



PARTITION IN INDIAN LITERATURE: PINJAR AND TRAIN TO PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Amrita Pritam's novel *Pinjar* and Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* remain two of the most hard-hitting literary works that describe the horror, the frenzy, and the sectarian tensions that ripped apart the lives of so many during the 1947 split of the subcontinent into the new countries of India and Pakistan. This paper will address the sectarian divide that the two novels convey in their plot as well as other major themes of sexual violence, communal tensions, and the manner in which this cataclysmic event shaped the lives of people on either side of the Radcliffe line.

Keywords: *Partition, communal violence, sexual violence, Khushwant Singh, Amrita Pritam*



Introduction

The Partition of 1947 opened a deep fissure between the various sectarian, religious and ethnic communities in the Indian Subcontinent. The magnitude of this event is such that we are still living through its fallout today, in the form of jingoism and communal violence on either side of the Indo-Pak border. One glaring instance of this is the rising tide of belligerent nationalism—especially in the form of the right-wing BJP government with its Hindutva agenda in India. However, in Pakistan as well, minorities are treated as second-class citizens by the State on account of Islamic nationalism, espoused by the Pakistani state as the dominant ideology (Qasmi & Robb, 2017). It would not be wrong to say that the events leading up to the Partition are responsible for unleashing the ugly forces of communal hatred and racism, in both India and Pakistan. Amrita Pritam's novel *Pinjar* and Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* remain two of the most hard-hitting literary works that describe the horror, frenzy, and sectarian tensions that ripped apart the lives of so many during the 1947 split of the subcontinent into the new countries of India and Pakistan. This paper will address the sectarian divide that the two novels convey in their plot as well as other major themes of sexual violence, communal tensions, and the manner in which this cataclysmic event shaped the lives of people on either side of the Radcliffe line.

The Partition as Rupture

The carnage that followed the announcement of the impending partition of the Punjab, and with it the creation of two new nation-states, unfolded on an unprecedented scale. Such is the trauma borne by those who lived to witness that you can seldom find someone who is willing or able to recount the events of the August of 1947 without choking up, or becoming overcome with emotion. It is an event permanently etched into the memory of those who lived to see it. In the words of William Dalrymple, it is “central to modern identity in the Indian subcontinent as the Holocaust is to identity amongst Jews, branded painfully onto the regional consciousness by memories of an almost unimaginable violence” (Dalrymple, 2015). The communal rioting that unfolded both prior to and in the wake of the partition claimed the lives of millions of Indians. In the words of Khushwant Singh: “The fact

is, both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured. Both raped. By the summer of 1947...ten million people – Hindus and Muslims – were in flight. Almost a million of them were dead” (Singh, 1988, p. 8).

Thus, the Partition was an event that prompted unfathomable bloodlust and newly-awakened hostility amongst ordinary people who committed acts of extreme depravity against their fellow man. Both Pritam and Singh’s novels show us that their characters face a moral dilemma when they know they are acting unjustly, and the weight of their conscience bears down heavily upon them. The two authors show us that man has a proclivity for both good and evil, which explains the moral dilemma faced by Rasheed in *Pinjar* and Hukum Chand in *Train to Pakistan*, two characters central to the two stories that concern us in this paper.

First, let us look towards Amrita Pritam and the plight of women that is described so viscerally in *Pinjar*. I have guided the inquiry in this direction because as Pritam shows, the female body was used, by both sides as fair game. Pooro, a young Hindu girl, is kidnapped by Rasheed, a Muslim man from a family that has had a longstanding feud with Pooro’s family over their kidnapping of Rasheed’s aunt, many years ago. Pooro’s kidnapping precedes the Partition by a few years. Rasheed kidnaps her to settle scores with Pooro’s family and the dishonor they brought upon his own family. It bears mentioning here that while the entire enterprise of “independence” was built upon staking a claim to territory on nationalist and sectarian grounds, so were women, on both sides, seen as human bounty to be claimed, and made off with, like lootfound on a battlefield. The impact of the scale of gendered violence that took place cannot be ignored, nor can we go without addressing it in this paper. The sexual violence against women remains a shameful stain on the already blood-spattered year of 1947.

