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## Studying Independence and Identity in Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Independence*

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**Abstract:** This paper shall talk about the idea of identity and the position of women through selected texts like Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* (Skeleton) and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Independence* amidst the trauma of partition. It studies, through these fictionalised histories of the times, the trauma of violence faced by women during the Indian independence in 1947 and critiques the grand narrative of freedom by talking about the voiceless women who were victims of rape, abduction, pain, etc. and yet they sacrificed for a better generation ahead and a better world for the future women of a new India and critique issues like patriarchy, communalism and gender violence.

**Key Words:** Violence, trauma, identity, independence.

I am a woman / I want to raise my voice / because communalism affects me / In every communal riot / my sisters are raped, my children are killed . . . / my world is destroyed/ and then / I am left to pick up the pieces . . . / It matters little if I am a Muslim, Hindu or Sikh / and yet I cannot help my sisters. Violence is almost always instigated by men, but its greatest impact is felt by women. In violent conflict, it is women who are raped, women who are widowed . . . in the name of national integrity and unity . . . We women will have no part of this madness, and we will suffer it no more . . . Those who see their manhood in taking up arms, can be the protectors of no one and nothing (Butalia, 128-129).

These lines are referred to by Urvasi Butalia in her pivotal work on Partition- *The Other Side of Silence*. The lines are taken from a pamphlet published by an activist organisation known as Women Against Fundamentalism, titled "Community, State and Gender: Some Reflections on the Partition of India" brings to our attention the very crux of the trauma and identity crisis faced by women during the partition and the much-celebrated independence of India in the year 1947. Hidden within the written historical celebration of the independence of a country, what remained untold were the silent voices of the "others"- the numberless and nameless women who were assaulted, raped abducted before and after the great migration, many of who



lost their names, identity, nation and yet could not be a part of the celebration of independence as they were the cost at which independence was earned.

It is interesting that at the very onset of independence, a significant part of the discourse of nationalism was referring to the nation as a mother figure which shelters and nurtures and therefore it is the very duty of the children of the mother nation to protect her sanctity from 'others' and foreign invasions. However, it is rather sarcastic that in the same nation, women were stripped of their identity as individuals, and they were rather objectified as a symbol of honour for the nation and for their community. A woman's body became a battleground, or rather a victim of wars fought all over the world. Her body space becomes representative of her country/ community/ caste rather than being just her own physical space. As commented by Butalia in her work in *The Other Side of Silence*, that "The idea of Women as property of families, communities, men-underlay the ways in which women's rights were so routinely violated during Partition, under the guise of protection, honour, purity." (Butalia, xxvii). This paper shall talk about the idea of identity and the position of women through selected texts like Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* (Skeleton) and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Independence*. Both these texts are set against the background of the period of partition and independence and attempts to understand if the position and idea of female identity has remained the same from 1950 when Amrita Pritam composed *Pinjar* and the idea of Women as "property-of families, communities, men-underlay the ways in which women's rights were so routinely violated during Partition, under the guise of protection, honour, purity." (Butalia, xxvii).

Partition is often recognized in history as the largest migration in the modern world in which the homeless, helpless families were identified, and they had the mark of trauma and violence etched in their bodies and souls. Munsih Singh writes:

With the increasing incidence of riots, parents of young girls got worried. One step they resorted to was to keep the girls within the protected walls of houses and that too in hiding. [...]The sights of suicide began haunting the minds of the youngsters and parents as well. In Amritsar, curfew was imposed. The ladies and girls were prohibited from leaving the huses. Irrespective of religion, all the girls were passing through psychological trauma.(649)

Amrita Pritam had a more direct experience of this historical period and in her iconic text *Pinjar*, she created a realistic portrayal of not only her protagonist Puro but also the other female characters like her mother, Lajjo, Taro, etc. Each one of them had experienced violence in different situations, and each one of them suffered from the same lack of choice and identity. Puro is a village girl who is soon to be married to her love, Ram Charan. Her world changes when she is suddenly abducted by a Muslim man called Rashid. Rashid abducted her for the sake of his community as they wanted to avenge a past similar incident when a Muslim woman was abducted and raped by the Sahukars(ancestors of Puro). In a moment, Puro lost her name, her identity as a free woman and her family, who disowned her. She was forced to marry her abductor Rashid. She was marked with a new name on her body- Hamida. She physically surrendered herself but in her mind she began to live a dual life. She was Hamida for others in the day time and Puro for herself at night. In her dreams she could meet her family and friends. She lived this dual persona life in order to silently keep her identity as Puro alive. Motherhood is forced upon her once she is married to Rashid. Though she embraced her child, she could not forgive Rashid for a long time and she felt the child was a part of a sin committed on her. Hamida/ Puro is not just a fictional protagonist in the novel. She is the representative of those women who suffer rape, violence and dishonour in the name of caste, society, community, etc. Pritam, through her pen, has represented different female characters, and each one of them has a significant story to tell. Solanke writes:

