BMC Research Journal
ISSN: 2795- 1731,
Peer-reviewed Multidisciplinary
Open Access Journal
Indexed in Journal

Birendra Bidhya Mandir Campus
Tikapur, Kailali, Nepal
Url:www.birendracampus.edu.np

Research Article

Indelible Marks of Violence in Amrita Pritam's Novel *Pinjar*

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Published by: Research Management Cell, BMC, Tikapur, Kailali, Nepal
Publication: June 2025, Volume: 4, BMC Research Journal
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DOI: 10.3126/bmcrj.v4i1.80064

Abstract

This paper examines the impact of the 1947 India-Pakistan partition through the lens of Amrita Pritam's novel *Pinjar* (1950), which poignantly captures the harrowing experiences of women caught in the crossfire of religious and political upheaval. The narrative follows Pooro and Lajo, two women whose lives are irrevocably changed by the brutal violence of partition, symbolizing the countless women who were abducted, raped, and subjected to forced conversions during this tumultuous period. Through these personal stories, *Pinjar* highlights the gendered nature of violence during partition, where women's bodies became battlegrounds for religious and cultural conflict between Hindus and Muslims. The paper delves into how the trauma of partition disproportionately affected women, whose suffering was often a consequence of communal hatred, societal norms, and the breakdown of familial ties. By drawing on trauma theory as articulated by Cathy Caruth and Jeffrey Alexander, as well as gendered readings of partition violence by scholars like Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon, and Kamla Bhasin, this study critically analyzes *Pinjar* to argue that Pooro's fate mirrors the fate of thousands of women whose lives were irreparably altered by the partition. Ultimately, the paper underscores the deeply gendered dimension of partition violence, illustrating how women's suffering became emblematic of the broader socio-political trauma of the era.

Keywords: partition, violence, trauma, Hindu-Muslim conflict, women's agency.

Introduction

Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* is a poignant and powerful reflection on the harrowing experiences of women during the 1947 Partition of India, a cataclysmic event that fractured the subcontinent both physically and emotionally. Written just three years after the violence and upheaval of Partition, Pritam's novel serves as a stark narrative of the suffering endured by women, particularly those like Pooro, who were abducted, forcibly converted, and subjected to both physical and psychological traumas. Through vivid storytelling, Pritam lays bare the profound agony these women experienced as they became collateral damage in a brutal social and political upheaval. Drawing on her own experiences as a refugee, Pritam's work offers an intimate, authentic portrayal of the devastating effects of Partition. While existing scholarship has primarily examined the historical, feminist, and socio-political dimensions of *Pinjar*, this paper seeks to offer a fresh perspective by focusing on the psychological and emotional landscapes of its central characters, particularly through the lens of trauma theory and gender studies. Using frameworks of trauma theory and memory studies, this analysis will examine how Pritam's narrative reflects the intersection of gender, violence, and historical trauma, making it a crucial work for understanding the long-lasting effects of Partition on women's lives.

One of the primary objectives of this paper is to deepen the analysis of Pooro's relationship with Rashida, a character often viewed solely as an antagonist. By considering Rashida's backstory and motivations, this paper argues that his actions are not only those of an oppressor but are also rooted in the shared trauma of Partition. This complexity challenges the simple binary of victim and oppressor that often dominates discussions surrounding Partition literature. Additionally, the experiences of Lajo, another key female character, will be examined to highlight the nuanced ways in which women's suffering during Partition has been marginalized or simplified in many historical and literary accounts. Lajo's abduction, forced survival, and reluctant submission provide a lens through which we can reconsider the often-overlooked psychological toll that such traumatic events have on women. While this paper synthesizes existing scholarship on *Pinjar* and Partition literature, its contribution lies in offering a new interpretation of these themes. By engaging with trauma theory and feminist readings, this analysis offers fresh insights into the lasting emotional and psychological scars left by Partition, especially in the context of gender and identity. In doing so, it expands the scholarly conversation surrounding *Pinjar* and invites new avenues of exploration in the study of Partition narratives.

Literature Review

The study of *Pinjar* has been deeply intertwined with broader discussions on Partition trauma, gendered violence, and the long-lasting effects of cultural trauma. Central to this conversation is Jeffrey Alexander's concept of *cultural trauma*, which explores how traumatic events reshape collective identities, particularly in societies recovering from violent ruptures like the Partition of India. Alexander's theory helps illuminate how the shared trauma of Partition continues to reverberate in the collective consciousness of both India and Pakistan, particularly among women, whose experiences of violence and displacement were often overlooked. Cathy Caruth's seminal work on trauma as an "unclaimed experience" that disrupts memory also provides a critical framework for understanding how Partition remains an unresolved and pervasive psychological wound in South Asia, continuing to affect generations long after the event itself.

