

From Imposition to Subversion of Patriarchy in Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*: A Critical Study

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Abstract

Pinjar is a novel written by Amrita Pritam, a Sikh woman of great experience and sentiments. It deals with the writer's own experiences of the trauma of the partition of India which immediately followed the declaration of the independence of India in 1947. The eve of this glorious day did not imagine what would be the next morning. That the partition of India had so extensive repercussions was ingeniously deferred and its effects on common way of life was even unimagined.

Keywords- Partition, Trauma, Suppression, Communities

The violence and communal conflict had started even much before the declaration of Radcliff Line. The suppression of Hindus during Delhi Dynasty and Mughal period had inculcated the hatred among people against their opposed communities and continues to exist even now. Some minor disputes had become a cause for violent riots was not new during the sensitive moments after the declaration of the independence of India on 3 June 1947 and they have influenced the common setup of different communities living in North West Province and the Punjab where both the communal conflicts and communal harmony simultaneously existed.

The social structure of the states was so complex that in the same village there were orthodox Hindus and Muslims on one side and liberal and secular Hindus and Muslims on the other side, and surprisingly enough, some people practiced both Hinduism and Islam. This structure of the then Indian society was either misunderstood or completely overlooked by political parties like the Muslim League, the Indian National Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha which had their own respective interests. When these parties fight against one another, it was those secular and religion-sharing people who became their targets for attack.

The partition of India in 1947 gave birth to two independent nation-states—the Hindu India and the Muslim Pakistan. Hindu India became a secular nation state and accepted both the Hindu and the Muslim communities as the members of her family. On the other hand,

Pakistan threw out all Hindus and Sikhs from its territories which gave birth to communal riots followed by bloodshed, butchering, plunder, rape and psychological trauma. The spectre of the partition of India in 1947 haunts us even after sixty-six years of the event. Partition killed many innocent women and children, made them refugees, shook their nerves and froze their blood. It became a very challenging task to overcome the brutal and violent repercussions which made the two children of Independent India the sworn enemy of each other. The train that left India to Pakistan never reached its terminal, and vice versa.

Literary and artistic presentations of the partition of India have made a mind-blowing portraiture of the brutalities and violence that was the result of the division of India into two nation-states. The history of literature on the partition of India starts with the partition itself. Many literary historians claim that there is no exact time for any movement or period to claim to be the starting point but this literature has a sudden outbreak which nobody thought about. Suddenly, within two months, this horrible event gave context to many texts. All partition literature moves around the period of these two months that immediately followed the declaration of the Independence of India in August 1947.

Role of women in India's struggle for independence is not negligible. They cooperated almost all the national movements sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly. Although there were a few women who played active role on the national level such as Annie Besant, and Sarojini Naidu, but common women from family household incorporated with nationalist leaders in the national movement for Independence by giving them financial support after selling their jewellery, spinning cotton (*khadi*) at home, boycotting all the foreign products, bearing *lathis* in mass protest against the British and most importantly by giving birth to immortal souls like Bhagat Singh, Chandra Shekhar Azad, and Subhash Chandra Bose and many more. Azadi was not the result of all the efforts put only by men. Women played semi-active role to bring about this idea to become free from foreign rule. Mahatma Gandhi acknowledges the role of his wife in his life as "Ba", that is, wife, mother, and friend. He, among all the revolutionaries, was an active agent who implanted a consciousness of Azadi among women folk. With his campaigns like uplift of women, Indian women became conscious of their roles in family.

In the making of the nation women were kept aloof by the male political leaders and revolutionaries. It is not because they could not cope with the problems that these revolutions were going to impose on them but they had not got full consciousness of their roles and rights in society. Indian society being a typical patriarchal one, women underwent a narrow consciousness that they are made only for household works and service to the members of their family. What was their real contribution and what it could be in future they were totally unaware of.

On the other hand, the abolition of Sati system gave widows a new opportunity to settle their lives once more but it was not an easy task to freeze the memories and miseries of the past. It was as difficult to get rid of the vicious system of social condemnation as to

abolish Sati system itself. Those women who refused to perform Sati could not find a respected place in society. In such conditions they were double oppressed: death of their husbands, and condemnation in society.

