

The *Pinjars* of the Body:

On Partition through the Women's Body in Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*

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Abstract

Partition, the long period of turmoil, is understood through a sense of violence uttered out of religious and geographic tensions. While the period witnessed a large exodus fuelled with multiple accounts of massive killings, massacres of children, migration from generational rootedness; a large brunt of Partition was bore by women and their bodies. Women's bodies became a playing ground for these tensions to play out, where they became honour 'symbols' or 'objects' between the political subjects of Partition. Several works such as Butalia's *The Other Side of Violence* capture the horrific tales of abductions, assaults, loss of livelihood and identity where the women are treated as devoid of any personhood and will. In this backdrop, Amrita Pritam's work, *Pinjar*, becomes important to address this violence perpetuated on women – where the protagonist Puroo, a Hindu girl, gets abducted and placed into this life and identity of a Muslim Hamida. Interestingly, Pritam stores this violence of Partition in the woman's body itself (or essentially *pinjar* of the body) which becomes an important tool throughout the novel in showcasing the tussled identity of Puroo/Hamida as she acts as the microcosm for the period itself. The paper then aims to analyse this tool of the body which Pritam uses not only to understand the turmoil faced by women as 'objects' of Partition; but also as a tool of language through which she articulates the many *pinjars* of memory, anguish, resignation and acceptance for Puroo/Hamida. Through her work, the paper will understand the site of the woman's body in Partition and showcase that while many accounts do not surface a language of words in mainstream History due to the nature of trauma, shame and impunity associated to it; the body becomes an important language through which memory and experiences of women during that time of turmoil can be studied.

Keywords: Partition, Body, Tussled Identity, Violence, Language.

Introduction

Partition, the long period of turmoil followed by the separation of State(s) that formed the nations of India and Pakistan, is stored in the woman's body for Amrita Pritam's work, *Pinjar*. In the strive for nationality on religious grounds, this

period witnesses a large exodus and migration from lands of generational rootedness to the violence of massive killings and abductions – wherein women and their bodies became ‘honour’ *symbols* or essentially *objects* of religion between these political subjects of Partition. In this backdrop, the narrative which Pritam weaves is focused on the protagonist Pooro, a Hindu girl, who gets abducted and placed into an unknown life and identity of a Muslim Hamida. This over the course of the novel unfolds in a constant contestation for her, between the memory of her past and acceptance of the new. Pritam, through Pooro/Hamida, then tackles this dilemma of a forceful shift of belonging which takes place between reluctance and reclamation across religion, identity and land. It is interesting how against the large skewering idea of formulating honour and nationality through women’s bodies which the period saw, Pritam focuses on the immediacy that surrounds the microcosm of Pooro/Hamida and her personal journey of coming to terms with her new identity against the loss of her memory. Further, it can be said that it is not only that her body becomes the ‘object’ for an assertion of power of one religion over the other, but it is also how the same body acts as a ‘subjective’ site for her personal memory to narrativize in a shifting identity against the larger mainstream History.

It is so as these shifts in Pooro/Hamida’s identity are involuntary and imposed upon; where her experiences as a Hindu girl recedes to be in direct opposition of her now life as a married Muslim woman, forming a tussle of a duality in Pooro/Hamida itself. It is substantial to note that language (of words) for Pooro/Hamida is silenced too; not only due to her being acted upon as a woman ‘honour’ object of Partition and its political subjects, but also in a dismissal of remembrance and erasure of her (Hindu) identity against the difficulty of embracing this new life as Hamida. The body here then becomes interesting for Pritam, who deploys it as a medium and a site for these shifts and contestations of Pooro/Hamida to be ‘silently’ narrativized without facing the difficulty of uttering them explicitly and to anyone in particular. Pooro/Hamida’s body then becomes the narrative ground of an articulation of a remembrance of her memory, her loss of agency and control, and her integration into this new society of village Sakkar. Moreover, it is important to see how the body of Pooro/Hamida converse with other women bodies in her surroundings that are still tackling the tensions of religion and Partition across identity spaces as women who all come to be silenced as objects of ‘honour’ upon which violence is perpetuated in the first place. Then, the body of and through the contested figure of Pooro/Hamida becomes the site of inquiry in Pritam’s *Pinjar*; where its abduction, acquisition, contestation, and reclamation in this “silent [women] history” of Partition, opens up a different mode of narrativization of women’s memory and subjectivity as ‘honour’ objects of Partition itself (Roy, 2021).

