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#### Partition and Womanhood: Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*

Abstract: Partition of the Indian Subcontinent produced disastrous aftermath for the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities. The unparalleled human endurance during the period of Partition possesses unique nature by virtue of the enormity of unscrupulous violence. Travail of trauma experienced by the female folk during pre-Partition and the Partition period is unmasked in the novel *Pinjar* by Amrita Pritam. Women speak of the chilly experiences of violence unleashed against them. This paper attempts to analyse the dreadful nature of female assaults by Jolle Demmers' theory on structural violence and the traumatised minds of the female victims are placed on the scale of shame-fear-dishonour syndrome mentioned in Urvashi Butalia's *Borders and Boundaries*.

Keywords: Gendered Identity, female objectification, structural violence, humanity

## Introduction

The Partition of the Indian Subcontinent on 14<sup>th</sup> August 1947 was a historical cataclysm which turned the lives of millions of Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims upside down. *Translating Partition* by Ravikant and Tarun K Saint reflects on some relevant events leading to Partition. The governing British administrators had demarcated “Hindu” and “Muslim” as two essentially different communities which consequently, hardened religious identities. These hardened religious identities, later, got manifested in the form of communalism (XII). The book points out that the Lahore Resolution of the Muslim League (1940) demanded a separate Muslim nation based on the two nation theory by Muhammad Ali Jinnah. This resulted in the marking of new lines on the map of the Subcontinent through the mental design of the British Officer Cyril Radcliffe. When the Radcliffe line was drawn on the map, the Punjab and Bengal drew lines of blood and tears on the wounded hearts of millions of people. “As the violence increased, however the migration took on an urgent and treacherous character: convoys were ambushed, families separated, children orphaned, women kidnapped and whole train loads massacred” (Menon and Bhasin 35). Homicide became a cursed feature of the pre-partition and Partition periods. Partition engendered the trauma of communal disharmony, sexual assaults against women, mass exodus, and impaired identity.

Women’s sexuality was challenged, abused and mutilated with horrendous barbarity at Partition. Partition was an epoch when “women . . . were targeted as the Prime object of persecution. Along with the loss of home, native land and dear ones, the women in particular were subjected to defilement . . . before death, or defilement and abandonment or defilement and compulsion that followed to raise a new home with a new man belonging to the oppressor community” (Bagchi3). The consuetude of moulding a pure woman through the patriarchal tenets of chastity made each and every limb of our society develop a gendered

judgment while dealing with matters related to women. The status of being gendered robbed woman of her identity, ethnicity and nationality: “Violence against women, which was brutality and systematically carried out in the period of Partition was not just incidental to it, but gendered by patriarchal social structures and cultural values” (Bruschi 196).

### Gendered Partition

Partition of the Subcontinent was executed on the bosom of the feminine gender. Femininity was a status which aroused the derogatory feelings of vengeance, grudge, humiliation, fear, shame and burden. Women were treated as mere objects lacking an identity on their own. Cruelties shown to women on gender basis are narrated authentically in Butalia’s *The Other Side of Silence*. Through the acts of abduction, persuasion to commit suicide, and rehabilitation, the men of the other community, own family and the states had done unpardonable crimes to women. Zainab, a real victim of gendered Partition, as is mentioned in *The Other Side of Silence* was a prey in the hands of the communal rioters, her own family and the state (47). Having been passed through the hands of many men, she married Bhuta Singh who loved her a lot and two daughters were born to them. At the Partition, the couple remained in India; but the rescuing unit of Pakistan traced out her and reported to her uncle who trapped her and brought back to Pakistan and arranged her marriage with his son for saving her property in Pakistan. Like Zainab there were innumerable women who were silenced by the rivals, families and the states.

The Inter Dominion Treaty passed by both the countries on 6 December 1947 assured the rehabilitation of the abducted women at Partition. “They agreed too that women living with men of the other religion had to be brought back, if necessary by force, to their own homes- in other words, the place of their religion...” (Butalia 139). When men were given chance to

choose their home nation, abducted women were denied because their homeland was decided by any of the two states based on their nativity during the pre-abduction period.

Gendered Partition and gendered violence are thematised in the novels like *Train to Pakistan*, *Lajwanti*, *Ice-Candyman*, *Pinjar* etc. Among these literary narratives on Partition, *Pinjar* possesses a distinctive place due to its polyphonic expression of varied women who pull through the society's gendered treatment before and after Partition.