Literature has articulated the pain of living through Partition, when it cannot be articulated through speeches or real-life accounts. Many writers have since then put pen to paper and proceeded to write stories that, although fictionalized, communicate the reality of Partition —Manto, Intizar Hussain, Urvashi Butalia, and Qurratulain Haider, to name a few apart from the two discussed in this paper. Bound up with the exploitation of the female body, a central theme in

stories related to the Partition that reflect its reality, there is also the question of the shame associated with having defiled daughters returned alive to their parents. In such a scenario, death is a more merciful fate than being left alive after being brutally violated.

This is evidenced by the refusal in the novel of Pooro's parents to take their own daughter back, both out of fear of retaliation from Rasheed's family, as well as the shame and stigma of letting a defiled daughter back into their home (Pritam, 2009). Pooro becomes a "skeleton". Hollow inside, having lost her home and her identity, her name is changed to Hamida, as she is given a Muslim name after marriage, which Rasheed has tattooed on her arm, to serve always as a stark reminder of her kidnapping. The tattooing of Pooro's new Muslim name on her arm is reminiscent of the identification numbers that Jewish prisoners in Nazi concentration camps were tattooed and branded with during the Holocaust. Holocaust survivors continued to bear those tattoos, which served as a grim reminder of one of the worst genocides of the 20th century.

Not quite Hamida, and no longer Pooro, she comes to exist in a liminal space between the two; a shadow of her former self, hollow and listless inside: "In her dreams, when she met her old friends and played in her parents' home, everyone still called her Pooro. At other times she was Hamida. It was a double life: Hamida by day, Pooro by night. In reality, she was neither one nor the other, she was just a skeleton, without a shape or a name" (Pritam, 2009, p. 20).

Pritam's novel tells a tale of more than just one incident of sexual violence against women. Later into the novel, after Hamida has already been married for quite some time, a 'mad' woman who aimlessly roams her village is raped, and eventually bears a son, dying in childbirth herself. Hamida rescues the infant and brings him up as her own. The atmosphere that Pritam builds in her novel is so intense and so harrowing, that personally, as a female reader of Pritam's book, I found that I could only read *Pinjar* in small doses. The constant threat that women face serves as a reminder of the value of the lives of women, and for Hamida/Pooro it serves as a reminder of her own predicament. Each instance of kidnapping or violation of a woman by a man takes her back to the time of her own kidnapping by her now-husband, Rasheed. She imagines what it would have been like had she lost her senses and gone mad after Rasheed's kidnapping. The mad woman's terrible fate thus hits far too close to home for Puro, and strikes a raw nerve.

Although the Partition has not yet come to pass, the air is already rife with communal tensions and mutual suspicion between the Hindu and Muslim communities. The Hindu community begin to question the selflessness of Hamida's actions. I will remind the reader here that at this juncture, Pooro is now Hamida, a Muslim woman who now has a Muslim son by the name of Javed and is maintaining a household with her Muslim husband, Rasheed. She is not welcomed by, nor does she fraternize with, the Hindu community in Rasheed's village. The Hindu villagers accuse Hamida and Rasheed of bringing up the child of a Hindu woman as a Muslim, thereby asserting their dominance over the Hindu community. This hostility over the simple, selfless, charitable act of rescuing an orphaned infant shows us a fractured community at odds with one another over religion.

While we read the novel as a work of fiction, it is also important to think historically and put the events that are narrated into the context of the social situation at the time. By doing this, we see that Rasheed's character has far more shades of grey instead of being just black or white, and we cannot be so simplistic as to dismiss him as a monster who was utterly unfazed in kidnapping a defenseless young girl. We see him instead as a product of his time. Pritam gives us ample evidence that Rasheed struggles to reconcile his conscience with his actions. He is apologetic throughout the novel towards Pooro, is often found in deep contemplation, mulling with disbelief over what he has done. He also does not sully Pooro's honor by violating her against her will or taking advantage of her helplessness. Following his own beliefs of what is justifiable, he waits for her to be married to him before proceeding to consummate with her. He cares for her, and is careful not to upset her. After he makes her his wife, she is the mistress of the house, and not a captive. By his own admission he finds it difficult to come to terms with what he has done, as though some inexplicable force overpowered his conscience to induce him to kidnap a young Hindu girl. By arguing this, I do not mean to absolve Rasheed of his crimes, rather, I wish to point out that Pritam herself is showing us that the circumstances in which one is brought up and socialized can normalize things that otherwise should not be normalized. In much the same manner, one could say that expressing jingoistic sentiments, or harboring stereotypical views about Muslims in India – being beef-eaters, taking many wives, being backward and ignorant – are things that are normalized by the ruling party in an effort to re-imagine India and rid the country of all traces of its pluralist and inclusive ideals, which were once upheld so proudly by its citizens.