Background: Partition, Women’s Bodies and Pritam

Amrita Pritam, in this narrative of *Pinjar*, focuses on capturing the violence perpetuated on women bodies due to Partition which shifted the mobility if not identities of these women itself. While Partition is categorised with a sense of violence uttered out of religious and geographic tensions, it becomes important to

understand how these women act as involuntary honour symbols for these makeups of religion, identity and land. They inherently bore the brunt of being the ‘object’ symbols upon which these contestations played out between the larger political ‘subjects’ that perpetuated and drove the movement itself. The accounts of separation and loss in this mass exodus were not only then formulated in massive killings, massacres of children, migration from generational rootedness; but were also acted upon these women objects through their abduction and conversion of identities. These accounts of woman ‘objects’ forced to be a playing ground in meting out religious contestations becomes substantial to understand Partition itself. However, the nature of the same can be said to be only constitutive through memory rather being assessing as the subject of mainstream History; as they have been constantly silenced if not revoked due to ideas and thoughts such as shame, impurity, and honour killings that store in the women and specifically, women’s bodies itself. A large stream of works such as Urvashi Butalia’s *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) trace these accounts of women that fail a language of articulation in not just the mainstream History, but are also repressed due to mental traumas, threats to their now changed lives, and acceptance through reluctance itself.

Pritam then weaves a new language of articulation in Partition women ‘objects’ through her protagonist, Puroo/Hamida, who narrativizes this anguish of identity through the makeup of the body itself. In the course of the narrative, she is seen to be battling a duality between a resignation/acceptance of Hamida and her silenced memories of Puroo. However, she is understood as someone who is dismissed from language (of words) – of failing to remember her own memory which accounts for her loss of identity and consequent reclamation against her new life. This dismissal of remembrance can be seen in the binaries that form the pure and the impure between the religious tensions of Hindu-Muslims. After getting abducted when Puroo seeks a return to her own house and family, a rejection from her own identity of Puroo is seen where she is deemed to have “lost your [her] religion and your [her] birthright” (Pritam, 2009). She is then taken out of the legitimacy of being a Hindu girl, where her abduction not only symbolises a loss of her “place in that home” but also a loss of her own articulation of identity and consequently memories of being Puroo itself (Pritam, 2009). Her abduction as Puroo the Hindu girl then carries a sense of shame and impurity that is then wiped out in the taxonomy in classifying as the married woman, Hamida. She is to be now Hamida and not Puroo which forms the tussle between losing her articulation of memories of Puroo and difficulty of acting as Hamida who she doesn’t feel a belonging to. Then language in names (essentially words) not only instil a shame in her abduction and her past life in Puroo, but she’s also absent from a remembrance of it in Hamida who is a Muslim wife in the village of Sakkar where no one knows who Puroo is and where no one can relate to her memory itself. Then it is seen how she cannot articulate this tussle fully in the trauma of having it involuntarily imposed upon her and her identity, which in turn is where it can be then seen narrativized in bodily actions and bodily anguish she faces. She is then dismissed out of her own memory in words but still this battle of a

“double life: Hamida by day, Pooro by night” is gauged upon her where who she is and where she belongs is sketched out of a ‘silent’ narrativity by Pritam itself that is out and beyond of words (2009). Pritam then can be seen articulating this sense of memory, which is absent of words, in the body which narrativizes this duality of identity in Pooro/Hamida that make for the ‘silent histories’ of Partition women itself.

Pinjar: The Cage of the Memory in the Body/Identity

In understanding how the body becomes the language of these ‘silent histories’ of objectified women that have incurred the violence of Partition itself, it is important to understand how Pooro/Hamida’s character is shaped. Pritam introduces the character of Pooro through a description of her body, where the time she is seen as a girl about to be married is sketched through the bodily changes she undergoes like “upsurge of blood in her limbs”, “breasts burgeoned”, and “kameez [becoming] too tight for her” (Pritam, 2009). This is substantial as from the start itself Pritam sets a scene of distinction in forming the protagonist between an introspection in words and an introspection through the body – where the turmoil of separation and loss that follows for Pooro/Hamida is formulated through the latter rather the former itself. The formulation of the body can be seen in multiple instances. In her first *Baisakh* as Hamida, she is seen to be articulating the sense of smell from her body to remember the *Baisakh* and the food of her family home in contrast to what is witnessed here in her new life. It also fills her mind with the thoughts of what would have been the rituals and customs back in the Hindu household which Pooro can only visit through memory; and for which the memory is itself evoked through not words of remembrance, but an action construed out of the body. Through these bodily actions of memory, a reader can note the contestations of the ‘double life’ she seemingly tackles in being Pooro/Hamida. It also denotes the way she cannot fully embrace the identity of Hamida in this tussle, where in a sense she is caged as a *pinjar* of her own memory that is separated from her but still propels out through her body and bodily memories of her past as Pooro.

