

**Representation of Gender based violence in Amrita Pritam's**  
*The Skeleton*

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**Abstract:**

Violence is a complex phenomenon which dwells upon various levels and can take distinct forms. Violence can be physical, sexual, psychological, verbal, linguistic and communal. It can be guided by the narrative of caste, class, religion, gender or even nation. Since ages women have been subjected to violence. The present paper focuses upon analyzing Amrita Pritam's well acclaimed novel *The Skeleton* for the representation of myriad forms of violence being inflicted upon its female characters in a typically phallogocentric society. Doing so, we would try to delineate the psychological and essentially gendered experience of women in the pre- partition and partition era.

**Keyword:-***Women, Gender, Partition, Rootlessness, Communalism, Violence, Subaltern.*

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Being set against the backdrop of partition of India in 1947, *The Skelton* (1948) is a tale of complexities of human mind, abduction of women, loss of identity, a sense of alienation, psychological and physical trauma that the women had undergone in an essentially oppressive feudo-patriarchal society. D.R More calls *The Skeleton* a remarkable novel “for its poetic presentation of the theme of the exploitation of the weaker sex on the background of the partition tragedy” (235).

Relying upon the views of Deepti Misri, who claims that, “every writing (representation) of violence is also a reading (or interpretation) of violence, we focus upon the representation of violence that enables us to read the representational content of violence itself” (9) we can say that the novel does not remain confined to the ethno-communal violence during partition. In *Pinjar* violence appears to be based upon religious identities but branches out into deeper gender based violence that has its roots in the oppressive patriarchal socio cultural setup. A close reading of the novel also trails out the exploitation of women, the forces working behind it and the cultural history of gender based violence against women in the society. The paper explores the gendered nature of violence committed against women by men during partition and further seeks to explore the issues of women's body, identity and sexuality. In *Pinjar*, Amrita Pritam tells us the story of a young girl, Pooro who belonged to a hindu shahukaar family of the village named Chattoani in Punjab. Her marriage has been fixed to with a young and handsome youth named Ram Chand, from a neighboring village Rattowal. The clouds of misfortune befell upon her when a muslim youth Rashid of the same village abducts her and keeps her in his

house. His action has been guided primarily by the old family feud between the Sheikhs and Shahukars . Pooro's uncle once kept the sister of Rashid 's father in his house for three nights. Provoked by his clan to take revenge and instigated by his desire for Pooro one night, Rashid abducts her. The ill fated Pooro escapes from Rashid's house and reaches her house. To her utmost shock, her parents refuse to accept her. She tries to commit suicide but Rashid saves her life. Rashid marries her and she is given a muslim name Hamida. She tries her level best to adjust in her new life, but from inside she feels torn and tattered. Trapped in a totally different environment, Pooro finds it difficult to get accustomed to this new way of life. Pooro suffers from a sense of alienation that leads to identity crisis:

“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 .” (25)

Pooro calls herself a “Skelton , without a shape or a name. She feels herself to be robbed off any subjectivity, individuality self esteem, who was not free to choose for her own. In the course of time, she gives birth to a child. For her the child is an embelm (insignia) of the wrongful deeds of Rashid, the forceful sexual violence being inflicted upon her. She is disgusted with the idea of carrying a portion of a person who has spoiled her life. She feels defiled for having an unwanted child, “a slimming white caterpillar inside..... if only she could take the worn out of her womb and fling it away ! pick it out with her nails as if it were a thorn prick it off as if it were a moghet or a leech....”(1) The child symbolizes the male dominated patriarchal society that treats woman as baits and exploits them according to their interest, “He had been planted inside her body by force against her will, and she feels”.....as if the boy was drawing the milk from veins was sucking it out with force....( 35 )

*The Skelton* differs from the other partition novels .Where the other novels focus upon the violence originated from the ethno religious realm, *The Skelton* expands its boundaries to figure out a deeper gendered dimension lying behind the communal atrocities inflicted upon women.

