

Violence against Women: an Interpretation of Indian Partition Fiction in the perspective of Humanism

Munmun Giri

Assistant Professor

Dum Dum Motijheel College India

ABSTRACT:

The partition of India, one of the most terribly traumatizing attempts of a forced geopolitical restructuring of human lives, is the greatest of human tragedies in the twentieth century. The mountainous shame and violence inflicted upon the women during the riot was not possible for the historians to record about. Literature has relived and recreated these 'hard' truths by fictionalizing the colossal desecration of human values. This paper aims to explore the Indian partition fiction from a humanist perspective. The academic objective of this paper is to present a detailed textual analysis of one classical text on the partition i.e., Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*. Such a study is bound to be interdisciplinary and it will borrow from history, ethics, culture studies and philosophy as an overall theoretical base.

KEY WORDS: Trauma, human rights, human dignity, education, honour, human values

Date of Submission: 14-07-2021

Date of Acceptance: 30-07-2021

I. INTRODUCTION

I have heard that many women did not want to lose their honour and choose to die. ... They were not just a handful, but quite a few. When I hear all these things, I dance with joy that there are such brave women in India.

(Gandhi, '223 Speech at Prayer Meeting' 202)

The partition of the Indian subcontinent on August 15, 1947 is seen as an outcome of certain historical, political and social forces. The history of partition, thus, has different experimental realities. Which is why, while the historians in India have remained overwhelmingly concerned with the causes, it was the creative artists who tried to discover the multiple faces of its effects. The brutal violence against women during the riot, the shameless attempts of legitimizing that violence and the long lasting impact of the trauma of such violence on their minds dig up some vital questions of humanism. A Humanist approach, therefore, would certainly help us to discover the suppressed cry of the Indian women for human rights, social liberation and dignity in the twentieth century, which were actually more important to ponder over than the political division of the country. Indian partition literature, particularly fiction written in different regional languages as well as in Indian English had their prime focus on those darker aspects of the Indian society, which were ignored and kept suppressed year after year. Priya Kumar rightly observed in the introduction of her book, *Limiting Secularism*, "...fictions through their return to a painful past open up possibilities of living together in the present" (xxv). The present researcher, therefore, attempts a reappraisal of the Indian traditional concept of humanism with a critical analysis of Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*. Such a discussion is sure to be interdisciplinary because it is bound to borrow from other disciplines such as history, philosophy, culture studies and gender studies etc.

Humanism in the ancient Indian civilizations-

Although, the word 'humanist' derives from the fifteenth century Italian term, 'umanista' describing a teacher or scholar of classical Greek and Latin literature and the ethical philosophy behind it, the spirit of humanism was already in the limelight of the ancient Indian civilizations and philosophy in the form of its quest for a general love and peace for humanity which includes a great part of the women. Ancient Indian civilizations like the Indus-Saraswati civilizations about 12000 years ago had approved that men and women are the two basic components of our human society and women have ever remained the driving force of all creative activities and arts. That is why, women in early Indian society enjoyed higher status in society in respect of prestige, dignity and respect accorded to her with that of man. The excavated figures of the women and the planning of homes and cities in the Indus civilization prove that women certainly had power and position to protect their interests in society. The image of the 'dancing girl' reflects how women were involved in cultivating culture and at the same time how they represented their power and position in keeping pace with the

men. 'The Great Bath', excavated from Mahenjodaro proved the importance of the women's interest in their society.

In the Vedic period, women were given liberty and opportunities to attain higher intellectual and spiritual standard. There were many women 'Rishis' (saints) who attained highest spiritual attainment like Arundhuti, the wife of Rishi Bashisthya. The Aryans evidently preferred male child to a female child. However, girl children were as free as their male counterparts. Education was open for both boys and girls. Girls were never thought to be confined behind 'Pardhah' (curtain). Because, the Aryans thought that in the development of their culture and the fine arts, women must have equal contribution, otherwise the development would remain inadequate. Women therefore, used to take part in religious ceremonies and social celebrations. There were many scholars who composed hymns of Rig Veda. We still remember with great respect the pioneers of women's education like Lopamudra, Gargi, Maitreye, Apala and so on in the Vedic period.

During the Vedic period, women could choose their husbands through a type of marriage called Swayamvara by which her fundamental human right of choice was assured. Humiliation of women was never accepted in early Indian society and the epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata show that the kingdom of Kauravas was destroyed because they attempted to humiliate and dishonour Draupadi. King Ravana was killed and his kingdom was annihilated for his attempt to abduct Sita and marry her forcibly.

