



Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596

An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

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The Suffering of Women During Amrita Pritam's Pinjar Partition

Yashodhara Y. Thaker

MA English, GSET

Email: thakeryashodhara@gmail.com



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Abstract

Amrita Pritam is well-known for her literary contributions to the partition. Readers might discover a contemporary history of India's partition catastrophe in her works. Readers can visualize and understand the true anguish experienced by the people during India's partition through the author's writings. Her well-known book *Pinjar* (The Skeleton) has a notable place in the partition fiction genre. Published in Punjabi in 1950, Khushwant Singh later translated it into English. The author uses the book to illustrate how women in India were ostracized, traumatized, and sexually assaulted during the partition. This article aims to demonstrate how the author, by using *Pinjar* as a lens, throws significant light on women's identity and sexuality difficulties. In light of this, the article will analyze the author's depictions of sexual assault against women, their suffering, and their estrangement from their bodies as a result of the division.

Keywords: Partition, Sexual Violence, Women, Pain, Trauma, Alienation.

The partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 was a glorifying event for the nationalists and the people of the newly demarcated nations. Simultaneously, this event was one of the darkest moments in the history of South Asia as well as for the entire humanity. Particularly for the women, the partition was an event of unbearable trauma- individually and collectively. Feminist scholars like Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon, and Kamla Bhasin through their writings brought the issues of women's sufferings and their trauma during partition but in the texts of history, this chapter is neutral/absent due to the dichotomy of public and private. Since women are presumed to be outsiders of public and politics, they are excluded from history because history is the manifestation of politics (Dey 106). Thus, it is necessary to locate the trauma meted out to the women in the history of partition. We can read or locate women's trauma in partition engaging with the theoretical ground of 'trauma'.

The term 'trauma' generally refers to the repeated infliction of wounds over the body. But in medical and psychiatric literature, especially in Sigmund Freud's text, the word 'trauma' suggests the infliction of wounds not upon the body but in the mind (Caruth 3). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud argued that the wound of the mind is not like the wound of the body. While the wound of the body is easily healable, the latter is not. The wound of the mind appears repeatedly in nightmares and inflicts the same wound on 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



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concentrated on the wound of the mind as trauma, we cannot exclude the wound on the body, while discussing the trauma of an individual. Because, if we link trauma with its etymology, we will find that wound of the mind is explicitly linked with the 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).

Thus, 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 is of two folds- bodily wounds and wounds over the mind. While analyzing women’s trauma in this chaotic partition, the author suggests that it is impossible to proceed by relegating bodily wounds from the wounds of the mind. We need an integrated approach as Radhika Mohanram too suggests. Now the question that comes to the mind is, “How bodily wound lead to the wound of the 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, and Judith Lewis Herman suggest that while coherency and control are absent over the life and body of the victims, trauma occurs (Mohanram 918). During the 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 twofold during the period of partition – the violence inflicted on women by the males of the opposite religious faith and violence inflicted by their 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’.

Apart from these, in some cases the family heads compelled their women to commit suicide; many girls and women were beheaded by their own men folk due to their faith in the notion of ‘purity and pollution’. They held the view that the body, mind, and family name would be polluted if their women were touched by the males of the opposite religious group. Moreover, it is believed in the patriarchal society that the honor of family and society rests on the hands of their women. So if their women are defiled by men of opposite religion then it would affect their family and social honour. Therefore, the men folk of the society inflicted violence until death over their women so that they could save their family and social honor. The



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trauma meted out to the women through the bodily wounds took the form of cultural trauma as Jeffrey C. Alexander argues in his book *Trauma: A Social Theory*. Alexander suggested that “when some people collectively feel that they are subjected to a horrendous event that leaves inalienable marks upon their consciousness, making their memories forever and change their identity fundamentally, cultural trauma occurs (Alexander 6).” Thus, from the perspective of Alexander, it can be argued that the trauma of the women during the partition is cultural trauma which can be equated to collective trauma. As collective trauma suggests, a blow to the basic framework of the social life of the people that damage the bonds shared by an individual with other and ruin the sense 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 the nation i.e. mother from external threats and protection of her honor and purity is deemed the prime duty of every individual in India. Here the woman 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 at an extreme level. For example, if Hindu women were raped by Islam men, then it was perceived that Mother India was raped and to take revenge for 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 on 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 the individual trauma without knowing the greater view of that turbulent period. A few scholars are engaged in penetrating 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 sources for studying the individual trauma of the people. The novel *Pinjar* is a contemporary fiction of partition. Therefore, *Pinjar* is worth analyzing while studying sexual violence against women and trauma unleashed by partition.



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Apart from the medical and psychiatric connotations, Trauma can be described as an individual's experience in life. However, the nature of the 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 for defense against the blow. Further, the victim can't react to the blow effectively (Erikson 187). Thus trauma signifies a state of helplessness, lack of 'the fight-or-flight response', loss of 'volume control', and activation of the 'on-or-off' switch of the trauma experienced by the 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 the '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 to Hamida and it was tattooed on her arm. With time, Pooro became the mother of Javed. During partition, their village Sakkar was included in Pakistan, and Pooro's entire family remained in India. In the 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's refusal compelled her to do so and consequently, she was alienated from her family and birthplace. The traumatic cause behind her family's refusal was religion and the notion of being polluted. If her family accepted her, they would be killed.

Apart from this, 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 "Who is she?" Whether a Hindu or Islam. Within herself she was a Hindu but for 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, her will was absent. Thus, she felt her son was a slimy sling, she would not take care of him if, in his veins, he didn'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 her womb against her will (Pritam 35).



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During the 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 under 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 her husband's family. She felt as if she had become polluted. Hence, no one would welcome her to her husband's house. But Pooro ensured her that she would be accepted by her brother and in-laws in India.

Apart from 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 were murdered, stripped, and paraded naked in the streets (Pritam 85). Hamida was a witness to 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, 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 choice, took them with them for the night, and returned them to the camp (Pritam 88). In other words, women were forced i.e. raped by the soldiers. In such a situation the women had no control over their 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 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 an internal conflict between love and hatred. Though her 'self' love pushed her to come out from her containment, she started the feeling of self-



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loathing as she said “I am not good for anyone now. No one will accept me.” (Pritam 118). In other words, Lajo had a strong and abominable feeling of being polluted by the Muslims.

In conclusion, it can be said that *Pinjar* gives us the 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 light upon the issues of identity and sexuality of women. The work is the writer’s way of depicting sexual violence against women, their trauma, and how they were alienated from the ‘self’- body in the aftermath of the partition.



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