We should rather proceed with this understanding , as remarked by Deepti Misri in her introduction to ‘Beyond Partition’:“Violence must be understood not merely as a phenomenal event that occurs out of time and place but also as a historically and socially specific process that moves in the realm of discourse and helps construct it.”( Misri 9)

The irony lies in the fact that though set in the backdrop of partition the central character of the novel *Pooro* is not a victim of communal violence rather she suffers from gender based violence in a patriarchal society that treats women as baits, as objects of desire and exploits them for their interests. *Pooro* belonged to an upper caste hindu family of Punjab (a strictly patriarchal society). Where women are being worshipped as Devis(deities) but people still wish for a male child . *Pooro*’s mother prays to the goddess while she was expecting another child. “She wished that her next child should be another son.” She does not want to have another girl child. This male female binary that the society has been using to ideologically justify the otherwise unjust relocation of gender roles for males and females gets reflected through the folk song that *Pooro*’s mother sings:

To sons are given homes and places;

Daughters are exiled to foreign lands. (11)

Women have to leave their family and parents and go adjust in another household. They are not even given the right over their paternal property. This type of cultural violence gets reflected through *Pooro*’s story. *Pooro* is not a victim of communal violence but a more deeply rooted gendered violence which branches out of the distribution of cultural role that has been assigned to the women in a society. *Pooro* is abducted by Rashid primarily to take revenge upon her family. When Rashid tells her this she asks, “If my uncle abducted your aunt, what fault was that of mine” ?( 18). The question that *Pooro* raises carries the answer behind Rashid’s violent action . It is a society where women are not seen as an individual, but as a symbol of the honor of a family or community. In this situation the female body becomes a battle ground. “Women bear

the brunt of communal hostility for, as Reena Mitra argues, “it is in the heaping of indignities on women that the power game of rival men in societies lies”.(104)

It shows us how the individual bodies of women are stripped off their subjectivity, individuality and are assigned strictly gendered roles. What it shows is the artificial installment of honor in a woman, who is herself merely an emblem. Pooro calls women like her as mere skeletons without flesh or blood compelled to suffer as if they had no heart, no soul and no feelings. “Honor is at the centre of this transaction: in penetrating the girl, the abductor would deplete the honor and therefore the masculinity of the “other” community and enhance his own accordingly”. ( Misri, 39)

Thus not only Rashid but the entire social order which attaches the values of honor, with the individual female body is responsible for the plight of women. *The Skelton* also uncovers the duality and two facedness of the social system that on one hand worships women as deities and considers them as symbol of the familial honor but if some misfortune befalls upon them they are abandoned to suffer alone. Pooro manages to escape from Rashid’s house. But her parents refuse to accept her as she has been defiled by the touch of ‘other’, “Who will marry you now? You have lost your religion and your birthright.” ( 22)

The novel here calls in question the process of attaching honor of the community or family with the physical chastity of women which turns out to be another form of violence against women. Rashid convinces her by saying that her family would not accept her because if they would dare do that the society would excommunicate them as she had been with him for fifteen days. Pooro laments that she is physically chaste, “I have only eaten your food and drunk your water.....I” ( 19). But nobody listens to her and she is punished for a crime she has not even committed.

The theme of exploitation and suffering of women in a phallogocentric society gets further developed through the other female character in the story. Kammo, an orphan girl is ill treated by her aunt. She takes Pooro as her mother but is banned by her aunt to meet the latter. Kammo's life tells us about the fate of orphan girls in our society who have to live on the mercy of their relatives. They are often abused physically and do not have access to a few moments of happiness.

The novel raises question to the attitude of the society towards a married women through the character of Taaro. Taaro lives next door with her parents. Her husband takes another women as his wife but she cannot leave him as her parents and society don't support her. She has to live with him for basic needs of life: food, cloth and shelter. They rather say, "Once we give away a daughter our lips are sealed. It's up to her husband to treat her as he likes."(47)

But Taaro is well aware of this violence that has been inflicted upon her by the oppressive social order. But she still has to bear it. This realization makes her feel disgusted about it and turns her almost insane. She calls herself unclean, a whore who "sells her body for cloth and food."(46) Too powerless to act she rebels by speaking openly against the hegemonic patriarchal order and the very institution of marriage which treats women as objects to be used as a commodity without given any choice and thus devoid of any subjectivity. Taaro remarks, "When parents give away a daughter in marriage they put a nose around her neck and hand the other end of the rope to the man of their choice."(45) Though in a hysterical moment, she holds the whole oppressive social and religious hegemony responsible for her plight, "Only my lips are sealed and feet part in fetters. There is no justice in the world ; nor any God. He can do what he likes; there is no God to stop him. God's fetters were meant only for my feet."(47)

The story of the mad woman presents another paradigm to the abuse of women in a feudo-patriarchal society. She comes to the village Sakker half-fed and half- naked. However to the shock and dismay of the villagers, the mad woman is impregnated by somebody. Pooro wonders what sort of man could have done this to her. She feels disgusted at the mere thought of

such a man who raped a mad women, in turn she feels agitated against the whole social order where identity of a woman has been limited to an organ:

“She is neither young nor attractive; she is just a lump of flesh without a mind to go with it ..... a living skeleton .....a lunatic skeleton .....a skeleton picked to its bones by kites and vultures.”(53) The mad woman gives birth to a child and dies in a pitiable condition. That boy has been taken by Pooro and Rashid as their own.