In the later Vedic period, the position of women gradually deteriorated. The curse of child marriage and the system of 'Sati dah' started to cripple the Indian society to a great extent. Women faced acute constraints in taking education, participating political assemblies, philosophical debates, in decision making bodies in their own families and even in taking decisions about their marriage and giving birth to children. Girl children became 'burden' for their families. Marriage and rigorous domestic life became compulsory for women and unquestioning devotion and dependence on their husbands was their ultimate goal in life. They were treated as slave in their in-law families and often reduced to an item of property to her husband.

Ancient Puranas like *Manu Smriti* observed that the family, in which women suffer, is bound to be ruined, while the family in which women are happy is bound to prosper. Yet, it may also be noted that Manu Smriti had some principles which would go against women. Women were deprived of the Upanayan ceremony and also of the liberty of taking education. Manu prescribed self-negation as the primary condition of a woman's existence. Women cannot have economic rights and have to live on depending on their father (at early stage), husband (at middle stage) and son (at old age). As a result, many evil social practices like pre-puberty marriages, illiteracy and superstitions started to cripple the Indian society.

During the Mauryan Period, the treatment of the women in society reached the extreme point of its nadir. Because, there was a growing practice of polygamy, employment of women as palace guards, bodyguards to the kings, spies and king's favourites. The concepts of 'Dasi'(woman slave), 'Rakshita'(kept for sexual entertainment) became popular words at time of Chandragupta Maurya.

In the Buddhist period, a conflict arose because of the liberal attitude towards the oppressed, the wretched of which women were a major part. The so-called concept of 'untouchable' as imposed by the Brahmins was proved meaningless in Buddhism. Women could get an easy entry in religious activities and discussions. The Buddhist women sangha called, 'Bhiksani Sangha' got importance in public life for their cultural and social services. Samrat Asoka, a Buddhist king appointed a special group called Mahamattasthat to be concerned only with the welfare of the women.

Women in Medieval period-

Medieval period, if called a dark period for the women, would not be exaggerated. Historians observed that the status of women started degenerating in the post-Vedic age because of the conception of purity, virginity and inter-caste marriages. Hindu women saw an acute restriction in their personal lives because of the Mughal Rule in this time. Hindus usually took the Muslims as 'Mlechhas' because of their dirty living habits and a lascivious look. From the eleventh century to the eighteenth century, India fell into the grasp of two different foreign rules and this political upheaval caused economic depression and social constraints, particularly among women. Sati Dah, child marriage, suppressions on the widows, the Pardhah Pratha and sometimes the Dowry system took hold of the Hindu society. However, the Bhakti movement in this time led by Chaitanyaya, Nanak, Kabir, Meera, Ramdas and Tulsi was hugely successful to bring in religious freedom for the women. But, it failed to bring in any type of economic freedom to the women and as a result, women continued to hold low status in the society. Ramakrishna, Ma Sarada and Vivekananda talked about 'matribhav' or a feminine or motherly impulse present behind the creation of this world. They imagined this world as 'Basundhara', a feminine concept of the world. Ramakrishna worshipped Ma Sarada as a 'goddess mother'. So, women in Indian tradition are one who should be worshipped and not to be disgraced anyway.

Women in Modern India-

Western influence in the modern India through the British rule brought an era of emancipation for the Indian women. The rationalistic and scientific viewpoint of human life gained a new spirit in touch with the British administration, English education and European literature. The concepts of Human rights, individual potentiality and humanistic thoughts began to change the superstition based conventional social norms. The social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy (172-1833) and Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) were the two most successful men who eradicated the social curses like Sati Dah, the self immolation of widows on the funeral pyre of their husbands, child marriage. Remarriage of the widows and mass education for the women were two important aspects of their movement. Writers like Gopal Hari Deshmuk (1823-92) in Maharashtra and the Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore in Bengal sharpened the attack on the inequities of gender and treatment of women in Indian society. Rabindranath's two short stories, *Dena Paona* and *Shashti* are the ever burning testimony of the actual status of women even in modern Indian society.

