

The Birth of a New Woman of a New India: A Critical Study of Amrita Pritam's *The Skeleton*

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Abstract

In 1947, communal hatred was deeply rooted in the minds of Hindus and Muslims and that aggression of one community over the other was usually exhibited in physical attacks on women. This continuous torture at the hands of men from both the communities pushed women into a state of trauma.

The existing research majorly looks at partition from the masculine gaze. Thus, women were pushed to the border who constitute the half of the population. Therefore, the present chapter aims to study the female characters of Amrita Pritam's *The Skeleton*, who were crushed by the society, especially during Partition, however, they challenged the stereotypical representation of the patriarchal society and became resilient rather than suffering as a victim. It majorly focuses on the protagonist, Pooro who rises like a phoenix even after enduring multiple tortures. She is the finest example of such women who not only empowered themselves but also protected other women especially in 1947 when women were the worst victims of Partition

Key words: Phoenix, Stereotypical, Trauma, Victim, 1947 Partition

Introduction

**“Eyes don't need a visa
Dreams don't have a border”
(Gulzar)**

Partition writings unfold the other face of independence which is filled with outcries of innocents who had lost their homes, relatives, and friends. It is true that historians had failed in depicting the trauma of people but literature gives enough space to them to express their pain and trauma. Partition literature successfully brings ordinary people into the centre and explores the inner plight of victims and witnesses of Partition through fictional characters and plots. The crucial theme of Partition is the violence on women as women were the worst victims of the event. Thousands of women were raped, abducted, killed or sold by people of both the communities during Partition riots. Suddenly violating a woman's body and honour became the most powerful strategy to disgrace the reputation of an enemy. One should contemplate; why should a woman pay the price of somebody else's crime? How could a man or a society forget that women are also human beings? Men also pay a price sometimes as victims of crimes, but the instances against women outnumber than those of men. Ritu Menon writes that women are absent from history and how history could be complete without adding the experiences and stories of half of the population. She writes: "...the absence of women in historical accounts is most unsurprising. Women have been excluded from making war, wealth, laws, governments, arts and science" (9-10). According to her, not only in Partition history but also in the history of any war, scientific achievements, or governments, women are always marginalized and their contributions are always ignored.

It is true that male writers focus on violence on women but they portray their women characters as the object rather than the subject of their story and somehow, they speak for women but from the perspectives of men, not women. Amrita Pritam comments that male writers do not consider women's writings seriously and even worthy for a read, while women are good in every field and are proving themselves but they have never been appreciated. In her interview, she argues: "Men take women's writing lightly; they doubt woman's sincerity. For example, when I got this Sahitya Akademi Award, and with it fame, the leading English daily in Delhi wrote that I got my popularity in Punjabi literature because of my youth and beauty. I was very sorry to

read that. Why not a talent? They can admire a beautiful woman, but not a talented one” (qtd in Coppola: 11). Hence, male writers marginalize the voices of women whereas female writers sensitively deal with the women’s issues and keep them in the centre and present their stories from their perspectives.

Female writers “...do not limit their female protagonist to the conventional view of self-sacrificing womanhood. Though women were incessantly traumatized by their Partition experience, they didn’t yield to it. They were crushed but they lived to tell the tale, drawing from their inner resources” (Arora 188). Amrita Pritam, the first Punjabi woman poet highlights these female experiences in her writings and her novel *The Skeleton* is the outcome of her experience of Partition. She becomes a vocal critic of violence on women through her characters like Poro, Lajo, and the Mad Woman.

Many writers have demystified Partition but, Amrita Pritam is one of the first women writers to look at Partition from the female point of view and allow her women characters to speak rather than to be spoken for. Amrita Pritam is a distinctive writer of her era when ‘religion’ used to be the crucial theme of women’s writings whereas male writers’ subjects were “woman was a flower, woman was a beauty, youth, grace” (qtd in Ruth: 2). However, Amrita Pritam’s theme was “woman in search of her identity through struggle”(qtd in Ruth: 2). Women have always been tormented, violated, and demeaned in a patriarchal society but Pritam’s women characters fight for their rights and identities. Upshots of Partition perturbed Amrita Pritam, consequently, she has written multiple poems, short stories, and novels based on and around this topic. In her autobiography *Revenue Stamp* (2016), she writes: “When during partition, the religious tornado struck the country, and made thousands of women weep, my mind too was cut into a thousand pieces and kept weeping with thousands of women...” (74). The pitiable situation of women in 1947 led Amrita Pritam to question the position and identity of a woman in a patriarchal society where she has always been considered inferior and labeled as the ‘other’. This research article deals with *The Skeleton*, one of the celebrated works of Amrita Pritam.

Review of Literature

Neena Arora and R.K. Dhawan in the book *Partition and Indian Literature: Voices of the Wounded Psyche* (2010) makes a rich contribution in understanding the trauma which is very much alive in the Indian psyche. It unfolds the causes and the circumstances that led ordinary people to migrate from their homeland and their awful experiences as refugees in their own country. It also includes the female outlook to understand Partition from the female gaze.

