



## Tortured Voices of the Female Protagonists in Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man (Cracking India)*: A Comparative Study

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### Abstract

The tragedy of partition continues to this day to be a tragic turning point in the history of the country as well as in the collective consciousness of its residents. Millions of people were murdered. Unprecedented acts of brutal violence that included deaths, looting, and arson were unleashed upon the "other" religious group. Women were the primary victims of this violence; millions of them were kidnapped, raped, and mutilated. This paper tries to portray the non-canonical vision of the partition through the unheard plight of the women present in the two literary works. As Urvashi Butalia states, "there were so many layers of silence encoded into these histories". In the male-dominated narratives of nation, community, religion, and partition, women lost their right to think and breathe. Their abduction was stigmatized to 'honor' and 'impurity'.

**Keywords:** Partition, Amrita Pritam, Bapsi Sidhwa, Feminism, Abduction, Violence, Trauma, Memory, Identity, Patriarchy, Indian Diaspora.

The tragedy of partition continues to this day to be a dismal turning point in the history of the country as well as in the cultural memory of its people. Millions of people were murdered. Unprecedented acts of brutal violence that included deaths, looting, and arson were unleashed upon the "other" population. Women were the principal victims of this violence; millions of them were kidnapped, raped, and mutilated. While the official history's meta-narrative revels in the jubilation of a new nation's birth, it ignores the horrific suffering of millions of people, especially the women who

are most severely affected by violence, loss, and displacement. In actuality, the history of division was one of severe physical and psychological abuse of women. But darkness surrounded it. There were so many levels of silence embedded into these narratives, as Urvashi Butalia notes. In the male-dominated ideologies of nation, community, religion, and partition, women lost their ability to be living, feeling, thinking, and self-identifying individuals. Part of the horrific brutality against women, both official and non-sanctioned, including rape, abduction, and the physical and

emotional suffering they endured, is documented in the partition literature on both ends of the border. The voice of the female novelist, the post-colonial theorist, highlights the breakages in neat identifications, highlights the silences, and the gaps while simultaneously subverting these polarising notions through the similarity of suffering that the women acknowledge as communal and religious identities hardened and tried to overwrite the individuality of women.

On the eve of the Indian subcontinent's independence from British rule, India was divided into two different states, namely India and Pakistan, based on religion (1947). This event is remembered as a catastrophic one that drastically altered the lives of countless individuals. As the mainstream viewpoint of the year 1947, the country celebrates its independence from the clutches of the British rule but the horror of the partition due to the communal hatred cannot be foreseen. 14 August 2022 was declared as the Partition Horrors Remembrance Day to remark the trauma of the division. Idea of the nation was attached to the abduction of women from different communities. Pritam's *Pinjar* and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* deals with the violence against the women of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Parsee community.

Pritam through the image of Pooro tries to narrate the voices of tortured women who were victims of communal hatred and anger. In *Pinjar*, Pooro's identity as Hamida is dominated by both her greater Hindu identity and the 'honour' of her family, which was violated by her kidnapping as an act of retaliation. The female body serves as the arena for contests over honour and retaliation. Additionally, Sidhwa tries to showcase the gruesome reality of anger and revenge thrown onto women's bodies through the character of Ayah. She becomes a scapegoat in the name of communal revenge, and she is dehumanized to the identity of the nation. As Urvashi Butalia points out, "women as a person did not count" (191).

This research project will follow the feminist point of view to analyze the trajectory faced by the female characters in the given literary works and the effect of the violence to their memory and loss of identity. It will try to focus on their battle with self and the patriarchal society to make their voices heard and regain their self. The paper tries to recognize the idea of diversity as a unit of 'unity' and to acknowledge the differentiation of perspective concerning each woman's narrative.

Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Ice Candy Man* (1988) and Amrita Pritam's novella *Pinjar/The Skeleton* are two writings that depict the gendered perspective of partition on each side of the border (1987). Indian author Amrita Pritam originally wrote in Punjabi, and Khushwant Singh translated her works into English. Both texts interact with the kidnapping of women during the partition, their attempts to escape victimhood and become agents who approach out to other women, and how their understanding of their bodies as the container of community honour, retaliation, and suffering subverts and transcends religious and social conventions. A number of women in both texts—outside of the primary characters—experience awful and catastrophic violence. The train that Bapsi Sidhwa and Amrita Pritam take in *Ice Candy Man* from Gurdaspur comes with everyone dead, no ladies, and gunny bags filled with women's breasts. The tale is interspersed with images of men having affairs with young and old women, naked ladies dangling from ceiling fans, and men burning fire to their hair while jeering. Women were degraded to simply physical beings. The wider identities of community, religion, and nation replaced the identities of women in the past. In both books, women find themselves at the intersection of small- and big-scale factors, with family, class, community, and nation all having an impact on who they are. As a Hindu maid in the home of a wealthy Parsi family, the ayah's identity in *Ice Candy Man* is inscribed not just in terms of social class and religion but also of the nation, as her

body becomes the locus of the contested country. It's noteworthy that she only ever goes by the name Shanta throughout the book. Her figure becomes into the object of love for Hindu, Muslim, and even British men, making her a symbol of the country that is coveted by all communities. Her former admirer, the Ice-candy-man, commands a mob to kidnap, rape, and prostitute the Ayah, turning her body into a target for contestation. This forces him to carry out an orgy of hatred and retribution against her. The drama of retaliation, hatred, and isolation is played out on her body, which is now desecrated because she is a Hindu. Menon and Bhasin note that in the traditional transposition, the motherland's body was transformed into that of the victimised foreigner. The mob:

Drag[s]her by her arms stretched taut, and her bare feet—that want to move backwards—are forced forward instead.... Her violet sari slips off her shoulder, and her breasts strain at her sari-blouse.... a sleeve tears...The men drag her in grotesque strides to the cart... Four men stand pressed against her" (183)

The body of the Ayah, which has been devastated and brutalised becomes the displaced symbol for a nation that has been brutalised and wrecked for communicating a story that would otherwise be too horrific to be shared as Hai mentioned. In *Pinjar*, Pooro/identity Hamida's is dominated by both her greater Hindu identity and the 'honour' of her family, which was violated by her kidnapping as an act of retaliation. The female body turns becomes the arena for contests over honour and retaliation. Female sexuality is a symbol of "manhood," and it must be avenged when it is violated (43). To punish the "dishonour" of his family caused by Pooro's ancestors who had kidnapped his aunt due to their failure to repay a loan, Rashida, a Muslim, kidnaps Pooro, "What was I to blame if my uncle kidnapped your aunt, asked Pooro?"

asserts that her personal identity comes first, above and above the greater identities of her family, community, and country. In a manner, the family's desire for protection as well as Pooro's mother's rejection to take her back are what lead to this refusal. In fact, partition highlights the "dispensability of women," as many women, like Pooro, are tacitly traded for the security and protection of their families. The "apparent fixity of distinguishing elements of identity... was thrown into chaos and confusion by partition and the unparalleled awful violence" (Menon21). Rashid's kidnapping of Pooro causes her Hindu identity to be in chaos. The removal of Pooro's "religion," the defining characteristic of a fixed identity, causes her to lose both her feeling of self and her sense of "belonging-ness" to the group.

Pooro returns knowing that she has been shunned by the society she was born into. This is the first step in the dehumanisation of Pooro, which is furthered by highlighting the similarities between her and a dumb animal that may be fastened to any peg or a stone "statue" that is incapable of responding to the living—she is as one deceased. The Muslim identity is actually imprinted on Pooro's body, with the name "Hamida" that Rashid has inked on her arm "in dark green letters," overwriting the identity and sense of self that she is born with (22). She thereby receives a brand-new identity that is prescribed by the religious community once more. She makes an effort to reject the forced identity and stubbornly holds onto the one she chose. In fact, the stress on the "purity" of the Hindu woman's body, according to Kamlabehn Patel, a social activist working with the recovery of women, was not only imposed by the community from above but also profoundly ingrained in the mentality of the women themselves. Because Hindu women fully internalise this tradition of "purity," the women felt "sullied," "stigmatised," and "impure." But even while she feeds the baby, she is still torn by conflicting feelings. In this bizarre universe, the child was truly hers, so a part of

her yearns to hold the child up to her and sob uncontrollably. Pooro continues to be a living being and is only a skeleton. In actuality, during the division, the skeleton becomes overwhelmingly a symbol of the woman, stripped of all other identities except from the one imprinted on her by the patriarchal ideologies of religion, state, and partition.

