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"Memories of Days Past": A Study of the Partition, Conflicting Motherhood and Trauma in Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*

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Abstract

It has been almost eight decades since 1947, that India has gained its Independence from the shackles of the British rule. Though the occasion of the Indian Independence remains a glorious day in the long-chequered history of the nation, yet it grapples with the trauma of the largest mass scale massacre in the history of the South Asian subcontinent. Thus, the Independence of India was achieved at the cost of large-scale displacements, religious animosity, riots, heinous murders, loot of property and violence against women. It is really unfortunate that the Hindus and the Muslims, who participated unitedly and wholeheartedly for the freedom struggle of the country, became enemies and participated in the massacre caused by the communal riots after the Independence by falling prey to the strategies of divide and rule of the British Empire and the political negotiations during that time. It divided not only the families but it divided the hearts of the individuals who were affected by its excruciating consequences. Most importantly, it resulted in the loss of identity in case of the people who either migrated to both sides of the western border of India as refugees or were subject to forced conversions. The worst affected were the women, who became the symbols of honour and revenge for both, the Hindus and the Muslims. Women were abducted, forced to religious conversions, raped and brutally murdered. This paper seeks to address the issues of the displacement, forced conversion, violence against women and conflicting motherhood in the context of Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*. It will examine mainly the women characters in the text under consideration to study these issues.

Keywords: Partition, Displacement, Trauma, Women, Conflicting motherhood

During the Partition violence communal riots engulfed both sides of the western border of India. It has been almost eight decades since 1947, that India has gained its Independence from the shackles of the British rule. Though the occasion of the Indian Independence remains a glorious day in the long-chequered history of the nation, yet it grapples with the trauma of the largest mass scale massacre in the history of the South Asian subcontinent. Thus, the Independence of India was achieved at the cost of large-scale displacements, religious animosity, riots, heinous murders, loot of property and violence against women. It is really unfortunate that the Hindus and the Muslims, who participated unitedly and wholeheartedly for the freedom struggle of the country, became enemies and participated in the massacre caused by the communal riots after the Independence by falling prey to the strategies of divide and rule of the British Empire and the political negotiations during that time. In this context, the statement delivered by Gopinath in Manju Jain's *Difficult Daughters* captures the crux of the matter. Gopinath states, "The British left us with a final stab in the back. We didn't want freedom, if this is what it meant. But, we were forced to accept Partition and suffering along with Independence as a package deal" (248).

In this chaotic state of existence, women's bodies became the battlefield of conquest and the conquered body of the woman became the trophy of triumph of masculinity, religion and nationality. Muslim and Hindu/Sikh men celebrated the violation of the honour of women belonging to the rival group. In the context of Partition, women became symbols of a community's integrity and masculinity. Isabella Bruschi in her book titled *Partition Fiction: Gendered Perspectives* observes, "When the ideas of community and nation are so insistently superimposed on the figure of the devote wife and selfless mother, the exploitation of women as the major site of contest in defence of those ideas is only too consequential. Mass rape and abduction were the translation of a symbolic construction into the material; when it came to offending the opponent, the distinction between the metaphorical and the literal was erased" (Bruschi 18). It is ironic that the Indian patriarchal society presents the mythical image of the nation as a goddess, Bharat Mata riding on a carriage drawn by horses on the one hand and strangles her individuation within the codes of the feminine on the other hand. It is a woman who is then subject to honour in the deified mother figure of the Indian myth. Also, ironically women are subject to humiliation within the microcosmic unit of the family and the macrocosmic society. Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* becomes an important text to examine the Partition times as through her fictional narrative, she uses literature as a voice of resistance against the hegemonic nationalist narratives of power that glorify Indian Independence and overlook the trauma caused by the cataclysmic historical event. In this context, Urvashi Butalia in *The Other Side of Violence* comments, "These aspects of Partition- how families were divided, how friendships endured across borders, how people coped with trauma, how they rebuilt their lives, what resources, both physical and mental, they drew upon, how their experience of dislocation and trauma shaped their lives and indeed the cities and towns and villages they settled in find little reflection in written history" (Butalia 9). These "aspects of Partition" remain the major thrust area of the litterateurs, theatre artists and the film makers who used the canvas of the Partition within the frame of fictional lens to disseminate the horror of the times. Pritam's text not only documents history but it also reads and voices the 'silences' of the dire historical event especially with respect to women.