Feminist scholars like Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon, and Kamala Bhasin have expanded our understanding of how Partition's violence was particularly gendered. In *The Other Side of Silence*, Butalia emphasizes how women, caught in the crossfire of communal violence, faced not only brutality from external forces but also betrayal and violence from within their own communities and families. Menon and Bhasin's *Borders and Boundaries* further explores the socially constructed roles that women were forced to play, often as symbols of family honor and national identity, making them especially vulnerable to violence and exploitation during Partition. Magar (2024) studied the history of partition between India and Pakistan and found the partition was not the real intent of people of British India but the political interest of political leaders based on religion at that time and it further led to violence, displacement and trauma. In this context, he further states, "The unprecedented and insufficient thought to divide British India into India and Pakistan was not a historical incident but also the cause of violence, displacement and traumatic incident for many people" (p. 71). In this context, Pritam's *Pinjar* emerges as both a historical narrative and a powerful voice for the subaltern. Through its depiction of women's suffering, *Pinjar* challenges dominant historical narratives and gives agency to women whose stories were often marginalized or erased in mainstream Partition discourse. The novel thus serves as a crucial text for understanding the intersection of gender, trauma, and memory in post-Partition South Asia.

Methodology

This study employs a multi-faceted literary analysis of Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*, utilizing trauma theory and gender studies to explore the psychological and emotional experiences of the characters. The analysis is grounded in a careful examination of specific narrative elements that shape the text and the characters' journeys. These elements are prioritized to uncover how the themes of victimhood, survival, and agency are represented. This paper applies a qualitative approach to analyze the thematic and narrative structure of *Pinjar*, with a primary focus on trauma theory and gender studies. Drawing on Cathy Caruth's and Jeffrey Alexander's influential theories of trauma, it examines how *Pinjar* portrays the fragmented and often disjointed experience of trauma, particularly the way women's identities are shaped and reshaped in the wake of the violent upheavals of Partition. Caruth's concept of trauma as a disruptive force that fractures memory and narrative offers a lens through which the novel's non-linear storytelling can be understood as a reflection of the psychological disarray experienced by its characters. Jeffrey Alexander's work on collective trauma further enriches the analysis by exploring how the trauma of Partition is not only an individual experience but also a shared cultural memory, affecting both personal and collective identities in the post-Partition landscape.

Additionally, this study draws on feminist perspectives from scholars such as Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon, and Kamala Bhasin, whose work on gendered violence during Partition provides important insights into the experiences of women caught in the violence of the era. By examining how these scholars document the systemic violence, abduction, and forced conversion that women endured, this paper underscores how *Pinjar* illuminates the intersection of gender and national trauma. Through close textual analysis, it will demonstrate how Pritam's narrative encapsulates the profound psychological, emotional, and social impact of these traumatic events on women's identities, showing how they were not only victims of individual violence but also caught in the broader cultural and political forces that sought to erase and reconstruct their sense of self. This methodology focuses on a holistic approach to analyzing *Pinjar* by prioritizing symbolism, dialogue, narrative structure, and character development as key elements that illuminate the intersections of trauma and gender. The analysis will demonstrate how Pritam's narrative complexity and the interplay of these elements provide a nuanced understanding of the emotional and psychological consequences of Partition.

Results and Discussion

Amrita Pritam's novel *Pinjar* (1950) delves deeply into the trauma of the partition. Set against the backdrop of India's division into two nations—India and Pakistan—it examines the profound impact of this separation, rooted in the differing religious identities of Hindus and Muslims. The plight of women during the par tition is realistically described in the novel. Amrita Pritam (1919–2005), drawing from her eyewitness testimony of the horrors of partition, objectively presents concrete and realistic accounts of the shattering experience of the ghastly events of 1947. She was among the thousands who migrated from West Punjab to settle across the newly created border. According to Lambert-Hurley, it is estimated that during the partition, "around twelve million refugees, 1 million dead from slaughter, malnutrition and disease, 75,000 women abducted and raped, thousands of families divided by new borders drawn on a map to represent the newly independent nations of India and Pakistan" (115).

While delivering a lecture to the MPhil class of 2020, Professor Beerendra Pandey asserted that following the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, the British solidified their control over India by fostering hatred and division, particularly between Hindus and Muslims. After the British left in 1947, widespread violence broke out, forcing millions to flee their homes and resulting in the deaths of countless others. The dark side of human behavior during this period, marked by looting, rape, and abduction, remains poorly documented (Pandey). *Pinjar*, a reflection of this grim scenario, tells the story of Pooro, a Hindu girl who is abducted by Rashida, a Muslim boy. Pooro escapes her captivity before her wedding to Rashida and returns to her parents' home in the dead of night. However, her parents refuse to accept her, declaring that their home no longer has a place for her. To her parents, Pooro—whether alive or dead—is of no concern anymore.

