



## **'Pinjar' - The Caged Skeleton: Shame, Silence, and Survival**

Debanjana Banerjee

Guest Lecturer

Department of English

Narasinha Dutt College

Howrah, West Bengal, India.

Email: [debanjanabanerjee2001@gmail.com](mailto:debanjanabanerjee2001@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

This paper examines Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* as an unrefined critique of violence and trauma inflicted on women during the Partition of India. The term 'Pinjar' translates to both "skeleton" and "cage", and serves as a symbol of the emotional void and societal entrapment women experienced. Through the characters of Pooro, Lajo, and the Sakkar madwoman, the novel uncovers the trauma of abduction and lost identities. Honour, shame, and silence intertwined, exacerbate and weaponise women, casting them as the targets of communal retribution, and uprooting them both physically and psychologically. Pooro's new, imposed identity as Hamida erases her previous self, yet she still manages to find agency. Rashid, at the core of the story, is not a black-and-white character; he is part of that which he condemns, torn between conflicting loyalties and the pull of tradition. From an ecofeminist standpoint, we see how violence against women and nature comes from the same place: male pride, revenge, and self-interest. If Pooro being abducted by Rashid to take revenge for their previous family conflicts is unacceptable, Pooro's brother, Trilok, setting Rashid's crops on fire to take revenge for his sister's abduction is equally wrong. Both women and nature are being objectified here as mere weapons to settle scores and satisfy the male ego. In the end, *Pinjar* presents to us how patriarchy and communalism reinforce each other, which in turn marks women as the primary victims -- yet it does not totally break their spirit or report their small yet real acts of resistance.

**Keywords:** Gendered violence, Psychological trauma, Partition violence, Loss of Identity, Ecofeminism.



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## Introduction

Splitting India in 1947 brought pain that few could forget. Wounds stayed open, bleeding long after the borders were drawn. Apart from dividing countries, it also affected personal relationships and identity. Under such circumstances, the world becomes chaotic and quiet, allowing literature to work as an outlet for everything unsaid. This paper provides a close reading of one of Amrita Pritam's most significant works, *Pinjar*. It focuses on describing the inhumane effects of partition, particularly on women, which can be broadly associated with emptiness and confusion.

Unlike most stories, *Pinjar* drops the readers into disorder, where nothing holds steady, and everything seems strange. The name itself, *Pinjar*, happens to mean skeleton or cage, quietly shaping how one sees what unfolds inside its pages. First, it describes a state when one experiences inner emptiness and feels hollowed out or boxed in. Secondly, identity becomes a rather fluid entity here. Where other partition literature like Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, and Saadat Hasan Manto's *Toba Tek Singh* provide dark images of the partition violence, like forceful migration and communal violence, Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* focuses mainly on the sufferings of women due to the partition.

*Pinjar* portrays the blurring of borders between the private and public spheres as well as between individual stories and the tragedy of the entire nation. However, *Pinjar* is more than a mere historical narrative. It does not speak of a lone sufferer but the entire women's race who were the victims of the partition violence. The plot is deeply rooted in true historical events. *Pinjar* unfolds less as a plot and more through moments unmoored. How easily identity slips when home becomes something unfamiliar and lost. Not tragedy driving it - just absence, widening slowly. A self, once displaced, does not snap back. Instead, it learns new edges. The ground beneath shifts without warning. Then comes the hush where old names mean nothing. This hollowing out? That too has weight.

Pooro, the protagonist, gradually starts to suffer from Trauma Bonding (Stockholm Syndrome). After her abduction, she was initially locked up in a small house in the isolated fields outside her village, Chatto. As her parents refused to accept her back due to the shame that the abduction carried with it, she was left with no other option but to marry and stay with Rashid forever. The isolated victim's survival instinct compelled her to form an emotional attachment to her abuser. Pooro adapted this coping mechanism and eventually accepted her fate and new life.

Survival sits at the heart of *Pinjar*, though it arrives quietly, through sorrow rather than speeches. The plot moves like memory - uneven, haunted. When identity crumbles, what actually remains? A person can lose home, name, even voice - and still breathe. That breathing becomes its own kind of question. Meaning clings to small acts, not grand choices. Pain shapes truth more than triumph does. What stays after loss? Not courage exactly. Maybe survival instinct.