Alok Bhalla in *Partition Dialogues: Memories of a Lost Home* (2006) interviewed Indian and Pakistani writers such as Intijar Hussain, Krishna Sobti, Bhasham Sahni, Bapsi Sidhwa, Kaleshwar, Krishna Baldev Vaid who have been the victims and witnesses of Partition. In the interview with Alok Bhalla, these celebrated writers talk about pre and post Partition days and how the long shared communal history is ruptured by the evil plans of a few politicians. During their conversation with Bhalla, writers discuss how the characters and plots of their stories are inspired by the real events of the 1947 Partition. It is interesting to know that how Partition fictions are more realistic than fictional.

Urvashi Bhutalia in *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) collects oral testimonies and interviews to look at Partition how it has affected millions of lives. The book is the collection of moving episodes of women, children, *dalits*, their unheard voices, and the trauma of dislocation. There are various untold stories which are marginalized in the grand narratives of Partition. The book provides significant details of Partition and raises thoughtful questions on behalf of multitudinous people who have been silenced on their sufferings. E.M Griffin in the article “Hierarchy of Needs of Abraham Maslow” (2014) argues that the most basic need of a human being is survival, and there are five things that dominate the behaviour of a person such as psychological needs, safety needs, love and belongingness, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs. These necessities could be flexible but it is necessary to be fulfilled for a happy and satisfactory life. Thus, the article contributes in understanding the causes of unnatural behaviours of people during Partition.

Discussion:

The novel begins with a gloomy tone “THE SKY WAS a colourless grey” (TS 1) that signals that it is a tale of a person who has been caught in a deplorable situation. It has an abrupt beginning where the female protagonist is shown as a heartless mother who wants to kill her unborn baby. To unveil the suspense, Amrita Pritam uses the flashback technique as a vehicle to take readers into the life of her female protagonist, Poro. The reader is informed that a Muslim lad, Rashida abducts her and takes her to an unknown place which she does not recognise. However, finally, after fifteen days, she succeeds in fleeing from the cage of Rashida and runs towards her home that is not less than a heaven for her. Amrita Pritam shows the courage of her protagonist who does not surrender herself to her abductor but frees herself from his prison. It is the first step of the protagonist where she does not respond as a helpless creature. But, her parents deny to accept her which makes Poro helpless.

Pooro's abduction and rejection make her the victim of patriarchy like uncountable women of the Indian society. Finally, she follows Rashida and delivers a baby boy that fills Rashida's heart with joy. He thinks that finally she has become the mother of his son and he has won her body. For Rashida, Pooro is no longer that girl he had abducted as she has become the mother of his child but at the same time Pooro detests her baby because he is the child of that man who has ruined her life.

Pooro had been a victim of communal animosity although she never thought that its impact would be so immense that the whole country would burn in the fire of hatred during Partition. Her village had Muslims in the majority and had been included as a part of Pakistan but Hindus, being in the minority were attacked by Muslims. Pooro's evolution as a strong woman is reflected when she takes the charge of saving the life of the abducted girl. She is informed about a Hindu refugee camp where she takes the girl, but the presence of the Hindus of her village and their condition disturbs her. Pritam writes: "The refugees looked crestfallen; misfortune had settled on their faces like a layer of dust..." (TS 89). In the refugee camp, Pooro meets Ramchand, who brings back the memories of her past. The informal yet awkward conversation with Ramchand makes her worried about her family but he discloses that her brother has got married to his sister and he has got married to her sister.

He further adds that his sister Lajo has been abducted by a Muslim lad. The pain of losing everything and especially the abduction of Lajo could be seen on the face of Ramchand. Pooro promises Ramchand in helping him to find and save Lajo though, ironically, he is one of those who had rejected her after her abduction. Hence, Pooro's actions and her role are a real tour de force as she still prefers to help those who had snatched her identity and left her to suffer alone.

Pooro's decision to find Lajo projects the development of her character from that of a victim to a protector. Amrita Pritam portrays the last scene of the novel which depicts the inexplicable plight of Lajo and reunion of the brother and sister. She writes: "They had nothing to say to each other. All they could do was to cry like children and wipe their tears away with the backs of their hands" (TS 125). Undoubtedly, Pooro had endured multiple pains and sufferings in her life but she astonishes everyone with her maturity. The last scene of the novel is the climax where Pooro rejects the idea of going back to India when it was her only chance. The title of the chapter is apt for Pooro as it shows the journey of a woman who has been victimized however, she chooses to be a heroine rather than a victim. In most of the Partition writings, men are shown as protectors of women during Partition as Asad in Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire*, Arun in Chaman Nahal's *Azadi*, Jugga in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* but in *The Skeleton*, Pooro saves the lives of women as a warrior.

Some episodes depict Pooro's evolution from a skeleton to phoenix such as her motherly love for Tara and Kammo, taking up the responsibility of the Mad Woman's child after her death, helping a Hindu woman in her safe relocation to a refugee camp, rescue of Lajo from her abductor and her successful departure to India, and her own decision to stay with Rashida by rejecting the proposal of returning to India. Hence, Pooro accepts her past and compromises with her situations in life and to some extent forgives those, who were responsible for all the tragedies in her life. Pritam's writings condemn the practices of patriarchy which do not provide a separate room for women but Pritam's characters struggle, fight, evolve, and finally achieve success in shaping their identities in a world that is governed by men.

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