In *Train to Pakistan*, the setting of the novel is the fictional village of Mano Majra on the banks of the Sutlej, which Khushwant Singh said was inspired by the real-

life village of Miya Mir. The location of the village in the Punjab is important as Punjab was the province that was physically partitioned, with the eastern part going to India and the western part becoming part of Pakistan. The novel begins with the murder of Ram Lal, a Hindu money lender in Mano Majra. His murder serves as the impetus that stokes communal tensions in the village as the dacoits who murder him throw bangles stolen from Ram Lal's house into the courtyard of the house of Jugga, the Sikh protagonist, to implicate him in the crime. The murder thus serves as an event that foreshadows the impending communal tensions that will seize not only Mano Majra but also the rest of the subcontinent as the partition takes place.

The arrests of Iqbal (an educated Sikh man who has returned from Britain) and Jugga for Ram Lal's murder are initially viewed by Hukum Chand (magistrate and deputy commissioner of the Mano Majra district, a wealthy man, and the Muslim protagonist of the novel) as a political tool that can be used to give the Sikhs a pretext to evacuate the Muslim inhabitants of Mano Majra from the village. However, this changes when Hukum Chand finds out that Iqbal and Jugga are not, in fact, Muslim, after he enquires as to the religious affiliation of the real culprits of Ram Lal's murder. When told they are Sikh, he feels disappointed, as now Ram Lal's death cannot be used to ratchet up hatred against the Muslims of Mano Majra. It is important to note here that Hukum Chand's motive is actually to evacuate the Muslim residents to save them from a future massacre, as he realizes the implication of the Partition. Already the Sikh inhabitants of the village are incensed by the train arriving with the bodies of dead Sikhs, which inflames them against the Muslim community. Later in the novel, as the Mano Majrans awaken to find the river Sutlej strewn with the floating bodies of murdered men, women, and children, the reality of what is happening finally dawns on the villagers. They realize the bodies have been the victims of a massacre when they notice the stab wounds on them.

Jugga's arc in the book is what interested me the most as a reader of the novel. He is very much an outlier when it comes to comparing him with the rest of his community, as he cannot care less about partaking in communal enmity against Muslims. His lover, Nooran, is the Muslim daughter of the village weaver. Jugga's disposition shows us that an ignorant man, who does not care much for the high politics of the Partition, is oblivious to religious hatred. This tells us that this religious hatred is a manufactured hatred, not one that comes naturally to people who had been coexisting in harmony until this moment. In the final scene, where he cuts the rope intended to derail the train carrying Muslims to

Pakistan, thus sacrificing his life to save the Muslims, he redeems himself for his lifetime of criminal deeds and petty crime. Jugga thus becomes an unlikely hero, a protagonist fit for a novel centered on the Partition, where both heroes and villains are characters with a proclivity to do both good and bad.

Conclusion

Out of the many ruptures that the South Asian subcontinent faced during 300 years of colonial rule, the final act in the play – the 1947 Partition – remains the one that has inflicted the deepest scar on the consciousness of its people. In the two novels I discussed above, we are reminded of the capability in ordinary human beings to do things which are *extraordinarily* depraved, *extraordinarily* evil – a far more frightening scenario. There exists a spate of literary fiction that addresses the horrors endured by humanity on both sides. Several of Manto's short stories, which he wrote after the Partition, such as *Khol Do*, *Thanda Gosht* and *Siyah Hashye*, specifically address the issue of gendered violence. I have noted Manto's stories here because within them, none of the perpetrators of sexual crimes, save one in *Siyah Hashye*, are identified by their religious affiliation. This is a deliberate decision, in my view, on Manto's part, to show that it was men from all quarters and all sects who were guilty of committing unspeakable acts of violence, and sexual violence against women, as I have tried to argue throughout this paper. Men who, reassured that there would be no atoning for their crimes, felt free to act with impunity, not only by violating the bodies of the 'Other's' women, but also by murdering the Other with whom they had coexisted until that moment.

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