Unable to resist the circumstances into which she is thrust, Pooro bears Rashida a son and begins to rise as a woman from the ashes of her girlhood. Pooro's eventual embrace of Islam comes only after her rejection by her Hindu family. When reflecting on her younger days at home, she recalls desiring a particular sweetmeat, which was traditionally Muslim in preparation, and now, ironically, it is the same sweetmeat she makes for her Muslim husband. The psychological violence Pooro endures stems more from the betrayal by her own family and community than from any other source.

Cathy Caruth formulates a theory of trauma in which memory becomes more significant than the event itself in the experience of trauma. He further broadens the concept

of trauma as "the overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events, in which the response to the events occurs in the often delayed and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (181). Life was thrown out of gear by the partition of the country in 1947. The trauma of this holocaust was so intense on Amrita Pritam's mind that she felt compelled to chart an entirely new path for herself and her people, embracing the collective sorrows of the community. *Pinjar* is a landmark novel and one of the most effective narratives addressing the experiences of women during the partition. Though it is primarily the story of Pooro and Lajo, it epitomizes the stories of thousands of women who were abducted during partition. *Pinjar*, which stands as a 'witness' to the violent division, narrates the story of Pooro, a Hindu Girl who is abducted and forced to convert to Islam, becoming Hamida. After being kidnapped, forcibly married, and ultimately compelled to live with Rashida, a Muslim man, Pooro suffers severe psychological effects. Her mind remains anchored in her mother's home, symbolizing her longing for her lost identity and the life she was forced to leave behind.

Pooro, a young woman of Hindu background, initially finds herself living a happy life with her family during the time of partition. Everything appears to be going well for Pooro, who is engaged to Ramchand, a young man from a respectable and prosperous family. Pooro lives in a world of fantasy. She was initially engaged to Ramchand, but fate eventually brought her into the life of another man, Rashid. Pooro's fantasy is shattered, and the turn of events becomes a traumatic experience for her. Pooro's abduction is an act of revenge. Rashid's family holds an ancestral grudge against Pooro's family, and this old feud leads to Pooro sacrificing her entire life. Rashid is made to swear on the Quran to "abduct the Sahukar's daughter before she was wed" (18). Pooro questions Rashid: "If my uncle abducted your aunt, what fault was that of mine? You have reduced me to a homeless vagrant" (18). It is noteworthy that Pooro is identified as the "Sahukar's daughter," not as an individual, but rather as a possession. Pooro is portrayed as a helpless victim and a powerless being in the hands of the man who possesses her life. Her mental trauma makes her physically ill, and she struggles to accept Rashid as her husband. Pooro pleads with Rashid: "Let me see my mother once" (18). Rashid warns her: "You have no place in that family anymore! If they let you in even once, not one of their Hindu friends or relatives will take a drop of water in their house. And you have been with me for fifteen days" (19).

The loss of her religion and birthright becomes intimately tied to the assumption that Pooro is no longer "virtuous." Despite Rashid's warnings, Pooro does not give up. After

much struggle, she escapes and returns to her parents' home. However, she is rejected by her own family. Her father tells her that there is no place for her in the family, as her abduction now casts doubts on her chastity and fidelity: "Daughter, this fate was ordained for you; you are helpless. Who will marry you now? You have lost your religion and your birthright. If we dare to help you, we will be wiped out without a trace of blood left behind to tell our faith" (23). Pooro's loss of religion and birthright stems from the fact that she has spent time with Rashid, a Muslim, and it is assumed that Rashid has violated her sexually. Pooro's hopes of regaining her old life are crushed when her father admits he cannot bring her back home. Her rejection by her family constitutes another form of violence she endures. This rejection wounds her even more deeply than the trauma of her abduction. Pooro suffers a double betrayal: first, by Rashida, who abuses her physically, and second, by her own family, who emotionally desert her.

Pooro struggles to accept the harsh reality of her family's rejection. Her mother confronts her about the implications of her presence, saying, "Daughter, it would have been better if you had died at birth! If the Sheikhs find you here, they will kill your father and your brothers. They will kill all of us" (23). Devastated, Pooro responds, "Then destroy me with your own hands" (23). The narrator reflects on her despair: "She had come full of hope. Now she had no hope, nor any fear. […] Even death had slammed the door in her face" (23). These words vividly capture the profound pain and anguish Pooro endures. Her parents' refusal to accept her is driven by the fear that "the Sheikhs will descend on us and destroy everything we have" (23). The trauma Pooro experiences is not just personal but deeply tied to cultural trauma. As Jeffrey Alexander explains:

> Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways (6).