"Memories of days past" (1) haunt Pooro amidst her state of abduction and forced conversion in Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*. "Memories of the past" with respect to the memories of Partition catastrophe remained a black spot for the victims of the holocaust and it overshadowed the glorious memories of the time before the dire event of cartographic division on the Western frontier of India. Pooro, the protagonist of Pritam's fictional narrative set in the backdrop of Partition, highlights the traumatized state of the contemporary women in both sides of the Indian border. She becomes the representative of women who were the victims of Partition violence. She is portrayed as the daughter of a rich Hindu Sahukar whose marriage had been arranged with Ram Chand. Unfortunately, she falls prey to a family feud resulted by religious animosity caused due the Partition violence. The narrator describes the episode of her abduction by a Muslim man named Rashida and states, "Pooro did not know from where the horse had come, nor who was the man riding it; she did not know how far she had been carried. She had lost consciousness and when she came to her senses she found herself on a charpoy in a room with the door shut. She banged her forehead against the walls and hammered the door with her bare hands till she fell, exhausted" (12-13). She thus becomes the victim of "settling old scores" (17) as Rashida explains to her later, "They (his family) picked on me; they made me take an oath on the Koran that I would abduct Sahukar's daughter before she was wed" (17). Pooro asks, "If my uncle abducted your aunt, what fault was that of mine? You have reduced me to a homeless vagrant" (18). The question asked by Pooro reverberates the echoes the voices of many such helpless women of

her contemporary society who lost their identities and lived fractured lives as "homeless vagrants" without understanding their fault to deserve such inhuman plight.

Pooro expresses her shock at her state of existence of being a part of a community which had wide cultural differences as compared to her upbringing. Her relentless endeavors to escape tuns into success one day but the refusal of her family to accommodate her back within her space, makes her realize the horrific repercussions of her new state of being an 'abducted woman'. She discovers the futility of her struggle to escape as her mother states, "Daughter this fate is ordained for you… 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 our fate" (22). She reveals the traumatic journey of returning to her abductor and states that in his family she felt like "a stray calf in a strange herd of cows" (25) and this indicates her trauma of being uprooted and losing her identity. In the context of Partition violence against women, Menon and Bhasin's study conclude that the "material, symbolic, political significance of the abduction of women was not lost either on the women themselves and their families, on their communities, or on their leaders and governments. As a retaliatory measure, it was simultaneously an assertion of identity and humiliation of the rival community through the appropriation of its women. When accompanied by forcible conversion and marriage it could be counted upon to outrage both family and community honour and religious sentiment" (Menon 5). This is further expressed in the ritual of her conversion where she focuses on the hollowness of her marriage to Rashida. The narrator states, "One day Rashida brought a silk dress of bright red and placed it in front of Pooro" and told her bluntly "Tomorrow you have to wear this; a Maulvi will be coming to perform our nikah. Be ready in time" (16). The act of tattooing a new name ends her hopes of escape from her state of distress. Pritam highlights the issue of the loss of identity of Pooro as the narrator observes, "The man tattooed on it the new name she had been given when she was married to Rashida. From that day "Hamida" was not only inscribed on her skin in dark green letters but everyone began to call her by that name" (25). Pooro was living a "double life" of oscillating between her identity as Pooro on the one hand and Hamida on the other in her psyche. The readers realize her death in life situation as they are informed that "It was a double life: Hamida by day, Pooro by night. In reality, she was neither one nor the other, she was just a skeleton, without a shape or a name" (25).

