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Resilience of Woman in Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*

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Abstract

"I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will."
— Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*

During Independence of the Nation, where the country was being divided on the bases of religion, women were being victimized, oppressed and traumatized for being a 'Woman'. This has been rendered in writings of various writers who have shown an agonizing and harrowing condition of women by citing events which occurred during partition of India and Pakistan. But this was only one side of the coin as on the other side there were women who strongly opposed the harassment being done on them or others either by killing or dying in the struggle. Amrita Pritam's novel *Pinjar* has broken the stereotype image of women and shown a strong character like Puroo, who defies the social law and acts like an impregnable bird who can never be captured again in the cage of society. The aforesaid novel clearly depicts the resilience of women and enunciates the victimized as strong, powerful gender that not only suffered the geographical, mental, physical and social partition but also sacrificed their life as true martyrs. The proposed paper would highlight the resilience of Puroo, a victim of cross-religious conflict, who is abducted by a man who later marries her. She also takes up a stand on her decision of staying back with her abductor husband during the Recovery Programme of 1947. She does that only because he accepted her when her own people were not ready to do so. Puroo manifests the condition of all the women who were not allowed to come back by their family in fear of social stigma. She asserted herself by saying that after her abduction "religion had become an insurmountable obstacle; neither her parents nor her in-laws had been willing to accept her. And now the same religion had become so accommodating!" She delineates into the fact that a woman is not an object which can be exchanged on the possessors will; rather a woman has all the right to decide what she wants or whom she wants to choose. Amrita Pritam also shows Puroo as a woman who despite herself being a sufferer does not confine to her own suffering but has a panorama of the condition of women during Partition. She delves in temerarious situation while trying to save her sister-in-law from her abductor; she secretly keeps her in her house and hands over her sister-in-law to her husband. Thus she is an epitome of a strong woman who stands as a model for the society. A reading of *Pinjar* is a clear testimony to the fact that Amrita Pritam dared to be different and didn't portray partition victims' only as pathetic creatures depending for male support or shedding tears and taking pity on their painful past but as true martyrs who underwent silent sacrifice.

"If you are going through hell, keep going."

—Winston Churchill

Scholars and literary works have always remained vocal in addressing the problems of humanity. The issue of partition, which has caused a great turmoil in the life of thousands of people, has been a burning topic of concern for them. Various themes of partition are vigorously addressed so as to study the deep cause and effect of partition on society especially women. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin in *Borders and Boundaries* define partition 'as the unfortunate outcome of sectarian and separatist politics and as a tragic accompaniment to the exhalation and promise of a freedom fought for courage and valor.'⁽³⁾ They delineate through partition literature's significant problems like dislocation, migration, abduction, rapes, mass suicide encountered by the people who became a stranger in their own country.

The tragedy of the partition encounter has given rise to various fictions which try to explore the inner turmoil and social complexes that plagued the subcontinent. The vast volumes of partition fiction in English, Urdu, Hindi, Bengali and other languages of the Subcontinent faithfully record the gruesome human disaster in the wake of partition. The incredible suffering and bewilderment of the people of the subcontinent has been a favourite theme with the Indian and Pakistani writers such as Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956), Attia Hussain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), Yasmin Khan's *The Great Partition* (2007), Gyanendra Pandey's *Remembering Partition* (2001), Rahi Masoom Raza's *Adha Gaon* (1966), Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* (1973), Amitav Ghosh's *Shadow Lines* (1988), Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* (1991), short stories by Saadat Hassan Manto and the poems of Faiz Ahmed Faiz. They attempt to give us an insight into the public frenzy, communal hatred, extreme disintegration and large-scale sectarian violence.

One of the first voices portraying the pain and horror of Partition was that of Punjabi poet and fiction writer Amrita Pritam in the novel *Pinjar* (The Skeleton) (1950), in which she created her memorable character, Pooro, an epitome of violence against women, loss of humanity and the resurrected woman (ultimate surrender to existential fate); the novel was made into an award-winning film, *Pinjar* in 2003.

The novel opens with an internal psychological portrait of traumatic Pooro who is sitting and opening a pod when suddenly she touches a slimy slug, she immediately relates it with her life, feeling as if her body was a pea-pod inside which she is carrying a slimy white caterpillar (her child). She wants to remove the caterpillar growing inside as it is unwanted and a result of forced marriage.

The sky was a colorless grey. Pooro sat on her haunches with a sack spread beneath her feet. She was shelling peas. She pressed open a pod and pushed out the row of peas with her finger. A slimy little slug stuck to her thumb. She felt as if she had stepped into a cesspool; she ground her teeth, flicked off the slug and rubbed her hand between her knees. 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...! (Pritam 1)

The realistic image of the ongoing situation of partition takes the story further where young girls were abducted and faced rejection if they wanted to return. After being trapped for many days, Puroo succeeds in escaping from the clutches of Rashida, her abductor, only to fall into the abyss of rejection from her parents: On the threshold of freedom they said: "If we dare to help you, we will be wiped out without a trace of blood left behind to tell of our fate." (Pritam 22)

Puroo, who had made all the efforts to reach back to her parents hoping they would hold her in their arms and comfort her, were not even ready to keep her in their house. She was left to live or die in the hands of fate: "When she had come this way earlier, she had believed she was returning to life; she had wanted to live again, to be with her mother and father. She had come full of hope. Now she had no hope, nor any fear." (Pritam 23)

It is perhaps this refusal of her family to accept her back that helps her to resist the reallocation of her after partition under the order which was also a protest against her Hindu community who brutally closed their doors on her. She does not only return to marry her abductor but also tries to accept her new identity as Hamida and behaves as one of the Muslim woman to prosper in a provisional, post traumatic sort of way in her new family and culture.