Pritam sincerely tried to voice the voiceless through her pen. She has painted it on the background of our Partition and the treatment given to women by her fate, family and society. Pritam's *Pinjar*, though it is a novel, is a sort of critical treatise which explores patriarchal psyche to go beyond the artificially created geographical and psychological boundaries by men for women. (43)

Each of the female characters that we find in *Pinjar* seems to live with their fragmented selves. An important character in the novel is the psychologically disturbed woman who lived on the streets and went missing. It was only known later that she was gangraped as she soon started to show signs of pregnancy. This very incident rather shocked the readers who are now able to understand the position of a woman in a society where she is nothing more than a lump of flesh, an object of pleasure, and therefore even a mad woman could not be spared from the violence of rape. Observing the pitiable condition of this woman—who has no sense of self or shame—Puro condemns the act:

What sort of a man could have done this to her? He must be a savage beast to put a mad woman in this condition. She is 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. (47)

Puro takes up the motherless child as the mad woman dies after the mad woman dies while giving birth. Puro knows, she has no identity, she is socially outcasted by her own family for no fault of hers. She could perhaps see herself in this orphan newborn who has no caste or communal identity. He has no family nor anyone to belong to. Therefore, it was easier for Puro to accept him than to accept Rashid. In her infinite loneliness and suffering, she could find company in the newborn. Her infinite suffering can be put to words by borrowing from Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner":

Alone, alone, all, all alone,  
Alone on a wide wide sea!  
And never a saint took pity on  
My soul in agony (Part IV, lines 9-12).

A significant section of the novella is dedicated to the description of the limitless violence and trauma faced by women of both the Hindu and the Muslim community in the hands of the men of their anti-community. The descriptions are a shocking and terrifying glimpse of the reality of partition. The author describes through the very experiences of Puro/Hamida:

Hamida's ears burned with rage when she heard of the abduction of Hindu girls by Muslims and of Muslim girls by Hindus. Some had been forced into marriage, some murdered, some stripped and paraded naked in the streets.

Thus passed August 15 of the year 1947. (53)

On another occasion, Pritam brings forth a girl who has escaped from an army camp and is rescued by Puro. She described her experiences to her saviour:

The camp was guarded by Pakistani soldiers. After sunset, bands of hooligans 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. (35)



The tragedy of the text lies in the fact that, though at the very end of the novel Puro is given a choice of going back to India with her birth name and identity, she refuses to leave Rashid. She is a representative of the numberless voiceless women who could never go back to their country. The psychological partition affected them, and Puro couldn't accept another displacement once she had been able to make a home of her own. Her final choice, therefore, cannot be called an independent choice. It is rather her only position from which she cannot bear any further displacement.

*Pinjar* is as much about the trauma of partition as but also about the solidarity that Puro feels with the other women she comes across. She feels sisterhood in their suffering and helplessness. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni writes *Independence* almost 72 years after *Pinjar*. The crux of the novel is also about the trauma of partition, the communal violence of the direct-action day and the course that the lives of three sisters- Deepa, Jamini and Priya take right after independence. It is to be remembered that the title used here is not only literal but also metaphorical. The world of Puro is much different from the world of Priya. The sisters are freer to make their choices and decide the course of their lives than to be a helpless victim in a patriarchal social structure. Their father had faced a violent death on the direct action day, falling prey to communal riots. Their lives took a dismal turn financially following a series of struggles and sacrifices. Each woman fought her own battle and bore her battle scar gracefully.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel "Independence" covered pre-independence, independence, and the post-independence era revolving around the time period from 1946 to 1954 wherein she talks about communal violence and riots and the frightfully narrow gap between the past and present which makes it impossible to escape or ignore the emotional intensity of the era, which is characterized by weeping widows, burning towns, widespread carnage, and the loss of many lives, among the sombre atmosphere and patriotic verses. Additionally, there is a hint of an inter-religious romance that eventually transforms into animosity (Vagmita, 2023).