The journey of Pooro's conversion to Hamida was not merely a religious conversion but it was the conversion of her 'being' into a fractured self, devoid of any proper identity or role. Though Rashia treats Hamida with love and care but his act of abducting, marrying a Hindu girl and converting her to Islam makes him a perpetrator participating in the wave of communal riots in the wake of the Indian Independence. As Hamida gets pregnant with the child of Rashida, she feels nauseated and defeated. Though Rashida, who was her husband, loved her deeply but for Pooro he was the prime cause of her fractured self and thus, she treated the child in her womb as a child born out of hate. She explains that she "felt as if her body was a pea-pod inside which she carried a slimy, white caterpillar. Her body was unclean. If only she could take the worm out of her womb and fling it away! Pick it out with her nails as if it were a thorn! Pluck it off as if it were a maggot or a leech…!" (1). However, for Rashida this was a news that brought joy to him. The readers connect the situation to the Partition background and understand the depth of the statement made by the narrator who states, "He had won over the Hindu girl. The gamble had paid off. Pooro was no longer the girl he had abducted and made his mistress- not a woman he had brought in as a housekeeper.

She was Hamida, the mother of his son". (33). In the text, later, Hamida overcomes her state of turmoil and accepts her child with new hope for survival amidst bleak times.

In this context the case of Jyoti in Antarjanam's text becomes an appropriate example to focus on Partition survivors who kept the torch of life glowing amidst the holocaust. The act of preservation through destruction reverberates in the ironical question asked by Jyoti, the rape victim in Antarjanam's "A Leaf in the Storm" to the doctor in the refugee camp. She asks, "My life…doctor…may I ask you something? Tell me, are you able to destroy something which must be destroyed, just as much as you can preserve something you think must be preserved? Now this life bred of damnation- conceived in consequence of inhuman rape and ignorance- tell me doctor, can you destroy this, save another life…? Can you do that?" (57). It is indeed ironical that "destruction" of one's life becomes the only way to "save" that "life". The juxtaposition of the terms destruction and preservation in this regard represents the horror of such an existence. Moreover, the doctor, whose profession makes him a savior of life is asked to give death to a child in the womb. The question asked by Jyoti highlights the hostile environment of the Partition days, where death in the womb is better than being born into the world of hate and revenge. Later, we are informed that Jyoti "warmed its forehead by caressing it gently. Her life-blood flowed like fresh milk. As the mother walked slowly towards the camp, the stars beamed from heaven" (64). The meaning of Jyoti is 'light'. Significantly Jyoti lights the torch of love amidst the Partition chaos. Her gesture of accepting the child of hate, who reminds her of the tortures inflicted on her as the partition victim, is the victory of humanity over the darkness of revenge. Thus, the gesture becomes symbolic of hope of a new life.

Urvashi Butalia further records, "The history of partition was also the history of widespread sexual violence, particularly rape, abduction, forced marriage, selling into prostitution. An estimated hundred thousand women in both countries are believed to have suffered this fate. (Butalia xxvi). Partition witnessed large scale displacement of population where people were deprived of human rights and they were forced to vacate their homeland. The narrator in Lalithambika Antharjanam's "A Leaf in the Storm" observes that people were "hounded out of those houses- those ancestral homes they had inherited, and which, they would have passed on to their progeny. They had been driven away from them like stray dogs… hunted out of them like wild hen." (58). The agony of leaving one's homeland and the pain of going to a refugee camp is a recurring theme in Partition narratives. Imam Baksh in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* laments, "What have we to do with Pakistan? We were born here. So were our ancestors. We have lived amongst you as brother' (133). Imam's daughter Nooran echoes her father and states, "Who will throw us out? This is our village. Are the police and the government dead?" (136). Moving from historical documentation enmeshed within the fictional lens, historians too, record the data of the cataclysmic event. Haimanti Roy summarizes the massacre as she records,

> In the course of four years between 1947 and 1951, recent scholarship estimates that around 14.5 million people moved between India, West Pakistan and East Pakistan, and an additional 3.7 million were 'missing' or dead. In these years, the pace of migration was swifter and greater on the border between India and West Pakistan, and was a two-way process that petered out by the end of 1949. (Roy 91)