Pinjar: The Skeleton of Resignation and Acceptance in the Body

What is interesting is the body does not just evoke the sense of memory for Pooro/Hamida in her tussle of identity across religion and belonging, but also acts as a skeleton or *pinjar* itself devoid of any will or autonomy in the helpless resignation and acceptance of her fate. Pritam captures this loss of agency and autonomy in Pooro/Hamida through the body as the object where this action is imposed upon (rather the body being the one who subjects the action of memory as seen above). This imposed action not only follows the abduction and acquisition of her ‘body’ by Rashida as a symbol of ‘revenge’ against Hindus, but also in the later stages of her bearing a child and being forced upon a nature of motherhood. In the incidents that follow the childbirth, Pooro/Hamida through her eyes (rather words) seems to say “What more do you want of me? I have given you my person and I have given you a son, I have nothing more to give” (Pritam, 2009). In her motherhood, the act of even giving her breast to her own bore son is seen in hesitation and reluctance, as if it is “sucking it [her] out with full force” and has been “planted inside her [...] against her will” (Pritam, 2009). This can be interpreted as a helplessness and emptiness that is

out of control and forced to act by her body – which showcases the body as an object for not only a reluctance in the identity of a Muslim (in contrast to her being now impure as a Hindu) but also an unwantedness in the nature of motherhood (of her body as a reproductive vessel for bearing a son). It showcases the way a women’s body is deemed as a skeleton devoid of personhood and will. Where Pritam narrates the body facing the brunt of being an object *symbol* of religion and honour in this turmoil, and being an object *vessel* for bearing children especially a son to the man (Rashida) who acts as an agent of this turmoil itself. It also shows how Pooro/Hamida’s body becomes the ground for a tussle between the personal and the political; simultaneously making her contested nature of identity and memory a microcosm of Partition and Partition a contestation of multiple such bodily identities and memories.

Pinjar: The Flesh of Reclamation in the Skeleton of the Body

However, in the course of the narrative, the body is also explored by Pritam as a site of acceptance and integration in this new life as Hamida. This integration is evident in the interactions Pooro/Hamida has in the new village Sakkar, especially with the three women who in their actions articulate the tussle she faces, outside of her body and through their bodies. It makes possible to see how through other women’s bodies (rather than just her own), she is able to narrativize her contested identity and hence feel a sense of belonging through connection. The first woman Kammo, a Hindu girl, reminds her of her own self as Pooro where it is through her spirits and mannerisms that she stipulates a remembrance of her lost identity. On the other hand, there’s Taro, a Muslim woman, who while can speak audaciously against the violence played out on women through a language of words which Pooro/Hamida fails to articulate for herself, but still the anguish in her body which stores and releases in ‘fits’ is what Pooro/Hamida empathises in. Lastly the mad woman, who is unidentifiable of her religion in this tussle of identities but is depicted as “a living skeleton” by her just like she was described by Pritam throughout the work, then consequently bears the anguish of the society and its evils itself (2009). These women, who she doesn’t speak to about her own tussled identity through language, come to resemble bits of her tussle in their own bodily anguish and bodily identity across religions – which comes to help her integrate in this new life and village. Here this integration with these women in her self can be seen by the action of the body of Pooro/Hamida itself, where she takes the child borne from the body of the mad woman after she is found dead, and voluntarily chooses motherhood this time by filling her breasts with milk and offering it to the child which she now claims as her own. In this way, it can be deemed that the aloof, new village and household she shares with Rashida comes to be slowly constituted as her own, as expressed and narrativized by Pritam through her body itself. It can then go on to suggest that the *pinjar* or the skeleton of the body, then over the course of the narrative, fills up in the flesh of acceptance and integration in this new identity – wherein the last act of saying “no” upon asked to be returned to her birthland and lost identity becomes the language of subjecthood and will which she reclaims. The body then becomes a site for

reclamation for Pritam too against the turmoil, the violence, and the ‘silent history’ of women of Partition itself.

Conclusion

Pritam then instils a new language of articulation for the objectified women of Partition through the body itself in *Pinjar*. She stores this idea of a *pinjar* in Pooro/Hamida, and in her tussle of the silent memory and the silent acceptance of fate – making for the “silent histories” of women and women’s bodies during Partition (Roy, 2021). She evidently articulates the anguish of the involuntary shifting woman identity across religion, land, and belonging through the medium and the site of the body; where these ‘silent histories’ can be given a language to (paralleling the mainstream History) and where women as bodies and body objects can be understood and assessed (paralleling the political subjects who impose and act upon them).

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