### ***Pinjar* – Hollow like a Skeleton, Confined like a Cage**

The word 'Pinjar' itself encapsulates the whole meaning of the novel. The women in this work survived Partition, having nothing left within themselves. Pooro is the main character, but the fate that awaits her is far from easy. She was kidnapped by Rashid and had to change herself into a new person known only as 'Hamida'. However, the poor woman was not simply trapped in this way: Pooro tried and tried to escape, but the way back was always barred to her. Should she escape to some distant place, the shame would still follow, blocking any chance at a normal life. So Pooro remained by Rashid's side - no affection there, only necessity holding her close.

In the case of Lajo, Pooro's sister-in-law, the caged feeling appears somewhat differently. She was abducted from the crowd of Hindus moving to India during the Partition riots. Her abduction was not out of revenge. It was merely to enjoy the female body. Out of her normal, happy life, she was suddenly pulled into the life of exploitation, confinement, and shame. Pooro and Rashid somehow managed to drag her out later. She walked home again. Nevertheless, chains stayed - no ropes, just the weight of the trauma. She was denied her previous life, maybe by herself. Shame moved with her, step for step. And there is the madwoman, wandering around in Sakkar, nameless. All she has lost includes herself, as well. She is the extreme version of all three—the lowest point—having lost even her sense of self. And yet, she too is confined by what has been done to her, unable to get out of her misery.

These three women, Pooro, Lajo, and the madwoman, reflect the true meaning of 'Pinjar'. They are living beings who have been reduced to surviving within the confines of custom, memory, and misery.

### **Women as the Primary Sufferers**

From the outset, *Pinjar* plunges the readers right into the horrors of Partition. For example, when Rashid abducts Pooro, the act is not just a tragedy but an indicator of how women's bodies become battlegrounds where one community tries to get its revenge on another. However, the

abduction is not just an individual incident but part of a much larger horror that many suffered through, and 'honour' became the pretext for all that evil. There is also Pooro's loss of identity after her abduction; renamed Hamida, she is denied a voice both literally and metaphorically since she cannot speak up anymore about what has happened to her. She loses even her own consciousness, unable to identify herself anymore – a fate of so many other women who disappear into oblivion.

Quiet moments often carry the deepest weight. She walks away, then returns, hoping things might be different now. This time, though, it is not some unknown face that shuts the door - her own blood does. The house stays closed. Her kin become strangers. It seems that her family prefers to value their reputation rather than love and compassion. And, like Pooro, Lajo also falls victim to abduction, although hers happened during the riots, and then she was returned home later. Her body bears visible marks of what happened to her, but she is never again able to re-assimilate into society mentally. 'Honour' in this culture is rather arbitrary: one woman is accepted into society while another is ostracised.

However, this novel is not all about being a victim. Pooro does a remarkable thing for Lajo and helps her get away from her abductor, letting compassion triumph over embarrassment despite the fact that there could have been no judgment from anyone on her part. Even though Pritam's female characters suffer greatly, they do fight back, although the way they try to overcome their difficulties is not as drastic. People have created shame and thrown it upon the shoulders of those who have already suffered. Pooro has not committed any crime; nevertheless, she suffers from others' judgments and opinions. Shame becomes a terrible creature and prevails over blood ties. This is what causes the collapse of all relationships: Pooro becomes estranged from her family, her fiancé, and anyone she had once trusted. There are some glimpses of humanity—in Rashid's bizarre but caring treatment of her—but generally, compassion is overwhelmed by fear.