Pritam's text under consideration provides graphic descriptions of the deplorable condition of women in the refugee camps. The author provides the helpless state of the refugees who were subject to inhuman physical and psychological turmoil. She portrays an

episode where one day Hamida saw a "band of a dozen or more goondas pushing a young girl before them". The victimized girl did not have a "stitch of clothing on her person. She narrates the horrific scene where "the goondas beat drums and danced about the naked girl". Hamida could not find out "where they came from" or "where they were going" (87). Later, the readers can understand that she was one of the unfortunate souls of the refugee camp. She describes another refugee girl who was found by Hamida in the sugarcane fields. The narrator states, "After dark, Hamida brought the girl home. She was from a refugee encampment in the neighbouring village and like the others, was awaiting her turn to be evacuated to India. The camp was guarded by Pakistani soldiers. After sunset a band of goondas stole in, picked out women they liked and took them for the night; they were returned to the encampment in the morning. The girl had been forced to spend the preceding nine nights with different men. She escaped from the clutches of her ravishers, lost her way, and when daylight came hid herself in the sugarcane field where Hamida found her" (88).

Further the character of the woman named Taro in the text is victimized figure who can voice her opinions but she is unable to do anything fruitful to revive her condition. However, she rebels by voicing her angst and frustration in front of her mother and Hamida. She reveals the hollowness of her marriage and states, ""For two years I have had to sell my body for a mess of pottage and a few rags. I am like a whore…like a common prostitute…"" (46). The narrator captures her reactions to highlight the plight of such helpless women oppressed by patriarchy and communal violence. The readers are informed, "Taro clenched her fists; her eyes turned up in their sockets showing only the whites; her body stiffened like a plank of wood" (46). Taro expresses her anger and frustration of being made a scapegoat within the hollow institution of marriage within patriarchal norms. She expresses her disgust of being given away in marriage as an object to a liar and a fraud. She states, "This is a big fraud. I have been swindled… I was never married. You are lying; the whole lot of you are liars… Why do you hold me? Let me alone. Get away from me" (48). Hamida's sense of admiration for Taro is expressed in her awe-struck state after witnessing Taro's rebellion. Pritam's narrator reveals "Hamida was taken aback. This was the first time she had come across a girl who had such views and who could speak her mind so boldly. She had often wanted to say things like that herself, but had never dared" (48).

The case of Kammo**,** a twelve-year old Hindu girl who was abandoned by her father after her mother's death captures the plight of a girl child in a patriarchal society. When her mother died her father remarried and migrated to the city with his wife, leaving behind his daughter Kammo, in the village. She stayed with her aunt who behaved like a step mother. The girl finds a a mother figure in Hamida. The text states details of Hamida's love and affection for the motherless child. She "massaged Kammo's foot, rubbed it with ghee and pressed on its wads of warm cotton-wool" (40). She gave Kammo "things to eat and clothes to wear, Kammo's frail body began to fill up; her sallow sunken cheeks became pink and rounded. Hamida helped her wash her hair and then oiled and plaited it" (41). Later however communal issues run riot in Kammo's life as she is threatened by her aunt to be ready to face dire consequences if she met the Muslim woman Hamida again. Moreover, Hamida is charged with a taboo of a social crime of elopement; a crime which she did not commit. The girl informs Hamida in her last meeting, ""Aunty says she has heard that you have run away from your home and I may do the same", stifling her sobs" (42).

