened as directed by Rashida. Her dual identity confused her to determine herself actually "who is she?" Whether a Hindu or Islam. Within herself she was a Hindu but for the society, an Islam. "Hamida by day, Pooro by night" (Pritam 25).

The novel also depicts how motherhood is turned into trauma. When Pooro became the mother of her husband's son, there was absent of her will. Thus, she felt her son as a slimy slung, she would not take care of him if in his veins, he doesn't carry her parents' blood (Pritam 34). Further, when her son tugged her breast, she felt as if he was draining her milk forcefully as his father forced her. She felt that Javed only belonged to her husband as he planted him forcefully inside her and nourished in her womb against her will (Pritam 35).

During partition, many families lost their sons, daughters and other members. In the novel, the novelist describes how Lajo, Pooro's sister-in-law, was dislocated from her family during partition when she was in her maternal home at Rttoval. She was abducted and confined in her maternal home by a Muslim family as they occupied her home. Lajo was alienated from herself in her own house as she was forced to do every household work. Every time she was in the surveillance of them so that she couldn't escape. She was forced to cohabit with the man of her own house but she refused to do so. She thus compares her own house with a coffin (Pritam 105). Though she was rescued by Pooro, she refused to join with her husband's family. She felt as she became polluted. Hence, no one would welcome her in her husband's house. But Pooro ensured her that she would be accepted by her brother and in-laws in India. Pooro's own experience of partition violence and trauma, she heard that Hindu girls were abducted by Muslims and Muslim girls by Hindus. Many girls were forced to get married, some murdered, stripped and paraded naked in the streets (Pritam 85). Hamida was a witness of such violence against women and their trauma- helplessness, lack of 'fight-or-flight response', and loss of 'volume control'. One day she saw how a band of a dozen or more *goondas* pushed a naked young girl before them. The *goondas* beat drums and danced about the naked girl. This trauma shaped a thought in Hamida's mind- "it was a crime to be born a girl!" (Pritam 87). This thought reflects her trauma, the situation of helplessly watching the girl in torment. Further, at that evening she rescued a young girl from their sugarcane field. She was forced to spend nine nights with different men. Pritam described that from the refugee camp the Pakistani soldiers picked out women according to their



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choice, took them with them for the night and returned them to the camp (Pritam 88). In other word, women were forced i.e. raped by the soldiers. In such situation the women had no control over their own bodies and sexuality.

The women who experienced sexual violence and trauma unleashed through the partition, were challenged by self-alienation too. Self alienation or alienation of self can be experienced by self-loathing, internal struggle between vulnerability and control, and love and hatred (Fisher 5). Women were more vulnerable and they had no control over their own bodies, sexuality and even their identity. The identity, both self and national, was determined by the border and culture. In *Pinjar*, it was seen that Pooro's identity was determined by the Redcliffe line and Muslim culture. Similarly, Lajo, the naked girl and the girl rescued by Pooro- their bodies were controlled by others. Further, Lajo was in the internal conflict between love and hatred. Though her 'self' love pushed her to come out from her containment, she started the felling of self-loathing as she said "I am not good for anyone now. No one will accept me." (Pritam 118). In other word, Lajo had a strong and abominable feeling of being polluted by the Muslim.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, it can be said that *Pinjar* gives us a means to have a look at the gory pictures of sexual violence against women, their trauma and their alienation of 'self' during partition. Besides, the writer through the lens of *Pinjar* also sheds important lights upon the issues of identity and sexuality of women. The work is the writer's ways of depicting sexual violence against women, their trauma and about how they were alienated from the 'self' - body as an aftermath of the partition.



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