The novel makes it clear that Partition was not just about uprooted bodies or lost homes for women; it was also about being deprived of everything else—family, dignity, self-respect, even the freedom to choose one's suffering. Women were affected most not because violence was directed at them individually, but because they became prizes in sickening games of cruelty. Although other partition literature like Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Saadat Hasan Manto's *Khol Do (Open It)*, and Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* presents the gendered violence as a part of the partition horror, Pritam's *Pinjar* provides a deeper dive into the

psychological realm of the characters. Pooro adapts Trauma Bonding (Stockholm Syndrome) as she has no one to call her own but her abductor, Rashid. Her source of wound and healing becomes one. On the other hand, Rashid suffers from Coerced Guilt as he was forced to abduct Pooro due to the pressure from his community. Throughout his life, he let Pooro take an upper hand as he was fully engrossed in guilt.

### **Trauma of Abduction and Loss of Identity**

However, *Pinjar* leaves no place to ignore the impact that the Partition had on women's identity and psyche. Pooro, displaced from her birthplace, loses not just her village and parents, but her very identity. Although branded as 'spoiled', she has never done anything to deserve this label. Being compelled to adopt a new name, 'Hamida', by literally having ink put on her skin, she loses her identity completely. Every movement in Pooro's life turns into a struggle against erasure. On the one hand, she tries to reject this new existence but succumbs to circumstances and is unable to do so. In a way, she is neither Pooro nor Hamida but somewhere between the two. Pooro is just one of those thousands of women who were deprived of their identity during the Partition. Their destinies have been changed against their will, their identities being ruined, forgotten, or used to hurt them. Pooro's images reveal the destruction process through which a traumatised individual passes. Pooro is disapproved of by her protective family, is given another identity, and loses the core of herself.

There is a particular scene that embodies the essence of all the brutality. The refugees are streaming out of Pakistan, and Pooro is given an option to return home. Out of his past regret, Rashid pushes her forward. Still, escape is not real when the door was locked long before she turned around. Out of nowhere, she said no - that choice carved a line in stone. Not surrendering defines her now, even when the world leans hard on hopelessness, yet especially when defiance sparks alive. In the end, she decides to save others from a similar fate by staying back and helping other poor women.

### **Rashid, the Passive Victim**

Although initially, Rashid seems like the bad one, things are not so clear-cut with him. He takes Pooro away, true. But hatred is not what drives him. His reasons run deeper than dislike. He has been entangled in a family conflict since birth and is attempting to "repair" an honour that has been badly harmed. As one may notice, customs enslave men as well; he conforms to the strategy simply because he should. When he kidnaps Pooro, one may observe how Rashid

deteriorates. Nowhere near cruel, he hesitates, holds back, yet still does nothing. Instead of striking out, he stumbles through clumsy comfort to fix his wrongs. When Pooro runs off, and her kin turn their backs, joy does not rise - he just lets it settle. Society makes her return to him the sole option.

Later in the narrative, Rashid transforms into a gentleman. Pooro moves freely, though grief lingers close behind. He wants safety for her, yet sees how his presence locks the door. Space remains between what he offers and what she has lost. His care holds weight, but so does confinement. Pooro begins saving kidnapped females while Rashid endorses the venture, even if it puts them at risk. When finally, there is no stopping Pooro from leaving if she wishes to, Rashid does not plead with her to stay. This is his gift to her, his opportunity to offer her the same freedom that was never available to him. It is an austere love, if love can be called thus – sorrowful, tender, remorseful.

Rashid, after abducting Pooro due to his communal pressure, develops a Coerced Guilt. He slips into a state of psychological distress as he feels guilty for the crime he had to commit, not wilfully but due to external pressure. He remains a passive companion in the marriage and lets Pooro take the upper hand, although she is also not very comfortable in the marriage. Distance prevails between them, restricting them from enjoying a normal life. Rashid does not invite hate, nor praise. Shaped by times long gone, he sifts through ruins built by others who share his blood but not his guilt. His presence in *Pinjar* suggests how systems trap even those who did not design them; sometimes mercy fails to balance what was done in silence or claimed on one's behalf.

Ultimately, *Pinjar* leaves the readers with a message – violence, honour, and shame are illusions. To the women who bear the brunt of the pain, mere survival becomes the greatest feat. However, occasionally, rarely, merely choosing one's fate is sufficient heroism in its own right.