The Madwoman portrayed in the text captures the insensitivity shown even towards the lunatics. Hamida explains that she was "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). However, this helpless lady too, was raped and impregnated by her tormentor's child. Hamida and Rashid adopt the child after the madwoman's death during childbirth. Hamida "nurtured the tiny bundle of skin and bone with her own breasts for six months, till he too had started to look as fat and chubby as her own Javed. He had come to look upon Hamida as his mother; his eyes followed her as she moved about the house" (61). She explains that "the foundling had become a part of her own flesh and blood" (66). However, as a villager states that he "saw the sacred 'Om' tattooed on her (madwoman's) left arm" (58), the problems with the custody of the child were raised. After six months of nurturing Hamida was separated forcibly from the child as the Hindu villagers claimed that they could not "tolerate the taking away of a Hindu boy" (63). Further, they provide reasons to validate their hollow claim by stating, "The issue is between our faith and theirs. If we let this matter go unchallenged today, tomorrow they will want all of us to become Muslims. Don't you see how uppish their behaviour has become?" (59). The same villagers who refused to take care of the child at the time of his birth by stating religious reasons, had now weaned the baby from his survivor's milk. Hamida curses her fate and thinks of being separated first from of Kammo and then the foundling. The narrator interrogates, "Why did she have to pick up flowers which others had plucked and cast aside? What inner compulsion made her water withered buds and try to revive them?" (67). The readers however realize that Hamida found a survival strategy in love and care of the helpless. The boy is sent to "the brink of death" as he threw up "every drop of milk" that went down his throat" (67). The Hindu villagers toyed with the child's life on account of communal beliefs. They then posit religious fear of facing the "curse" if the child died (68). They return the child to the Muslim couple and state, "Take him! We leave his life in your custody! If you can save him, he is yours! They deposited a yellow, waxen doll wrapped in white linen in Rashida's lap. The child was in a state of coma" (69). Hamida's love and care revives the foundling and a week later the villager see the foundling "gurgling and playing merrily in Hamida's courtyard" (70).

Hamida meets Ram Chand in a refugee camp. Her marriage had been arranged by her parents with Ram Chand. He was there in search of his sister, who was the wife of Pooro's brother. During this incident she came to know about his brother's marriage for the first time. Her tortured mind thought and "wondered over the plight of women- people's daughters, sisters, wives-who were forcibly held by strangers under roofs like hers. Among many such, one was Lajo, Ram Chand's sister and her own sister-in-law" (94-95). Her plea for help from Rashida in this regard proves to be fruitful. Rashida successful finds and restores Lajjo to her rightful place within her family. The narrator observes, "Rashida's face reflected both pride and humility- the first because of the good turn he had done to Lajjo, the second because of his having abducted Pooro. He felt that he had partly redeemed the debt of honour he owed on that score" (126). Hamida realizes the intrinsic goodness of her tormentor and forgives him. She accepts her state as Rashida's wife wholeheartedly and refuses to leave with her brother. On being asked to return, Hamida tells her brother, "When Lajo is welcomed back in her home, then you can take it that Pooro has also returned to you. My home is now in Pakistan" (127). Irony lies in the fact that the same family who refused to accept the absconded Pooro was now willing to welcome Hamida. Pritam's highlights humanity as the true religion of mankind and reveals how love overcomes religious animosity.

Urvashi Butalia in *The Other Side of Silence* observes, "Mass scale migration, death, destruction, loss- no matter how inevitable Partition seemed, no one could have forseen the scale and ferocity of bloodshed and enmity it unleashed […] Still less could anyone have

forseen that women would become significant, so central and indeed so problematic" (Butalia 188). So, one can conclude that even within the absence and silencing of women, their presence is evident in the signification they gain in the context of Partition. Significantly, Pooro emerges as a triumphant soldier on the battlefield of Partition who prioritizes love over revenge and hatred. Her act of embracing her child by forgetting the torture inflicted on her by her tormentor Rashida, her act of being the savior of the madwoman's child, her heartfelt kindness towards Kammo, her efforts in finding Lajjo and finally, her decision to accept Rashida wholeheartedly by staying with him in Pakistan, portrays the act of survival amidst death and chaos. Mothering the child born out of hate and spreading the teaching of love becomes her strategy of her survival as a victim within the backdrop of the Partition turmoil. In the context of women, Ritu Menon in "Reproducing the Legitimate Community" observes that women became "crucial definer of identities and demarcator of boundaries between and within communities, genders and nations" (Menon 15). Even in the context of Independence, Partition and Nation, Pooro emerges as a triumphant survivor who overcomes the hurdles of patriarchy and religious animosity to fight the battle of life anew with her new found family on a new land.

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