Although, the status of women has received a radical change in the perspective of opportunities in education, administration, employment, economic freedom and political participation, women still suffer domestic exploitations and become victim of domestic violence and dowry system in the 21st century. M. N. Roy wrote in *The Ideal of Indian Womanhood* (1939) that in India "marriage is an indissoluble bond which deprives woman of all freedom, denies her the right to an individual existence. A wife is not a human being, for her there are duties to be performed, not voluntarily, but under an inflexible discipline" (...). Everywhere she is in chains, be it at home or outside. Freedom for women has still remained a matter of joke because cases of rapes are growing by leaps and bounds now-a-days both in rural and urban areas all over the country. Marriage still means 'labour and pain' for the women while it means liberty and relaxation for her counterpart in Indian society. Women are easily targeted for violence in any critical situation for showing masculinity and power, be it at domestic periphery or in any feud among communities or at the level of nationalist issues. It is very crucial to observe that Indian Partition fiction draws our attention toward those humanist issues related to the women, the issues that often overlooked as 'ignoble' compared to the national or political issues. *Pinjar* (in Punjabi) though written on the background of the partition of the country, has its prime focus on the terrible atmosphere of violence directed to women. The questions of illiteracy, early marriage, forceful marriage, slavery, self identity, decision making come in the forefront with a greater force than the partition of the country as a great historical event.

***Pinjar* (2009), a narrative of self liberation-**

Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* is a tale of self liberation, a transformation- from Pooro to Hamida, from a simple, innocent girl to a matured, experienced woman who is bold enough to negate the hateful game of religion. Set against the background of religious and clan feuds on the eve of the partition of India, *Pinjar* aims at presenting the struggling miseries of the Indian women in the whirl of cultural and religious differences. Originally written in Punjabi by Amrita Pritam, recipient of Jnanpith Award, Sahitya Academi and Padma Shri, *Pinjar* or *The Skeleton* is translated into English by another veteran writer in Indian English, Khuswant Singh in 2009. The text, although short in length, is full of profound depth of humanism. In each of its chapters the writer raises crucial questions of individual freedom, tolerance, compulsion of conversion, cultural differences, making of marriage, illiteracy and ignorance. The text reiterates love and fellow feeling irrespective of external differences.

Forced Marriage, a Humanist Issue-

Pooro is the central character of the text. She is not properly educated and at the age of fifteen only, her father arranged marriage for her. "Pooro's parents were resolved to lighten themselves of the burden of a daughter" (3; ch. 1). The word, 'burden' indicates the value of a girl child in Indian society. In a family, particularly if it is poverty ridden, girl children are always treated as unavoidable troubles. They are not given proper dignity and liberty of a human being. Pooro is not allowed to go out of her home by herself. There is a reason to be cautious- "the Muslims had become very aggressive. Hindu girls never ventured out except in the broad daylight of the afternoon" (6; ch. 1). Pooro belongs to a family of money lenders of Chatto village. At times, they became victims of poverty and had been compelled to sell their kitchen utensils. They were to withstand the taunts and tricks, and ultimately they could not bear any more disgrace. They left the village and went to Thailand. Pooro's father struggled high to save his ancestral house from the attachment by creditors. "The first thing Pooro's parents did on their return to Chhato was to find a young man... for the hand of their daughter" (2; ch. 1). A scholar will be mistaken if he takes the novel in feminist framework. Because Pooro's fight is not limited steadfastly against the patriarchal oppressions, rather she is in search of an ideal society where humanism would control its steering and women would be treated primarily as a human being.

One day Pooro is abducted by Rashida across the fields of Chatto village a few days ahead of her marriage with Ram Chand and is kept confined for fifteen days in a secluded garden house. Although Rashida

does not behave with her like “an enormous grizzly bear” (9; ch. 2), her abduction and conversion to Islam before marriage with him raise so many humanist questions that cannot be ignored anyway. Pooro feels unconscious in deep shock. When she comes to her senses, she finds herself within four walls. She bangs her forehead against the walls as if to wish herself to be bold enough to change the course of her life herself. She, like a freedom fighter begins to hammer the door of her confinement with her bare hands still she feels exhausted. She shrieks and falls back unconscious once again, “She dreamed she was in a cave. A black bear was combing her hair with its claws. She shrank in size while the bear grew bigger and bigger” (13; ch. 3). The freedom of life is abducted from Pooro with her confinement in the hand of Rashida. All her dreams and all her joys are snatched away from her life. It is surely an offence from the view point of humanism. Adolescence, according to psychology, is very much sensitive and sensible a stage for any human being because at this stage boys and girls grow a mind which is not matured enough to think rationally yet it carries an indomitable romantic wonder which can conquer any peak of victory. Pooro’s mind at fifteen is killed permanently with the decision of her marriage by her parents. Her abduction by Rashida puts the last nail in that coffin. She asks Rashida, “Tell me, in the name of your Allah, why did you do this to me?” (16; ch. 3) Rashida makes Pooro remember about the past history of their two families which had been at loggerheads for many generations. “Your grandfather had advanced us Rs 500 on compound interest and taken our house as mortgage. We could not redeem the mortgage. He attacked our house and had the entire Shaikh family ejected....your uncle kept my father’s sister in his house for three nights....My grandfather made my uncles swear that they would avenge these insults” (17; ch.3). Pooro’s abduction is the result of that oath. Thus, the aim of showing power by defaming people of other community is executed through the sacrifice of the life of two women members of their respective families.