### *Pinjar*

*Pinjar* throws light on some momentous incidents of inter-family grudges communal reprisals and religious feuds which are staged through the gendered medium of woman's sexuality. The protagonist Pooro who would later be known as Hamida and Lajo, Pooro's sister-in-law, are literally degraded to the level of *pinjar* or skeleton in consequence of male hegemony. When the face and self of a woman are torn off by male hooligans, she turn out to be emotionally depraved and becomes a mere object to suffer pain. The novel encapsulates the traumatic struggles encountered by the Hindu-Muslim community during the pre-Partition and Partition times by highlighting the aspect of patriarchal obsessions with chastity, marking of female body and defilement of communal honour.

### Gendered Identity, Marked Body

Partition of the Subcontinent ascribed a gendered identity to the women of the newly born nations, India and Pakistan. "The issue of gendered identity is central to any discussion on the interplay of community, class and caste..." (Menon and Bhasin 21). It had been the practice of the Subcontinent to treat the woman's body as a symbol of family honour as it had been the practice to ascribe a mother image to the nation:

The nation as mother produces an image of the allegorical mother whose offspring are the country's guardians, heroes and martyrs. Individual mothers

are celebrated as instances of this image: their pain and suffering, their sacrifices are recognized as part of nation's sacrifice... The rape and violation of the individual women become symbolically significant in nationalist discourse and the politics of national identity as a violation of nation and an act against the collective men of the enemy nation... (Ivekovic and Mostov 11).

Ascription of gendered identity to women and attribution of mother image to the nation put the women of the Hindu-Muslim community in a vulnerable position of susceptible victimisation of sexual violation. The pre-Partition instance of the protagonist Pooro's abduction by the Muslim boy named Rashida who recompensed his aunt's nab by Pooro's uncle voices forth the plight of any woman whose identity was stamped by avenging patriarchy. The abyss of anarchy into which Pooro was thrown was created due to the "patriarchal notion of safeguarding honour" (Menon and Bhasin 58). The patriarchal society insisted on "moral regulation or rather a hypocritical foundation of the hegemonic class in India" (Bagchi20). Pooro's father who represents such a patriarchal hegemonic class renounced the polluted daughter for safeguarding the honour of his family and community.

The isolated instance of abduction of Pooro which happened in the pre-Partition period assumed a commonality in the Partition period when the Hindu-Muslim fissure occurred like a peeled orange being fallen apart. Violence unleashed against women found the most heinous forms like stripping, mass rape, force marriages, and conversions: "Some had been forced into marriages, some murdered, some stripped and paraded naked in the streets" (Pritam 85). The uncontrollable continuum of assaults pelted down on women could be defined in terms of the structural violence theory by Jolly Demmers. Structural violence is the violence inflicted by the society upon the weak or the marginalised. "People are caught up in the structures of exploitation and repression that are harmful and damaging to them, hence-

physically- hurtful, and violent” (Demmers57). The patriarchal structure of the Subcontinent inflicted havoc upon women who were weak. Dishonouring the women of the rival community was taken to be a token of self-honour and manliness.

The apparent manifestation of structural violence is visible in the debased vogue of marking women’s body which is specified in the ill fate of Lajo, Hamida’s sister-in-law, who was kidnapped by her Muslim neighbour on her way to India at the time of Partition. Lajo met with a disastrous period of abominable behaviour from her kidnapper and his aged mother. She felt alienated, dejected and downcast in the very home where she was brought up. In her ghostly home she became a skeleton. Her rescue was not possible without her unwilling sexual submission to her captor. Gendered identity of the Hindu-Muslim women at Partition degraded them to the mean level of mere marked bodies which were always vulnerable to rape, tattooing and mutilation which served as the different forms of structural violence.

Psychological oppression and physical objectification had aroused shame-fear-dishonour syndrome in the affected women at Partition. Shame-fear-dishonour syndrome got expressed in different manners with women: “Fear at the prospect of being sexually used; the unspeakable shame of being raped; fear of death and the twin dishonour of violation and consequent rejection” (Menon and Bhasin59).

Pooro and Lajo were poor victims of shame-fear-dishonour syndrome due to objectification of womanhood and deprivation of identity. In the pre-partition period, Pooro had undergone the shame-fear-dishonour syndrome due to the awkward and awful sight of Rashida, her Muslim neighbour. The fear of Rashida kidnapping her made Pooro shudder in her nightmares because Rashida belonged to the rival community, Islam. As she feared, when the kidnap and the forceful marriage with Rashida took place, she became captive of shame-fear-dishonour syndrome. In the first phase of her nuptial life with Rashida, certain sights

made her tense and irate: “what if the boys were suddenly to pick up the girls and carry them away on their houses? What if all the girls were abducted...?” (Pritam 31).

