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EXPOSAL OF FALSE RELIGIOUS DOGMATIC IN *PINJAR* : A CRITIQUE

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Abstract:

Pinjar foreground the falsity of the religious dogmatic attitude towards women in Indian society; which poses the strict rules on the weaker sex without considering them as human beings rather they are considered as a property, or a plaything or just mere an object without feelings and dignity! The present paper tries to expose religion as a force that constrains women in the name of —honor and chastity through the close reading of ‘Pinjar’.

Keywords: *Partition, Religion, Dogmatic, Patriarchy, Trauma, etc.*

*Today I implore Waris Shah, to speak from his grave;
And turn over a page of the book of love;
When a daughter of the fabled Punjab wept, he gave tongue to her silent grief;
Today a millions daughters weep, but where is Waris Shah to give voice to their woes?*

Amrita Pritam has caught the gist of the ordeal and suffering of partition in this famous poem; the pain of abduction and gendered violence. Her well known novel ‘*Pinjar*’ (1950) is an exact picture of the violence against women during and after the partition of India in 1947. The title of the novel *Pinjar* indicates helplessness of the woman who is restrained in the cage of marriage and the chaos and mayhem during the partition period which is mainly called as ‘August Anarchy’, and its aftermath. It was translated into English by Khushwant Singh as *The Skeleton* and into French by Denis Matringe. The cinematic adaptation of the novel was released in 2003 which has won the National Award in the best film category conferred by the Indian Government. It poignantly pictures a very long and painful saga of the suffering of the women during this period.

Amrita Pritam is a well known author and poetess in India; the first woman to win the Sahitya Academy Award. Her writing mainly brings forth the realistic themes dealing with the relationships amongst human beings and deliberates on the woman issues with lucid narration. The event of Partition between India and Pakistan in 1947 cast a gloomy shadow over the bliss that accompanied Indian independence from the clutches of the British dominion. The traumatic event had catastrophic repercussions for Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs resulting in bloodshed and mayhem, the legacy of which survives till date in the psyche of the people of both the nations. The Pakistani as well as Indian partition literature depicts the horror of the event and more importantly, document the psychological as well as physical trauma of the people who went through it.

Amrita Pritam narrates the gendered experience of the traumatic Partition in 1947 and depicts how religion becomes a powerful source that constrains women in the name of honor and chastity. *Pinjar* is mainly the story depicting the dilemma of the abducted women by the men of rival religious

affiliation in order to quench the thirst of revenge; a scathing critique of the society at large which considers the woman as a property to be usurped and used according to its wish and will. Menon and Bhasin rightly point out that,

[the] material, symbolic and political significance of the abduction of women was not lost ...on the women themselves ...their communities or on ... governments. As a retaliatory measure, it was simultaneously an assertion of identity and humiliation of the rival community through the appropriation of its women (Menon, 3).

Pinjar (The Skeleton) in Indian literary canon is considered as a metaphor of violence against women highlighting the women's suffering, exploitation and sacrifices because of their dislocation and abduction during partition. Amrita Pritam has tried to offer a realistic portraiture of the agonizing suffering, victimization, trapped anguish and traumas of the victims of the August Anarchy. She has underlined the degradation of human values through the exploitation and violence against women during those turbulent days. Pritam critically explores the ways in which the destiny of its protagonist Puro eventually becomes the fate of thousands of women at the time of partition. Puro's life was relived by countless women during the partition and the post-partition period.

Puro is abducted by Rashid, a Muslim boy who is forced for it to avenge for the similar act committed by Puro's uncle. Thus Amrita shows how men take revenge on each other by victimizing women, a phenomenon as common in peace time as in times of war or riots. Though Rashida does not rape Puro, when she manages to escape and go home, she is told that there is now no place for her there. Her parents do not accept her because they think she is no more chaste and pure, "You have lost your faith and birthright. If we dare to help you, we will be cut down and finished without a trace of blood left behind to tell our faith" (*PIN*, 23).

Her father denies granting her earlier place saying how he will keep her and nobody will marry her as she has lost her status and identity. Rejection is another form of violence she goes through and later many women see this hideous face of the society.

Puro comes back to face another blow as her rejection was a bigger pain than her abduction. She was violated twice, first by her abductor who violates her physically and then her own people emotionally violate her by rejecting and eliminating her from the family. "...she had believed she was returning to life; she had wanted to live again, to be with her father and mother. She had come with full of hope. Now she had no hope, nor any fear..." (*PIN*, 16).

She was uprooted another time after rejection. Her abduction changes and alters her identity. After several years, partition brings these losses back in the lives of women which cannot be compensated. The old identity was wiped after abduction and altered in that era of violent transition and transformation. Puro becomes the victim of oppressive patriarchal institution. This attitude of her parents shocks her, as she has not been touched by her abductor, and she has not even touched the water in his home and still she is rejected by her parents who have nourished and nurtured her. So she has to agree to change her religion and marry Rashid. Her name is changed to Hamida. Pritam writes, "In reality she was neither the one nor the other. She was just a skeleton without a shape or a name" (*PIN*, 22).