With the gradual development of education, especially foreign education under the British rule, people became aware of the rights of women. This foreign education gave a new platform to the oppressed women to re-establish their future and restore their place in society which was not ready to accept them positively. This effacement was not an easy task which had sudden effect yet they tried to evolve from their past. Now women have overcome their problems but their acceptance in society as widows has not found complete support. If we see our society on *de facto* grounds, we find that this effacement is incomplete. Going back into the 1930s and 1940s Indian society, we see that women, whose husbands died (and sometimes they never saw their husbands), were discriminated even in higher classes like Brahmin and Kshatriya. Bipin Chandra describes the status of women in the early 19th century Indian society as:

Social conditions were equally depressing. The most distressing was the position of women. The birth of a girl was unwelcome, her marriage a burden and her widowhood inauspicious. Attempts to kill girl infants at birth were not unusual. Those who escaped this initial brutality were subjected to the violence of marriage at a tender age. Often the marriage was a device to escape social ignominy and, hence, marital life did not turn out to be a pleasant experience. An eighty-year-old Brahmin in Bengal had as many as two hundred wives, the youngest being just eight years old. Several women hardly had married life worth the name, since their husbands participated in nuptial ceremonies for a consideration and rarely set their eyes on their wives after that. Yet when their husbands died they were expected to commit Sati which Rammohan Roy described as 'murder according to every *shastra*.' If they succeeded in overcoming this coercion, they were condemned, as widows, to life-long misery, neglect and humiliation (Bipin: 84)

Ratna's effacement in *Kanthapura* is the best example of the condition of women in a typical Indian society.

Comparing Sati and abduction of women during the partition of India in 1947, we find a huge difference between the conditions of women in India and Pakistan. In Sati, a woman (especially a widow) was not maligned and humiliated publicly. She went to her husband's by the will of her parents and other family relatives. But, on the contrary, in her abduction, she is violated and humiliated publicly and no consent of her family and relatives is involved, even there is no question of it. This effacement was hundred times tougher than that of Sati. But women overcome this problem more successfully than the last one. It became possible because development of education changed their mindset and gave them examples to correlate their conditions with those of other similar oppressed women who

restored themselves in their society effectively. Women consciousness came earlier in the West and with the development of education people became aware of the rights of women and justice with them. It was not true vindication of women if they were discriminated only on the grounds that they were abducted and humiliated publically in which they were just victims. Partition was not brought by the clashes between Hindu women and Muslim women for power but political upheaval between the two parties, Indian National Congress led by Jawaharlal Nehru and the Muslim League led by Mohammad Ali Jinnah, exploited by diplomatic politics by the English rulers. Then why did women became the centre of the violence if they were not responsible for the partition? The question is very difficult to answer.

In almost every society, women are considered to be the property of one's enemy. They are very sensitive commodity, if exploited or violated, have a direct effect on social and moral prestige of the enemy. Women are better half of men and serve them as long as they (women) are alive. They give them respect and this respect establishes their standard in society. If this standard of the enemy in society is destroyed, the enemy is a living-dead person. But for such conditions women are the centre that is why one always tries to hurt one's enemy by violating them. But is it a proper revenge? No. But who thinks about it? None. Where there is a feeling of revenge, it devours many innocents along with the avengers and the avenged.

Mahatma Gandhi talked about equality of women with men and advocated about their education and emancipation. His indefatigable efforts to restore the primitive value and status of women in traditional Indian society brought new changes. They started breaking the boundaries of threshold and came to fight vis-à-vis the alien rule. They became aware of their oppression and exploitation by the foreigners, especially in such a way that they, along with their family, had to work hard in the field but could not get their due wages owing to the high rate of tax revenue; and they worked hard in factories no less than men did but were paid less than men were. They also became aware of their oppression by the patriarchal Indian society itself where hierarchic caste system enjoyed privilege. They started subverting this mode of proliferation of power. Ratna in *Kanthapura*, rejects all patriarchal imposition to follow widowhood and Sohini in *Untouchable* repudiates the high state of Brahmins in the village by speaking against Kalinath about his misconduct with herself.

Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* (1950), originally written in Punjabi and translated into English by Khushwant Singh, deals with women caught in violence and riots which followed the partition of India in 1947. The novel tells the story of the abduction of Pooro, who is engaged to be married to Ramchand in the nearby village, Rattowal. She is kidnapped by Rashida to avenge the old family enmity between hers and Rashida's families. She is brought to the enemy's house, kept in a forlorn house in a field, cleverly runs away back to her parents' but they reject her welcome, then returns to Rashida's, is married to him by changing her name as Hamida, suffers a miscarriage, finds herself busy with household works, brings

up a child from a mad woman who died after the childbirth, bears the wounds of snatching away the child from her by Brahmins in the community, and is always craving for her fiancé, Ramchand. The novel also depicts the breaking out of communal violence, men butchered and women raped, defiled and butchered, some girls and women abducted and kept as maidservants and mistresses, and properties of the victims usurped by the Muslims. During this violence, a newly married girl Lajo, Pooro's sister-in-law, is lost. Pooro plans to search her out by any means and at last she succeeds to do so. The rehabilitation of abducted men and women is announced by the Government and people are ready to receive their lost ones into their family once more and here the novel ends.