Abduction and Individual Freedom-

Pooro’s abduction by Rashida raised the question of individual freedom. Humanism believes in the freedom of the individual, including the right of self determination. It advocates separation of religion and the state affairs from personal matters. Rashida snatches away Pooro’s freedom of living by forcibly separating her from her family and also by confining her in his house. He marries her against her wish. Pooro is not given the least scope to determine her choice of living. Pooro asks a question to Rashida in her bewilderment, “If my uncle abducted your aunt, what fault was that of mine? You have reduced me to a homeless vagrant” (18; ch.4). The state administration is also involved. Rashida bribes Rs 500 to the police to report that they could not find any trace of Pooro. Pooro’s parents suffer mountainous anxiety and spend a terrible time.

Crisis in Self-Identity-

Pooro’s conversion into Islam and her marriage with Rashida brings into focus the ugly game with one’s self identity. According to humanism, human life is precious because he is the measure of all things. But Pooro’s life proves that human life is everywhere, not only in chains but also in torture. Pooro is married to Rashida. Her arm is tattooed on with a new name, ‘Hamida’. With that inscription, her Hindu name ‘Pooro’ becomes old and lost. Pooro becomes not only homeless but also unknown to herself. She becomes a refugee in an unknown land. The compulsion that is applied for the conversion and the stoic surrender that Pooro shows at that time can remind anybody about an animal sacrifice at religious rituals. The human Pooro remains no one to recognize:

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 (25; ch. 5).

At the end of the novel, Hamida stands before an acid test. Her head is still held high in peerless personality and haloed in a divine dignity. She is now no Pooro, no Hamida but an illuminated human being with all the normal sensibilities. When Hamida’s brother grabs her hand and says, “This is your only chance” (125; ch. 27) Hamida can easily understand what he intends to say. Like Lazo, she too is now free to join the group of the Hindus and should leave Rashida for India. But she makes her brother release her arm, turns back to where Rashida is standing and clasps her son to her bosom. She says to her brother, “My home is now in Pakistan” (125; ch. 27). Like a messenger of humanity Pooro says to herself, “Whether one is a Hindu girl or a Muslim one, whoever reaches her destination, she carries along my soul also” (125; ch. 27).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1]. Anand, Mulk Raj. *The Humanism of M. K. Gandhi*. India: University of Punjab Press. 1971. Print.
- [2]. Basu, Jayanti. *Reconstructing the Bengal Partition: The Psyche under a Different Violence*. Kolkata: Samya Publication, 2013. Print.
- [3]. Bhalla, Alok. *Partition Dialogues*. New Delhi: Oxford, 2006. Print.
- [4]. Gandhi, Mohondas K. ‘223 Speech at Prayer Meeting’. *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*.

- [5]. Vol. 89. Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. Of India, 1958-94, 200-2. Print.
- [6]. Gupta, G. Balarama. Humanism: An Over-View. Calcutta: A Writers Workshop Grey Bird Publication, 1983. Print.
- [7]. Kumar, Priya. Limiting Secularism: the Ethics of Co-existence in Indian Literature and Film.
- [8]. India: Permanent Black, 2008. Print.
- [9]. Lokeshwarananda, Swami. Ed. Chintanayak Vivekananda. Kolkata: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1977. Print
- [10]. Mishra, Dr. Devendra, et al. Eds. Encyclopedia of Indian Heritage and Culture. Vol. 1. New Delhi: Shree Publishers and Distributors, 2008. Print.
- [11]. Philips, C. H. The Partition of India: Policies and Perspectives 1935-1947. UK: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1970. Print.
- [12]. Pritam, Amrita. Pinjar :The Skeleton and other Stories. Trans. Khuswant Singh. New Delhi: Tara Press, 2009. Print.
- [13]. Radhakrishnan, S. Indian Philosophy. Vol. 2. New Delhi: Oxford, 1999. Print.
- [14]. Roy, M.N. The Ideal of Indian Womanhood. India: Indian Renaissance Association Ltd, 1941. Print.
- [15]. Roy, Shivnarayan. Pravandha Samagraha. Vol. 2. Kolkata: Ananda, 2003. Print.

Munmun Giri. "Violence against Women: an Interpretation of Indian Partition Fiction in the perspective of Humanism." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 26(07), 2021, pp. 30-34.