Being rejected and leading an identity less life, devoid of identity Puroo does not kill her memories of family, friends and fiancé but kept them intact in her subconscious mind and vented it only in her dreams. "It was a double life: Hamida by day, Puroo by night. In reality, she was neither one nor the other; she was just a skeleton, without a shape or a name." (Pritam 25) Pritam has shown the unvented desire of Puroo for Ramchand, the man with whom her marriage had initially been fixed, with an incident in which she makes an effort to see Ramchand even after her marriage by going to his village. It clearly shows that she still has the flume of desire mixed with anger burning for him. She always thought that "why didn't Ramchand come for her? Did he not love her?" (Pritam 29) "What was the difference between being engaged and being married?" (Pritam 22-23) This incident is a clear example of a strong woman who does not succumb to the miseries and live rest of her life in tears but tries to fulfill her embedded desires by seeing her fiancé once so that the earnest wish to know the person who broke her trust is fulfilled and she goes in peace with the future.

Amrita Pritam has developed the character of Puroo, making her evolve from individual to social representative during partition in order to give a realistic image. During the partition many women were abducted, raped and married, who were treated

as sex slaves by abductors. Among them there were some women who had accepted the situation and were happy with their new life as it was better to be with one man rather than being passed to many and Pooro was one of them. She had bitterly acknowledged the fact that now she had no family to go to but Rashida, with whom she had to spend the rest of her life. The birth of her son, Javed, made it easier for Pooro to accept the changes in her life and gave her the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties she had faced and show the resilience taking place in her life "Out of this conflict of hate and love, love and hate, were born Hamida's son and Hamida's love for her husband." (Pritam 35)

A very strong image of woman during partition is carved out of the novel when one day Pooro comes to know from Ramchand that his sister, Lajo, now her brother's wife, has been abducted in a nearby village. Immediately Pooro's repressed anger towards her family and society who had rejected her on the basis of societal norms flows out from her subconscious mind and she decides to find Lajo so that she does not have to face the bitterness and dejection which Pooro had to. She takes up the endeavor to go from village to village as a saleswoman (bunker) in order to find Lajo. Dexterously she asks the people about the girl and finds her out. She then plans out for her escape from the abductors and manages to bring her back to her home defying all the so called feminine laws of fragility. In doing so Pooro affirms that women who were abducted during partition were a victim of communal disharmony under the hands of men and not the culprit who were supposed to be despised by the society. She tells Lajo "You will certainly go back to your home. You were not to blame for what happened to you". (Pritam 117)

In September 1947, after partition, the government of both the countries decided to relocate the abducted women by starting a programme called 'Central Recovery operation' which aimed to recover and rehabilitate women who had been abducted during migration. Female social workers with the help of Police would locate such women and take them back to the nation they belonged to. This act seemed a compulsion as it did not give freedom to the women to make their own choice. Women did not always want to return to their family because they feared about getting accepted in their family and sometimes they were happy with their new husband and family. Mridula Sarabhai, the Chief Social Worker for the Recovery Effort states that:

One of the twenty-one women was so determined to stay with her new husband that she confronted - You say that abduction is immoral and so you are trying to save us. Well, now it is too late. One marries only once - willingly or by force. We are now married - what are you going to do with us? Ask us to get married again? Is that not immoral? What happened to our relatives when we were abducted? Where were they? ... [sic] You may do your worst if you insist, but remember, you can kill us, but we will not go. (Qtd. in Basu 73)

They were forced to return to their native place, regardless of their desires. While male citizens were able to choose which country to live in, abducted women were not given that option. In fact, they were deprived of many rights of citizenship. Butalia in her book argues, "... the woman as a *person* did not count, her wishes were of little consequences, she had no right to resist, defy or even to appeal, for the Act denied even that basic freedom." (Butalia 208-241)

Pooro, (now Hamida) cannot contain her agitation when Rashida informs her of the Government Proclamation ordering people to hand over all abducted persons, so that they could be exchanged for others similarly abducted by Indians. Parents had been exhorted to receive back their abducted daughters. A sense of resentment surges through her mind: When it had happened to her, religion had become an insurmountable obstacle; neither her parents nor her in-laws had been willing to accept her. And now the same religion had become so accommodating! (Pritam 67). Now all of a sudden their natal countries believed they knew what was right for women, and then forced them to acquiesce.

It is perhaps this resentment by society which evokes an individual to shed down all the fear and rise as a phoenix, ready for a new beginning. G. Pandey in *Remembering Partition* argues that while official histories view Partition merely as 'constitutional political arrangement', survivors' memories suggest that 'it amounted to a sundering, a whole new beginning and thus, a radical reconstitution of community and history' (7) Pooro, herself hands over Lajo to Ramchand, indicating that she is the same woman whom he had forgotten and had not accepted her back. It is then that her brother asks Pooro to return to India as it was her last chance saying, "Pooro! ...This is your last chance ..." (Pritam 125) Even Pooro herself knew that she could return to her family by just declaring that she was a Hindu. But she confidently affirms and exercises her choice, challenging the government laws "My home is now in Pakistan." (Pritam 125) 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 recreates her own identity, 'Hamida', which had once been thrust upon her. She also carves out a new space for those abducted women for whom relocation would be synonymous with uprooting for the second time. Thus Pooro, the protagonist defies patriarchal and territorial boundaries, effectively using her agency to critique the reality of partition by choosing to stay in Pakistan and exercising her own will.

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