During the partition, individual trauma often translated into cultural trauma. When members of one religious community were attacked by another, the entire group shared in the suffering. In the novel, Rashida's family holds an ancestral grievance against Pooro's family. Years earlier, Pooro's family had displaced Rashida's family, taking possession of their property. Pooro's grand-uncle even abducted Rashida's grand-aunt, defiling her before letting her go. To avenge this humiliation, Rashida's family made him swear to kidnap Pooro as

retribution. This act of abduction and the violation of women became a symbolic means of dishonoring the opposing community—a grim form of subjugation.

The pre-partition communal tensions and the chaotic conditions of the time provided fertile ground for such vendettas. Rashida, a young man from the Muslim community, was chosen as the instrument to inflict an indelible wound on the Hindus. Under familial pressure, he swore on the Quran to avenge the old scores by abducting Pooro before her marriage. The violence of partition left survivors deeply traumatized, and its impact continues to resonate across generations. Pooro's mother further underscores the gravity of the situation, highlighting that if Pooro's husband learned of her return, the consequences would be catastrophic. The family's fear and panic leave her mother uncertain and deeply troubled.

Though the partition is now considered 'history,' it's trauma remains etched in the memories of the people. Writers, too, were profoundly influenced by the event, which not only divided the nation but also fragmented languages, cultures, and literatures. Partition tore apart families, opinions, and loyalties. These intricate and deeply personal experiences cannot be fully captured by historical narratives, yet they remain an indelible part of collective memory and consciousness. In *Borders and Boundaries*, Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin analyze the impact of partition on both the minds and bodies of women. They describe 'women's sexuality' as:

> It had been violated by abduction, transgressed by enforced conversion and marriage, and exploited by impermissible cohabitation and reproduction, which was at the center of debates around national duty, honor, identity, and citizenship in a secular and democratic India. (20)

Women experienced cruelty not only from their enemies but often from their own families. A woman who was touched or raped by another man was regarded as dishonored, and consequently, her entire family was considered dishonored as well. Pooro is utterly devastated, reduced to a hollow shell with no emotions. She cannot grasp the reality that her family has completely rejected her.

This situation highlights that a woman's position is ultimately determined by the caste and religion of the man who holds power over her, whether it is her father or her husband. Pooro, initially a Hindu girl, is forcibly converted to Islam after her abduction, and her name is changed to 'Hamida.' The inner conflict within her is profound and uncertain, as she struggles to reconcile her new identity. Pooro tries to adapt to her new life, but when she

encounters her fiancé, all her memories resurface, reigniting her love for him. Pooro's existence becomes a state of limbo, caught between two worlds. Pritam poignantly describes her condition: "In reality, she was neither one nor the other. She was just like a skeleton, without a shape or a name" (25). Pooro is left in a state of confusion and loses her identity between Hindu and Muslim. She belongs nowhere. According to Pritam, Pooro is neither Pooro nor Hamida. Her identity has been reduced to that of a skeleton—without shape or name. She has nothing left because she has been abandoned by her maternal home and feels unacknowledged in Rashida's family. Pooro is trapped in the cage of patriarchy, and her subjectivity is completely suppressed. She is compelled to live a life that is neither fully human nor animal. She exists in a liminal space, stripped of her identity and autonomy.

Like Pooro, another woman, Lajo, is equally victimized. Pooro faces the challenge of finding Lajo, her sister-in-law, who has been kidnapped by Muslim men. Despite her own suffering, Pooro demonstrates immense strength during this crisis to help Lajo. With Rashid's assistance, Pooro helps Lajo escape from her abduction. They take Lajo to Lahore, where Pooro's brother Trilok and Ramchand come to receive her. Amrita Pritam presents Lajo's character as another poignant example of the plight of abducted women during partition. To survive and escape her captor, Lajo is forced to endure further humiliation, including sleeping with the Muslim man who abducted her. Despite her own sorrows, Pooro supports and counsels Lajo during this difficult time. In her despair, Lajo confesses her fears and confusion: "So far our families have been mourning the loss of one. Now they can mourn the death of two. Pooro, I have nowhere to go. What face will I show to anybody?" (47). This passage vividly portrays the unspeakable plight of abducted women, narrated with deep empathy and sensitivity by Amrita Pritam.