Pooro suffers from identity crisis and is cursed to lead a double life. She is split into two: Physically she belongs to Rashid and in the heart of her hearts she is still beholden to Ram Chand. Every now and then she remembers him. The birth of her own son and her knowledge of the ugly exploitation of other women around her make Pooro speculate about her own situation. As a result of this she finds herself in a comparatively better position. Above all Rashid’s unconditional love and concern also moves her. Eventually she tries her level best to reconcile with her situation and strives to live a normal life, “Now she wanted to forget that Rashid had abducted her. After all he was her husband and the father of her son.”

This signifies her transforming psyche. But she still feels for Ram Chand . When an old lady from a neighboring household asks her to accompany the former to Rattoval, a strong desire to see Ram Chand compels Pooro to accompany the old lady. All through her journey, she recalled her past and breaks into tears:

“From the fields of Chattoani she had longingly gazed at the footpath which led to Rattoval. That was the way Ram Chand would have taken. He was to have come on a gaily-decorated horse, as bridegrooms do, that was the way her bridal palanguin carried by four bearers would have taken.”(71)

In Rattoval, she meets Ramchand , but cannot exchange a single word. Late that night, she went to the fields, reaches where Ram Chand was standing,”picks a handful of dust and severently smeared it on her eyelids”. Her gesture shows her deep delved love and reverence for

Ram Chand. During partition she meets Ram Chand in a refugee kafila. He tells her about Lajjo's abduction. The plight of women is further intensified during the turbulent time of partition of India in 1947. The communal violence being inflicted upon people is precisely penned down by Amrita Pritam :

“The streets ran with blood and were to be cluttered with human corpses, with no one to bury or cremate them, the stink from putrefying flesh hung in the air spreading pestilences”. (84)

Partition has been marked with communal murders, lootings, abduction of women, forced marriages and rapes. But the worst sufferers are again the women. The novel marks many incidents of violence inflicted upon women from the men of the opposite community. It focuses on the trauma of women who were being abducted , raped, murdered , stripped and paraded naked in the streets: “One day Hamida sees a band of a dozen or more goondas pushing a young girl before them. She had not a stitch of clothing on her person. The goondas beat drums and danced about the girl.”(87 )

The novel further tells us about the plight of the women refugees who are bound to stay in refugee camps. Pooro rescues a young girl hiding in their sugarcane fields. The girl comes from the refugee encampment in the neighboring village. That Hindu girl tells the heart wrenching tale of camp-women,“ The camp was guarded by the Pakistani soldiers. After sunset bands of goondes stole in picked out women they liked and took them for the night, they were returned to the encampment in the morning.”(88)The girl was forced to spend the preceding nine nights with different men. When Pooro meets Ram Chand, he tells her that Lajjo has been abducted by goondas . Pooro hands him over that camp girl for her safe return to India . Pooro and Rashid find Lajjo in her house now occupied by a muslim goonda. With a carefully worked out plan they succeed in rescuing Lajjo from her abductor . All these incidents portray the predicament and exploitation of women where we see men as the tormentors. It is imperative to unveil the pattern underlying the association between the communal violence with gender based



violence inflicted upon the women. It makes us wonder how the forces of communalism and patriarchy work together to push the women against the double yoked violence. The patriarchy vests the female body with the values of honor and respectability of the community and thus in turn strips off all the subjectivity, individuality of the women. Rather makes them more vulnerable more prone to the violence. The discourse of communalism organizes bodies through the logic of substitution, whereby individual bodies literally become communal bodies:

“Female bodies as reproduces and boundaries of the community, become the repositories of the community honor. Accordingly, sexual savagery before killing in communal riot is a paradigmatic manifestation of this logic.”( Misri,38)

Being the upholders of a cultures respectability that rests on their status as chaste, undefiled beings the violation of female bodies becomes the corruption of the community itself. As Ivekovic and Mostov argue, “In the acts of war....communalist rape women are the instruments of communication between two groups of men.”(Misri,11)

The potent imagery of skeleton is central to the novel. It is the women’s bodies which are reduced to “skeletons without a shape or a name”(25)that symbolizes their objectification, dehumanization as if they are without any feelings, emotions, devoid of any choices and thus stripped off their identity.