The premise of the novel gives almost equal space in the development of the characters of all the three sisters and also the ones closely associated with them. Of the three sisters, we find Priya to be a new-age woman who wishes to be a doctor and considers Sarojini Naidu as her ideal. Her dream comes true when she can meet Smt. Sarojini Naidu and she blesses and encourages Priya:



You (Priya) are a daughter of independence, the country's future. Women like you are the ones for whom we fought and died—the ones who will transform India. You must carry the flag forward. You may fall from time to time. We all did; what is important is to get up again. (Divakaruni 278)

These are the very words which become the anchor of Priya's life. She faces rejection as the medical college refuses to fairly allow her because she is a woman. She has to sacrifice her love, Amit, to pursue her dream of being a doctor, and a new struggle begins as Amit marries her own sister, Jamini, after calling off his engagement with her. She gives priority to her ambition and dream of becoming a doctor against all odds, she travels to America alone to complete her studies.

Betty Friedan, in her pivotal work "The Feminine Mystique" (1963), has wonderfully discussed her feminine ideology that argues against the traditional role of a homely woman, negating her rights like ambition, career, independence, opinion, etc. Divakaruni seems to have used Friedan's concept of feminist independence and applied the same in her novel *Independence*. Divakaruni critiques the males in the novel and the socio-cultural parameters and attempts to break the borders. Deepa, the eldest of the three sisters, marries a Muslim man, Raza and marries him against her community. She even eloped with him as her association with Raza was considered to be unacceptable by her family. She tried to fit in with his customs, like wearing a burqa, working for the Muslim League. She learnt the traditional Islamic customs, even visited the Mosque, and hid her real identity completely. She even left her country and went to Dhaka with Raza. Her real struggle started when Raza died in an accident, and Deepa faces constant ill treatment from the party members of Raza. A friend of Raza even attempted to force her into marriage.

The story of Deepa's transformation from a beloved daughter to a secret lover, then a hidden Muslim woman, and finally a widow facing unbearable hardships showcases the struggles faced by women in a patriarchal society. It also highlights the cruel impact of religious divisions on personal relationships and lives. (Bharadwaj and Kaur 226)

Jamini, the second daughter of Nabakumar, faced the odds of life from her very childhood. She is neither as intelligent as Priya nor she is beautiful as Deepa. She has a mild disability as she walks with a limp. Her physical imperfection became her identity. With a financial crisis in the family and no commendable

attributes, it rather seemed unlikely that she would ever get married. After her father's death, she became a constant companion to her mother. The partition of the nation had a personal, horrific impact on the life and psyche of Jamini. As the riot broke out,

Villages were attacked, houses were burned down, and women became targets of unspeakable violence. Jamini's village fell victim to a mob attack, resulting in the destruction of her home and injuries to herself and her mother. She narrowly escaped a rape attempt and was burnt alive. The flames of partition left people blind to the value of women and their physical purity. (226)

Her marriage to Amit began as a compromise, as Priya's engagement and her relationship with Amit fell apart, but she was well aware that it was her best survival strategy to live respectfully with her mother. Through *Independence*, Divakaruni criticizes the patriarchal move in society. She observed: "When men go off to be heroes, do they even realise what that does to the women they leave behind?". (Cited in Gunawat and Kapoor pg 44)

Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to comment on the theme of Independence in the novel. Bharadwaj and Kaur comments:

Banerjee's "Independence" serves as a testament to the resilience and strength of individuals who navigate the complexities of cultural conflicts and immigration. By presenting the story from a woman's perspective, the novel invites readers to embark on a transformative journey that challenges preconceived notions, fosters empathy, and ultimately celebrates the indomitable spirit of those who dare to seek independence amidst adversity. Through its powerful narrative and thought-provoking themes, "Independence" (227)

*Pinjar* and *Independence* both can be called fictionalised history, which speaks of the voiceless section of society who had no role to play in the grand narrative of independence. They were rather objectified and were victims of violence and trauma that followed partition. Their silences surfaced more powerfully than the voice of patriarchy. Issues like identity and socio-political position of gender are critically and deeply dealt with in both novels. The unspoken trauma faced by women during partition has travelled a long history. Yet the undaunted spirit has remained untainted as Divakaruni quotes the universal words of Tagore:

Jodi tor dak shune keu na aashe,tobe ekla cholo re.



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Ekla cholo, ekla cholo, ekla cholo, ekla cholo re.[...]

Walk alone, walk, walk alone. (149)

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