Many women suffered immensely during the partition period. Even mad women were not spared from such atrocities. A mad woman who arrives in Pooro's village is impregnated by an unknown man. Observing the pitiable condition of this woman—who has no sense of self or shame—Pooro 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)

Pooro denounces this act as inhuman because the mad woman did not even realize what had happened to her and eventually dies during childbirth. No one cared about the mad woman's religion, family, or survival.

Another woman Pooro meets is Kammo, a young girl without a mother who is rejected by her father and forced to live with her aunt. Kammo is mistreated and exploited by her aunt, yet she sees Hamida (Pooro) as a maternal figure. However, Kammo's aunt forbids her from meeting Hamida because Hamida is a Muslim. Reflecting on Kammo's plight, Hamida realizes the grim reality: women are the ultimate victims in all conflicts. She laments: "It was a sin to be alive in this world full of evil… it was a crime to be born a woman" (65). Through *Pinjar*, Amrita Pritam sheds light on the immense suffering of women during the partition of India. Riots, rapes, and abductions of women from opposing communities were rampant. Urvashi Butalia, in her book *The Other Side of Silence*, recounts such horrors: "Women jumping into wells to drown themselves to avoid rape or forced religious conversions. Fathers beheading their own daughters so they could escape the same dishonorable fate" (5). Women were degraded to nothing more than objects of male desire.

In *Pinjar*, the story of Taro—a village girl abandoned by her husband for another woman—makes Hamida see her own home as a refuge. When Pooro inquires about Taro's plight, Taro responds: "What can I tell you? When a girl is given away in marriage, God deprives her tongue, so that she may not complain" (76). This response reflects a male-dominated society where women have no voice, even when it comes to their own rights. Recalling her own personal tragedy, Pooro is consumed with anger upon hearing about the abduction of Hindu girls by Muslims and Muslim girls by Hindus. She remembers: "Some had been forced into marriage, some murdered, some stripped and paraded naked in the streets" (79). The novel describes numerous heart-wrenching incidents where women became victims of hooligans. One day, Pooro sees a group of more than a dozen men forcefully pushing a young girl in front of them. The girl is completely naked. The men beat drums and danced around her as they paraded her through the streets. Pooro could not determine where the men had come from or where they were going. She reflects bitterly: "It was a sin to be alive in a world full of evil; it was a crime to be born a girl" (35). Later that evening, Pooro finds a young girl hiding in their field. The girl reveals that she is from a refugee camp in a nearby village, waiting for her turn to be evacuated to India. The narrator describes a grim picture of the camp's conditions:

> 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)

Through *Pinjar*, Amrita Pritam vividly portrays the brutal realities of the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan, exposing the horrific ethnic riots between Hindus and Muslims and the devastating impact on women.

Conclusion

In *Pinjar*, Amrita Pritam poignantly underscores the suffering, exploitation, and sacrifices endured by women due to their displacement and abduction during the partition. Through a detailed examination of Pooro's and Lajo's journeys, the analysis reveals how their experiences reflect the enduring psychological scars of displacement and violence that define not just personal histories, but also the collective memory of the indelible trauma of 1947. The symbolism of the 'pinjar,' as both a literal and metaphorical representation of confinement, plays a central role in illustrating the gendered nature of suffering, particularly how women's bodies are marked by violence and societal control. Key findings of this study underscore the intricate ways in which Pritam uses dialogue, internal monologues, and shifting narrative structures to express the fragmented identities of women caught between historical and personal traumas. Rashida's character, in particular, complicates the binary of oppressor-victim, shedding light on the complexities of survival and complicity in times of political violence. Additionally, the novel's exploration of gendered trauma reveals how patriarchal systems and historical violence intersect to shape the personal and collective experiences of women during Partition.

Beyond its historical context, *Pinjar* remains deeply relevant in contemporary discussions on gender, violence, and trauma. The novel's portrayal of women navigating a world marred by conflict offers profound insights into the ongoing struggles faced by marginalized groups, particularly women, in regions affected by war and displacement. In today's global context—where issues such as sexual violence in conflict zones, gendered oppression, and the long-term effects of trauma continue to shape societal discourse—Pritam's work serves as both a reflection of past injustices and a call for empathy and justice in the present. By examining the emotional and psychological dimensions of Partition, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how literature can illuminate the profound

impacts of historical trauma on gendered lives. *Pinjar* not only represents the Partition but also offers a lens through which we can view the lingering effects of violence and displacement on women, underscoring the need for a more nuanced and compassionate engagement with the trauma of conflict. In this sense, Pritam's work continues to resonate, reminding us of the importance of memory, resilience, and the ongoing fight for gender justice in the face of violence.

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