The female characters in the novel, Pooro, Lajjo, the abducted camp girl, the madwoman present us with the female subjects who share a bond through a common understanding of their bodies as markers of honor for their communities in the process of tragic and traumatic relocation. The government issues a proclamation ordering people to hand over all the abducted women so that they can be exchanged for the muslim women being abducted by the Hindus and Sikhs in India. The families though reluctant, are coming forward to accept their women. Pooro and Rashid accompany Laajo to the border where Ram Chand and her brother come to receive her. Now Pooro gets the golden opportunity to return to her family in India. But she decides to

stay with Rashid in Pakistan. She says, “when Laajo is welcomed, take it that Pooro has also returned to you. My home is now in Pakistan.”( 127 )

This leads to her final reconciliation with her fate. The novel ironically point at the new government policy of recovery adopted by the state which again defined the identity of women solely in religious and communal terms rather than being based on any individualistic basis. This decision again proves out to be an instance of state violence that does not consider the wishes of the people in question. Thus so called recovery and rehabilitation prove out to be another blow to the females who have already suffered a lot. Pooro’s refusal to return to her family or get rehabilitated marks her rebellion against the patriarchal institution of family, society, community, religion and the state itself. By doing so Pooro rejects the institutions of family, society and community which have once rejected her when she managed to escape from Rashid’s house. Doing so, she appears as an embodiment of the existential philosophy which believes that man is a unique and isolated individual caught in an emphatic and hostile society, responsible for his own actions and free to choose his own destiny, Pooro takes an existential decision to stay with her husband and son. Priyadarshani Dasgupta remarks,“ Pooro thus makes the non-normative choice to refuse the offer of inclusion and interpolation into family , community, nation that was once denied to her. In doing so she rescues her own identity, ‘Hamida’ which was once thrust upon her.”(2013:5,143 ) Rashid plays a significant role in Pooro’s transformation. He also symbolizes the complex dualities that lie under the narrative of patriarchy that not only acts as an instrument of violence against its female subjects, but the males also fell prey to it and suffer badly .Rashid is a true example of this. The only mistake he makes is that he abducts Pooro for which he pays a heavy price. He never receives that unconditional love back that he showers upon Pooro. The guilt that he has wronged the girl he loves makes him sick. Burning with fever, he mumbles seeking forgiveness from Pooro reflects his guilt. He saves the madwoman’s child and when Pooro decides to take it as her own he supports her. He risks his own life to rescue Lajjo. He abides by whatever Pooro says. He suffers badly and never gets the true love that he

deserved. His character bears testimony to the fact that men are as much a victim of patriarchal violence as women.

D.R More rightly calls Pooro ‘a symbol of suffering and survivalism’( 61). She rises as a courageous woman rather than a helpless victim though she appears to be one in the beginning of the novel. The transformation in her character can be clearly seen throughout. Initially, she hates Rashid for abducting her . She is not able to accept her son rather considers herself to be polluted and unclean. She considers herself to be a skeleton, devoid of any feelings, desires, stripped off her subjectivity and dreams. But this objectification by the society could not strip her off her humanity. She does not undergo dehumanization rather the traumatic experiences of her life turn her to be more humane and sympathetic toward the plight of other subaltern women around her. She showers her motherly affection to the orphan girl Kammo who is ill treated by her aunt, she adopts the madwoman’s child as her own and even breastfeeds him, with the help of her husband Rashid, she manages to save the camp girl and Lajjo from their abductors and manages to send them to their respective families. Finally she decides to stay with Rashid in Pakistan. Doing so, she chooses for her own, a right that was never given to her before. Taking this existential decision, Pooro re establishes her identity as a human being that further leads to restoration of her self esteem and subjectivity. Doing so, Pooro appears as an embodiment of the power hidden in a woman and its manifestation.

To conclude we can say that *The Skeleton* tries to unravel the ways in which the lives of women got affected by the essentially violent experience of partition. It not only depicts their psycho spiritual trauma but also shows the growth of its female protagonist from a passive victim to an active agent who decides to make choices of her life.

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