### **Ecofeminism—Women and Crops Caught in the Fire of Male Rage**

From soil to skin, control runs deep where women and earth are treated the same. Power shapes both lives when one rules over all. Men decide what grows, who speaks for the trees - or the mothers. A system built high on exclusion pulls threads tight between body and land. Both women and land are treated as objects that men feel entitled to possess, control, dominate, and even harm if their pride gets hurt in some way. As shown in *Pinjar*, Trilok, the brother of Pooro, burns Rashid's crop land as an act of vengeance. It is not only a symbolic and rhetorical action. Women and crops receive the exact treatment – possession, cultivation, and destruction in times of men's anger.

*Pinjar* was written during the Partition of India, which is characterised by violence, among other things, and an extremely patriarchal ideology. The bodies of women become a means of proving the honour of men. Land becomes the extension of men's ego as much as women do. The abduction of Pooro by Rashid is perceived as a shame upon Pooro's family. Without any further thought or discussion, Trilok starts burning Rashid's lands. It is not only about the financial damage but also about rivalry and power among men.

From an ecofeminist perspective, it is evident that patriarchal rage shatters humanity and the environment. Pooro does not have any control over her own life. Instead, she is perceived as a possession that can be returned and even disposed of according to the preferences of men in terms of their honour. Just like Pooro and women in general, living entities such as crops are also sacrificed for the sake of satisfying male vanity. Destroying crops through burning them is not only a form of revenge, but also breaks the bond between humans and Mother Earth. Farming usually means caring for soil, working alongside nature, then feeding it gently. Yet here, that rhythm twists - suddenly harsh, quietly violent. Thus, the destruction of crops symbolises Pooro's dislocation and loss of identity. Ecofeminism argues that such forms of abuse are linked and result from similar mindsets.

The author not only outlines the outcomes of the revenge but also points to its inherent destructive nature as well. The story illustrates how the egocentric violence continues to repeat, destroying not only individuals but also the surrounding reality. The moment when Pooro starts to understand compassion and virtue is when Pritam seems to imply something positive, which coincides with what ecofeminism stands for. As Françoise d'Eaubonne, the French feminist thinker, says in her work, *Le Féminisme ou la mort* (translated into English as *Feminism or Death*), the survival of the planet and the liberation of women are interconnected, as both are controlled by the same patriarchal forces. She also advocated for a revolution led by women to dismantle the patriarchal control structures. Here, in *Pinjar*, Pooro, Lajo, and the other women are exploited as much as the agricultural land, in the hands of patriarchy. When Pooro's intention to save the other women becomes a fulfilled action, the circle of ecofeminism becomes complete. Pooro, although a sufferer herself, gathers the courage to help other victims. This act of hers brings a revolution in the patriarchal structure, where male ego and family pride were based on the exploitation of women and nature.

## Conclusion

*Pinjar* tells a raw story about the damage caused by Partition, especially how it hurt women. They seem to be mere bodies without souls. Pooro, Lajo, the woman driven mad, trapped not just by men's rules, but also hatred between communities, and distorted ideas of dignity. In addition to being subjected to violence during Partition, the novel shows how the shame and silence that surround their experiences contribute to their marginalisation, even when their bodies are physically safe once more. The trauma they received will never be erased. Their lives will never be the same again. Once the damage is done, it can never be undone. Rashid complicates the narrative as he is not merely the man who abducts Pooro. Caught in a loop of vengeance and pride, Rashid follows the path the story itself condemns. Now and then, those who suffer blur into those who harm. Rashid, being influenced by a sense of communal revenge and false pride, not only destroys the lives of Pooro and her family but also his own life as well. Struck by guilt, he leads a life that is neither carefree nor normal. He unknowingly becomes the passive sufferer, Pooro being the active. They failed to have a normal marital life. While Pooro's life was filled with hatred, Rashid's was filled with repentance.

Hope survives, even when everything burns down around it. Though *Pinjar* centres on Partition, its real target shines through - the systems turning women into objects, erasing who they are. Pritam walks out of ruin, not unscarred, yet carrying something quiet but steady. Pooro's actions, although heartbreaking, reflect the careful decision-making process she employs in order to seek out small opportunities for humanity in her cage.

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