Her return is rejected by her parents and goes back to Rashid: "When she had come this way earlier, she believed she was returning to life..., she had come full of hope. Now she had no hope, or any fear too" (*PIN*, 23).

However, Puro's mother wants one more son, a brother for her daughters but rejects abducted Puro. During this turmoil, Puro comes in contact with three females living a wretched life who are manifestation of the each episode of Puro's tormenting life. All the three female characters are treated merely as a body, not as humans. Tara is suffering with some unknown disease and is fed up of her own life. Her husband has brought another woman to live with and forces Tara to become a prostitute. Her illness and her husband's attitude towards her are unbearable. She wants death to free her from the cage of life. She says to Puro:

What can I tell you? When a girl is given away in marriage, God deprives her of her tongue, so that she may not complain... For full two years, I have had to sell my body for a mess of pottage and a few

rag. 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 meant only for my feet" (*PIN*, 36-38).

Women are considered as the upholders of a culture's respectability that rests on their status as chaste, undefiled beings, the violation of women's bodies becomes the corruption of the community itself. A young girl is abandoned by her father and lives neglected and overworked in the house of relatives; Kammo is a motherless young girl who is ill treated by her aunt. She sees her mother in Hamida, but her aunt bans their meeting. When the religious frenzy breaks out, Hamida 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" (*PIN*, 65).

Her sister-in-law, Lajo mirrors the first painful phase of Puro's life when she was kidnapped in her abductor's house. Later, she persuades her husband to help her rescue her brother's wife Lajo and send her back to India. An abducted girl whom she found in the crops and helps her to reach to the refugee camp reflects the abduction of Puro. She identifies herself with these women. Through the medium of these characters, Amrita Pritam attempts to unveil the facets of women's trauma which are outcome of the societies false socio-religious and cultural dogmatic. Thus the women were oppressed by the double yoke of patriarchy and aftermath of colonialism.

Once she accompanies an old woman for cure of her weak eyesight to Rattoval, Ramchand's village. The two come across each other, they recognize each other, but none of the two utter a word. Ramchand is also a victim of the falsity of the social dogmatic about the chastity, purity and dignity of the woman, that he lacks the courage even to recognize her, lest about accepting Puro as a wife when she was first abducted by Rashid. Ramchand, Puro's father and Puro's brother become the symbols of helplessness in front of the orthodox conventional thinking, false religious dogmatic.

After the partition takes place, a Hindu refugee group takes a night halt outside their village. Ramchand and his family are among them too. Hamida goes to meet him. Ramchand tells her that his sister Laajo, who is now also her brother's wife, has been abducted by Muslims. He requests Puro to save his sister, Laajo. Puro and Hamid are able to locate her. Parents were requested and pleaded to accept their abducted daughters back. The religion had started to become accommodating and flex the rigid clutches of orthodoxy. She is put in a situation similar to that of Puro. Under Puro's shelter she fears returning to the family that had once rejected abducted Puro's comeback. She says, "So far our families have been mourning loss of one, now they can grieve the death of two. Puro, I have nowhere to go. What face will I show to anyone?" (*PIN*, 79)

Puro compares the two times: when she was abducted and her return was rejected by her parents and 1948, when families and community came searching for their females. She was pure and was yet considered unclean at that time. "When it happened to her, religion had become an insurmountable obstacle; neither her parents nor her in laws to be, had been willing to accept her. And now the same religion had become so accommodating?" (*PIN*, 112)

Chandraprakash Dwivedi, the director of the award winning film "*Pinjar*", in his interview to Sukanya Verma he says: "What I found special about the novel was its depiction of the crumbling structure of society, people's beliefs, faith, values of life and principles" (2003: n.pag).

The treatment of women in the Indian culture, the dogmatic beliefs and the rigid customs and traditions that existed at that time are reflected in the novel. The strange custom of having "exchanged" marriage, that is, a girl would be married to a family only in exchange of another daughter from this family, as *Puro* was married to *Ramchand* only as *Trilok* agreed to marry *Ramchand's* sister, *Lajo*. The status of women had been as if they were items of trade. And then the treatment of abducted girls, like *Puro* whose purity was questioned and they were not accepted by their own families as they were considered 'impure' and if people came to know of what had happened to them, it would bring shame and dishonor to their family. So, instead of sympathizing with them for the atrocities that had been done unto them, they were forced to find refuge elsewhere. This meant that they would resort to staying with their captors and had to suffer for the rest of their life. This novel depicts the violence on various levels; on religious, social and most prominently on biological level through different women characters.

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To Cite the Article: Hiremath, Rudramma, S., "Exposal of false religious dogmatic in Pinjar: A Critique". *Literary Cognizance*, I-3 (Dec., 2015): 45-48. Web.