Butalia claims that "partition was perceived as a violation of its body" and that "country was pictured in feminine terms, as the mother" (Butalia 186). Given that the construction of a Muslim homeland caused "a loss of a portion of itself," the identification of woman as nation turned the Restoration of Women into a symbolic act of regaining the motherland. The recovery of the Ayah is complicated in *Ice Candy Man*, though. Because the society in Pakistan intervened and supported the rehabilitation of women, Lenny's mother and aunt are able to free kidnapped women and return them to their families or recovery camps. They act as gendered subjects in an effort to reach out to families, assisting them in crossing the border to their new country and rescuing kidnapped women. In reality, the young narrator has many restless nights because she finds it difficult to understand why her mother would save fuel and gasoline and load them into the trunk of her vehicle. In order to save the "Ayah, a Hindu servant lady who was both a sexual and political victim of the animosities between Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu males," both Lenny's mother and godmother – upper class Parsee women from the narrator's family – cross class and ethnic boundaries (Hai, 390). Their impartiality and class connections enable Shanta's former admirer to save her from being prostituted at the Hira Mandi. Despite Shanta's status as a maid, the Godmother, conscious of the Hindu woman's "purity," implores her to continue working for him because "worse things are forgiven." Life marches on, as daily activities bury the remnants of our pasts. That's how life is. What if your family refuses to accept you back? (262). In

contrast to Pooro, *Ice Candy Man*, from Ayah Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man*, and The Skeleton, from Amrita Pritam, chooses to return to India despite his sorrow and his pledge to take care of her. Sidhwa's identification as a Parsee, who belongs to a "neutral" group, is compromised by his association with the newly independent Pakistan.

The manner in which the women rescue Ayah is only an act of solidarity because the new nation has no place for the victim of abuse and the ethnic "other" that Ayah has become. Forced unions, and the children born into them, were not accepted by the law, the community, or the families; instead, they were described as "abducted persons" themselves and were considered to be "illegitimate." The option to stay behind or bring "illegitimate children" with them was not granted to recovered women. *The Literary Critique: A Meta Language Initiatives Law*, tradition, or community, which required to set strict lines of identification of the purity of blood, did not acknowledge the children of kidnapped women. The narrative voices of the post colonial lady novelists on both sides of the border disrupt the exultations of the dawn of independence and the birth of a new nation in the meta-narratives of history. By placing the narrator's perspective in the form of a female kid from a marginalised group, Sidhwa accomplishes this in the narrative choice itself. In doing so, she "challenges the prominence and exclusivity of Pakistani and Indian male supremacist master narratives" (Hai 389). She also makes fun of Gandhi with his remarks about enemas and congested bowels, comparing him to Hari the gardener except that no one could play around with his dhoti. This is one example of how she utilises humour to disrupt nationalist beliefs. Similarly, Jinnah, the astute attorney, cannot defeat Nehru, the despicable politician who seemed the other way. Pritam also captures her insignificant dissenting voice:

"Hamida's ears burnt with rage when she heard of 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."

Both of the texts, *Ice Candy Man* and *Pinjar/The Skeleton*, portray women as the victims of terrible and unusual acts of violence, but they also show them as subjects who challenge the boundaries and divisions that violate them and kill millions of people in the name of religion, community, and nation. They also assume the responsibility of agency to save others and, more importantly, even subvert these divisions through their deeds. Even though the Parsee ladies, like Sidhwa, identify with their new country of Pakistan, they act as agents in locating and recovering the kidnapped Ayah from prostitution where her former admirer, the *Ice Candy Man*, has placed her; Pooro also acts as an agent in rescuing abducted women. She raises questions about the very religious tensions that have been sparked by adopting a Hindu woman's child. In Dutta's words, "survivors tales cannot be limited to 'violence' alone but contain various narratives storylines and meanings," the experience of Pooro/Hamida highlights this (21). In contrast to those who stayed firmly ensconced in patriarchal communitarian solidarities, Amrita Pritam and Pooro identify with a variety of alternative strands and spaces in Punjab's colourful culture and history (Dutta, 21). Despite the fact that women are often merely seen as extensions of their communities or religions in dominant patriarchal philosophies, women are depicted in both texts as both victims of horrifying violence and as individuals who, through empathy, not only recognise and lessen the suffering of other women, but also subvert the very divisions that oppress them and kill millions.

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