

Exploring the Transition of Female Voice in Amrita Pritam's Novel

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Abstract: Amrita Pritam is one of the most famous and respected writers in India, renowned as a leading figure in Punjabi literature. Her works are infused with a distinctive feminine touch, addressing social issues at the intersection of Indian identity and universal human concerns. *Pinjar*, one of Pritam's most defining creations, centers on the protagonist Pooro (later known as Hamida) and her unyielding journey. This journey seeks to evoke empathy for women who suffer in the name of family honor. The study illustrates how Pooro, who becomes a victim of a gender-based crime, displays unbreakable generosity and resilience. She transforms and empathizes with the helpless and broken women around her. Starting as a victim in a patriarchal society, she evolves into a woman who challenges traditional Indian norms. Pooro becomes a unique character who, with unwavering faith in her own path, overcomes social pressures, inequalities, injustice, violence, and family constraints. Her development highlights the strength of women amid societal dishonor and decay.

Key words: Partition, violence, social pressure, injustice, woman, victim, strength, wisdom.

1. INTRODUCTION:

“On the day when it will be possible for woman to love not in her weakness but in her strength, not to escape herself but to find herself, not to abase herself but to assert herself – on that day love will become for her, as for man, a source of life and not of mortal danger.”

Simone de Beauvoir

The thought permeates throughout Amrita Pritam's novel *Pinjar*, one of the most iconic partition novels that captured the soul-crushing trauma of the India-Pakistan partition. It encapsulates the power of literature; as it serves as a record of those ordinary citizens who were the greatest victims of a massive political failure, and women, being the 'second sex', endured a double scourge of the partition.

Being a leading feminist in India, Amrita Pritam became a symbol of a woman's quest for her own choices and for strengthening her identity. In a writing career spanning half a century, Amrita's vast literary canon includes essays, poems, novels, biographies, Punjabi folk songs, and numerous translations. Born on August 31, 1919, in a Sikh family in Gujranwala (now in Pakistan), Pritam's family moved to India after the partition. She is one of the few writers equally popular in both countries, even during the most tense times, and several of her works subtly reflect the trauma of one of history's most terrible human tragedies.

The communal riots, mass murders, and barbaric slaughter of innocent citizens during the India-Pakistan partition forever terrified all those who witnessed it. Amrita, naturally sensitive and a keen observer of her surroundings, was no exception. Memories of the partition occupy a large part of her work. As one of the few educated women of her time, she became the voice of half the population that suffered the worst tortures on their bodies and souls. Recalling the year of the partition, Pritam wrote in her autobiography:

“The most gruesome accounts of marauding invaders in all mythologies and chronicles put together will not, I believe, compare with the blood-curdling horrors of this historic year.”

A woman is more than a medium of procreation or a body for men's amusement; her life, her choices, and her identity must stand above any social obligations imposed upon her. Her revolutionary ideas led contemporary critics to brand her a feminist, long before feminism was a recognized term. Her literature was never restricted on grounds of gender, and that is what makes her universal and relevant. Amrita Pritam's legacy for women and future generations is to challenge the status quo through her works, question taboos, and redefine them. In the finest manner, she keeps the cultural fabric intact while exposing its flaws that have seeped in overtime and suffocated the beauty of harmonious coexistence.

Amrita Pritam carved out a distinctive niche for herself in the genre of partition literature. *Pinjar* (1950) was her debut novel, translated into English by the legendary Khushwant Singh; it exposed the hollowness of society and how morality and justice become delusions while the devil takes over all humanity, sparing no one. The fictional tale of Puro was the reality of thousands of women who lost their families, beliefs, honour, and homes. The partition of one of the world's most populous countries adversely affected one-third of its population in one way or another, and countless people were rendered homeless overnight, with the pain of losing their women, children, and belongings.