Partition produced skeletons of innumerable women of the Hindu-Muslim and Sikh communities due to gendered objectification. Hamida’s thoughts focus on gendered assaults: “In her thoughts, she wondered over the plight of the women -people’s daughters, sisters and wives- who were forcibly held by strangers under roofs like hers” (Pritam 94). Women who were migrating to their promising nation in khafilas were susceptible to dangers like abduction, rape, coercive marriages and conversion. So most of them got victimised to shame-fear-dishonour syndrome. Lajo became a prey to such a dishonourable kidnap by a Muslim who detained her in his house. Having been left alone in her erstwhile house which had by then turned out to be the property of her religious enemies, Lajo pulled through shame-fear-dishonour syndrome.

The gnawing anxiety about the possibility of an impending sexual conquest, forceful conversion, and consequent expulsion from her husband’s family made her absolutely collapsed. The thick mask of silence worn by Lajo in front of Hamida who arrived at her house for her rescue, was an external manifestation of her intense psychological trauma. She underwent the twin dishonour of violation and consequent rejection. While the rescue plan of Lajo was being executed, Lajo was made to surrender herself before her Muslim captor who gifted her a skeletal identity through objectification. Partition quenched the thirst of the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh predators who derived exhilaration from the mutilated and dishonoured bodies of women of the other community.

Humanity is the most expected quality that should emanate from a human being. The shadows of huge walls like gender, religion, caste, creed, nation, language, fashion, money etc. darken the halo around humanity. Discrimination, objectification and othering are the

major backwashes of weakened humanity. *Pinjar* evinces the exalted and genial faces of humanity through the character Pooro or Hamida who is supported by her husband.

From the defaced, skeletal identity of Pooro, Hamida emerges as an epitome of humanity by breaking the shells of name, religion, gender, and nationality to assume her single identity as a human being. She lends a helping hand to Taro who has been leading an embarrassing life with her husband, having lost her identity as the woman of her man. From the demeaned stage of a skeleton, Taro rises up to the level of a strong woman through the airy space of warm communication provided by Hamida. When Hamida holds the foundling of a dead mad woman close to her breast and feeds him, her human identity gets concretised and elevated by crystallising other narrow identities based on religion, nativity, or nationality.

When Partition sows the venomous seeds of reprisal and rivalry due to the dichotomy caused by multiple identities formulated on the basis of religion, nationality, gender, caste and creed, Hamida remains a lake of humanity which is least affected by the fire spitting revolts. Destructive mechanisms were executed on the part of the Muslims and the Hindus alike: “One morning they decided to assault the house in which the Hindus had sought refuge. They poured kerosene oil over the windows and doors and put burning faggots to them” (Pritam 86). When Hamida sees a Hindu girl hiding in their sugarcane field after having been spoilt by some Muslim hooligans, she safeguards her and brings home to provide all sorts of security. When a convoy to India reaches, she safely hands over the girl to Ramchand from whom she comes to know that her sister-in-law Lajo also is missing. Hamida and her husband become diligent in searching and finding out Lajo, a Hindu woman. In the light of a well-planned script, Lajo is spotted and rescued. Rashida, a real Muslim, and Hamida, a converted Muslim, view, discern, and experience people with their unwalled mind through the transcendent medium of unhampered humanity.

## Conclusion

Partition of the Subcontinent had inflicted incurable wounds on the bodies and minds of the women of the Hindu-Muslim communities. The great trauma of the womanhood at Partition was the flickering status of identity and home. Torn by communal hooligans, the women of the were expelled from their families, as a result of which they were forced to peel off their erstwhile identity and assume a new identity of either a call girl or the wife of a man of the rival community. The post-partition settlement pacts of India and Pakistan also battered the identity and psyche of the abducted women because they never got an opportunity to choose a home on their own. In the names of the abstract concepts of chastity and honour women at Partition were torn off, both physically and mentally and they were subjected to perennial trauma.

“Trauma brings with it the need to witness, to speak, to somehow make an impression on the world that records the outrage of the moment. But trauma also stuns, dazing us into silence ... The traumatised, we might say, carry an impossible history within them...”

(Parasher204). The imbroglios of women during the colonial and the Partition epochs reflect the impaired identity as a major cataclysm which often preyed on the minds of the womenfolk. The silenced tongues and crumbled bodies of women like Poro, Lajo, Taro, the mad woman, and the raped women of partition period have always craved for a full voiced exposure of their sorrow laden minds. In order to heal the wounds of gendered, communal and national cruelties, one has to widen the horizon of one's mind to develop a broadened attitude of humanistic nationalism which is expressed through the words of Hamida:

“Whether one is a Hindu or a Muslim one, whoever reaches her destination, she carries along my soul also” (Pritam 127). Unwalled attitudes and activities widen the horizon of humanistic nationalism which will save the nations from fissures of differences.

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