The novel raises the problem of women who have been abducted and defiled and their unwelcomed return into their own family. The novel raises the question why such innocent women have to suffer both in and outside the family. The reputation of a family comes at stake if a girl or woman is abducted from it and social norms do not allow the girl/woman or the members of the family to retrieve the past relations. The parents who gave birth to the girl, brought up and arranged her marriage, have to become stone-hearted when unfortunately the girl is abducted from the field and not allowed her to come back in the family anymore. Such oppression of a woman by the members of her own family, especially by her own parents is an emotional violence and it has continued for centuries. When Pooro comes back to her family one night she is asked:

"The neighbours will hear. There will be a crowd", warned her father. Pooro mother stuffed her mouth with the hem of her shirt.

"Daughter, this fate was ordained for you, we are helpless". Pooro heard her father's voice. She clung to her mother. "The shaikhs will descend on us and destroy everything we have".

"Take me to Thailand with you!" cried Pooro.

"Who will marry you now? you have lost your religion and your birthright. If we dare to help you, we will be wiped out without a trace of blood left behind to tell of your fate"

"Then destroy me with your own hands"

"Daughter, it would have been better if you had been died at birth! If the Shaikhs find you here, they will kill your father and your brothers. They will kill all of us,"

said the mother, hardening her heart."

Pooro remembered Rashida's words: "You have no place in that home now" (Pritam:22).

But when she marries, Rashida surrenders his all will and happiness before her. He looks after Pooro no less than a true husband does. Here the novel takes a dramatic turn. Pooro, who was abducted and violated, starts controlling the power. She hates Rashida but he wants to give her all happiness that she would find after her marriage with Ramchand. He

visits Ajmer and prays Allah to arouse love for him in her heart. This love for Pooro provides her an opportunity to control Rashida. She enjoys domination over her husband, Rashida, and makes him do what she wishes: search for her lost sister-in-law Lajo, kidnap her from a Muslim's house, sends her to rehabilitation camp, etc. And Rashida takes it all as repentance of his crime committed by abducting Pooro.

Rashida not only abducts her (Pooro) but also falls in love with her. He wants to restore to her all pleasures of being a wife. In spite of being scolded and taunted by her wife, he loves her most. This love becomes a weakness that Pooro utilizes to convince and control Rashida. Pooro's brother burns all his harvest and the fact is disclosed but Rashida never nurtures the feeling of revenge and never tortures Pooro. He settles all the disputes related to his harvest burning and never speaks a word against Pooro's brother, though he knew that it was none but her brother himself who set fire to his harvests. All this event shows how powerful Pooro was in Rashida's family. In Punjab, Haryana, Northwest Gujarat and Pakistan, women are never considered to be greater and stronger than men in any respect but Pooro supersedes this patriarchal construction of family.

Pooro fights for the rights of women. She urges Lajo to send her back to her family. She also argues that all parents and guardians who have lost their children and relatives must search for them when the riots and violence of the partition is over and welcome them, especially girls and women, with respect and happiness. In a conversation between Pooro and Lajo:

"When you get back, ask my mother to see me at least once before I die", sobbed Hamida.

"I ... I'll never get there" [says Lajo].

"Oh yes, you will. You will go back to your home, your husband and your brother".

"I am no good for anyone now. No one will accept me".

"Lajo, I will never allow such wickedness while I live.

"You will certainly go back to your home. You were not to blame what happened to you" (Pritam:116-117).

Thus we see how Pooro becomes conscious of her status and honour in society and tries to restore it anyhow even in such turbulent conditions as during the partition of India when communal violence predominated. Pooro not only fights for her rights along with those of other women, but also dominates the family she lives in. She evolves from her oppressed conditions to a possessive woman who enjoys all power in the family and interferes in making decisions. She effaces the fear of humiliation, social prestige and standard, religious virtues and all the superstitious set patterns of patriarchal society to restore the past of those women who were kidnapped, raped and violated in the riots during the partition

Feminism as a movement has rarely been sought in India but the empowerment of women has always been into light since the national awakening during Indian Renaissance after the dark ages of Indian women history. The image of a woman has always been ideal as a goddess. Her position in society and roles in family became a matter of national prestige. For the first time, their problems were taken into consideration by male nationalist leaders such as Rammoham Roy, Dayanand Sarasvati, Mahatma Gandhi and many others and reforms took place. We have seen so many bold and charismatic women such as Raziya Sultana Rani Durgavati and Rani Laxmi Bai in our national history but those who directly talk about oppression of women are few and far between.

In the mid-twentieth century just after the partition, India saw a revolutionary change in the condition of women. Though it began as disgust but concluded with a landmark effect on succeeding generations. Rehabilitation of women along with children after violence and exploitation during the partition of India reflected another sign of that silent revolution that began during the Indian Renaissance. Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* contextualises that landmark event into its text.

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