"Hindustan had become free. Pakistan had become independent, but man was still a slave in both countries—slave of prejudice... slave of religious fanaticism... slave of barbarity and inhumanity." (Saadat Hasan Manto)

Set against the backdrop of the 1947 partition and the subsequent communal riots, *Pinjar* is a tragedy soaked in Indianness that highlights the devastating turns in the life of a modest girl named Puro, whose entire existence is upended by an old family feud and then by the catastrophe of the partition. With Puro's story as the main plot and a few subplots masterfully woven together, it develops into a novel of emotions, social pressures, gender inequality, violence, and human suffering. Amrita Pritam witnessed the partition firsthand, and her experiences find direct expression in *Pinjar*. In addition, *Unke Hastakshar* and *Dr. Dev* also voice her trauma. She once said about the partition:

"I have written a lot about communal quarrels, and now I am tired of it... Man has still not understood Mohammad, Nanak, or Krishna. He is still entangled in petty things and is right where he was before. How will he understand that love and the Lord are one?" (translated, 2001: 20)

Pinjar was adapted in 2003 into a major Indian historical film of the same name, directed by Chandraprakash Dwivedi. Urmila Matondkar delivered a phenomenal performance as the female lead, Puro. In addition to critical acclaim, the film won the National Film Award for Best Feature Film on National Integration and a Special Jury Award for Manoj Bajpayee's astounding portrayal of Rashid.

Puro is a simple Indian girl living with her family. She is engaged to a kind young man, Ramchand, from a respectable family. The story takes a tragic turn when, during a casual walk in the nearby fields with her younger sister Rajjo, Puro is abducted by Rashid, instigated by his elders to settle an old family feud.

Rashid carries out the abduction but cannot bring himself to be cruel to Puro, as he is drawn to her. He is portrayed as a generous and kind character who succumbs to family pressure and commits the crime of abducting an innocent girl. One night, Puro manages to escape and returns to her parents. Her parents, sorrowfully, turn her away, begging her to leave for the sake of her siblings, their reputation, and peace. Puro is left alone—no family, no identity, no home. She contemplates ending her life by jumping into a nearby well, but finds Rashid waiting for her, aware of the outcome.

Like a dead soul, Puro follows Rashid to his house and lives like a caged, helpless being. Rashid is burdened with guilt and shame every time he looks at her, but both realize there is no going back. Amrita Pritam strikingly builds the idea of how the Indian social fabric feels more like chains of orthodox fears that grip people so tightly that family love and affection simply vanish in the face of social pressures. Relocated to a new village, Sakkar, Puro and Rashid lead a mundane rural routine devoid of empathy or connection. Both feel cheated as the life ideals modeled by their families collapse like a house of cards due to Rashid's provoked act of aggression.

Puro, now Hamida, comes into contact with three neighboring women who show her the darker side of society and make her realize she is not alone. The three narrate the barbarity they have endured and continue to bear in a society that has shut its conscience toward them. Taro, a middle-aged married woman, suffers from an unknown ailment and has been disowned by her husband. He has brought another woman into the home and forces Taro to become a prostitute. Her disease and her husband's tortures are unbearable; she wishes for death to free her from this prison of life. To quote Taro:

"What can I tell you? When a girl is given in marriage, God deprives her of her tongue so she may not complain. For two full years, I had to sell my body for a cup of pottage and a few rags. I am like a whore, a prostitute... there is no justice in the world, nor any God. He (her husband) can do what he likes. There is no God to stop him. God's fetters were only on my feet." (pp. 36-38).

Kammo, a motherless young girl, is Puro's next encounter with cruel reality; disowned by her father, she lives at her aunt's house. She is beaten and exploited by her aunt. Kammo sees Hamida as a mother figure, but her aunt prevents her from meeting Hamida because Hamida is Muslim. Hamida (Puro) realizes that the ultimate victims in all clashes are women, "It was a sin to be alive in this world full of evil, thought Hamida. It was a crime to be born a woman."

Puro often saw a mad woman wandering the village. Disowned by her family, homeless, and unable to care for herself, even her woman's body was not spared. Puro learns that the mad beggar woman is pregnant, completely unaware of who raped her. Puro feeds her and, after she dies in childbirth on an abandoned village street, takes care of her infant son. Even Rashid shows empathy toward these women and the baby Puro brings home to raise as her own. But Puro is shocked when the villagers take the baby away on religious grounds.

"It was a double life. Puro became Hamida by day and turned back into Puro by night. In reality, she was neither Hamida nor Puro; she was just a skeleton, without shape or name." (p. 25)

A few months later, Puro's family marries their son Trilok to Ramchand's younger sister, Lajo, while Rajjo is married to Ramchand's cousin. Puro's brother Trilok never comes to terms with life without his sister and, in a way, avenges her fate by setting fire to Rashid's crops and continues searching for Puro. Meanwhile, Rashid marries Puro, and they settle into an uneasy routine; Puro becomes pregnant but suffers a miscarriage, certainly due to the psychological turmoil she is enduring. Rashid and Puro remain in the newly formed Pakistan, while Puro and Ramchand's families move to India amid the horrendous riots. Lajo becomes a victim of the riots; she is abducted, raped, and forced to live in her own father's house, now occupied by one of the rioters.

"No one is more arrogant toward women, more aggressive or scornful, than the man who is anxious about his virility." Simone de Beauvoir

Puro finds Lajo and helps her escape with Rashid's assistance. We see the gradual transition Pritam develops in the characters of Puro and Rashid, who have outgrown their familial and social ties, safeguarding their inner morality and doing their part to set things right. Puro displays indomitable will as she risks her life to search for Lajo on her own, and Rashid helps by reaching out to sources to reunite her with her family.

The novel reaches its climax in the camp where Trilok and Ramchand receive Lajo. Trilok meets Puro for the first time since her disappearance and offers her the chance to return to her family and start afresh. For a moment, Puro is struck by the unfulfilled dream life she was to live with Ramchand, which will forever linger in that corner of her heart where the young innocent girl lived in the shelter of her family. But the moment passes, and recognizing Rashid's honesty and dedication over the years, Puro displays immense wisdom and strength in understanding that Rashid too was a victim of social discrepancies and vain pride. She accepts her fate and tells her brother that, after everything that has happened, she belongs where she is. Ramchand responds with tremendous empathy, seeing that Puro has accepted Rashid.

It can be observed here that, despite portraying men as the dominant and violent gender, Amrita Pritam never overlooks the role of wise and supportive men in uplifting women. The characters of Ramchand, Trilok, and Rashid significantly illustrate how men, as the privileged gender, can play a role in changing the course of society. To quote Simone de Beauvoir:

"...if men were content to love a peer instead of a slave—as indeed some men do who are either without arrogance or an inferiority complex—then women would be far less obsessed with their femininity; they would become more natural and simple and would easily rediscover themselves as women, which after all they are." (Beauvoir 742)

Meanwhile, Rashid slowly tries to merge into the crowd to make it easier for Puro to leave with her family, and burdened with guilt, he quietly slips away despite his unfailing love for her. However, Puro seeks him out, and the two tearfully bid farewell to Lajo, Trilok, and Ramchand. In this way, Puro brings closure to her tragic past life, seeing herself in Lajo who has returned to where she belongs. Puro's character becomes universal—with every girl who has been subjected to circumstantial prejudices and has striven to keep up her will and belief. And the novel ends with Puro's concluding thought:

"Any girl, whether Hindu or Muslim, if welcomed back into her home, take it that Puro's soul too has reached its home." (p. 118)

Thus, Puro becomes synonymous with every innocent girl who was a victim of crimes against women. Amid gender-targeted tortures, Pritam crafts Puro's character as a woman of will and rejuvenating spirit. Her concern was for women's issues as well as Indian womanhood. She provides the finest portrayal of feminine sensibility by observing the inner world and psyche of her women protagonists. Amrita illustrates women sensitive to changing times and situations. She reveals remarkable insight into the nature of a woman's mind and depicts a woman's capability to perform multiple roles in her surroundings despite her secondary status and social pressures. Puro's story blooms within the burdens of womanhood and thrives as a tragic tale of inspiration and compassion.

2. Conclusion

Puro is a distinct combination of compassion and will. She is devastated by how she and many like her are punished for atrocities inflicted upon themselves by others, yet she remains sympathetic toward her parents and seems to forgive them, viewing them as part of the vast majority that surrenders to bias and oppression and fails to muster the courage to stand for what is right. J.M. Coetzee's remark "Pain is truth" summarizes Puro's evolution. The most inspiring aspect of Puro's character is her transition from a mute sufferer to a genuine transformer. Puro's persona is unique as it reveals the inner strength of a woman who, despite personal tragedy and unimaginable suffering, was able to channel her love and cherish womanhood in her own way. Amrita Pritam's excellence lies in her portrayal of women characters who revolt yet never break ties, who are wise yet deeply empathetic, who are modern yet traditional. Her novels offer some of the most enlightened and sophisticated female characters in modern Indian literature. Puro, as a woman, seeks affection, acceptance, and recognition; she gladly devotes herself with infinite honesty to anyone who honors her identity and promotes a fair existence beyond the boundaries of gender.

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