

AMRITA PRITAM'S *SPINJAR (THE SKELETON)*: THE VOICE OF THE SILENT, SUFFERING WOMEN

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Introduction:-

Amrita Pritam has been a household name across Punjab province, partitioned between India and Pakistan, for decades. She will always be celebrated for her ability to portray the essence of the robust people of Punjab, their turbulent lives and, above all, their deeply entrenched pathos. In simple but delicate and creative prose and verse, she expressed the poignancy of India's division by the colonial administration in 1947, when millions were uprooted, with bloodshed and tragedy on either side of the new border. Her works remain immortalised in the hearts of millions of Punjabis.

Amrita Pritam (1919-2005) was the first important woman writer in Punjabi literature. She wrote novels, essays and poems. She put Punjabi literature on the world map. No other writer is as synonymous with Punjabi literature as Amrita Pritam. She was the first woman to receive the Sahitya Academy Award in 1956. Her important work as a novelist was *Pinjar* (The Skelton). Later she received Bharatiya Gyanpith, one of India's highest literary award. The Padmashree was awarded to her in 1969 and finally Padma Vibhushan, India's highest civilian award in 2004. She was honored with India's highest literary award Sahitya Academy of Letters, the Sahitya Academy Fellowship given to her for her life time achievements in 2004. Amrita is the first recipient of the Punjabi Ratna Award conferred upon her by Punjab Chief minister Cap. Amarinder Singh. She has received DLitt honorary degrees from many universities including Delhi University-1973, Jabalpur University-1973 and Vishwa Bharti-1983. In her career of over six decades, she has penned 28 novels, 18 anthologies of poetry, 5 short stories and 16 miscellaneous prose volumes.

Amrita Pritam was an iconic Indian writer, whose works as well as life were a bold statement that redefined not just the Punjabi literary canon but also found new words and images for how Indian women perceived themselves. She defied social norms and conventions. There was no split between life and literature for Amrita because literature was her life. Her writings concentrated on the problems of women. She emphasized women's experience under patriarchy and brought the focus on to the marginalized. Her intense and prolific works deal with the palpable problems of life, wants and denials of men and women. She is described as "one who loved dearly and suffered terribly".

Pinjar (The Skeleton) :-

In the novel *Pinjar* (1950), the novel was translated into English by Khushwant Singh as *The Skeleton*, Pritam depicts the political and human tragedy that engulfed Punjab in the months of intolerant rioting that preceded the sub-continent's partition into a Muslim Pakistan and a broadly secular, but predominantly Hindu India. Amrita Pritam focused on the lives of young Muslim, Sikh and Hindu women who became the victims of abduction, rape and other untold miseries during the fury of the chaos and mindless killings.

The novelist in Amrita Pritam was at her best in *Pinjar (The Skeleton)*. The younger generation was introduced to Amrita's work through this novel which was made into a successful film in 2002. It is the story of a Hindu girl, Paro, abducted by a Muslim boy Rashid. Her parents refuse to recover a 'defiled' woman. Unable to resist the circumstances she was thrown into, Paro settles down as a bride and bears Rashid a son. In 1947, nostalgia for the life missed by Paro makes the couple save Hindu and Sikh women from their Muslim abductors and send them to the security of evacuee camps meant to take them to their kith and kin.

Pinjar highlights the women's sufferings, exploitation and sacrifices because of their dislocation and abduction during partition. The novelist 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.

Pinjar is a story of abduction of a young girl Puro by a man (Rashid) of rival religion in order to avenge the family enmity. It is a saga of Puro's journey of transformation from Puro to Hamida, her loss of identity and her

agony. The novel is a critique of the society at large which considers the woman as a property to be usurped and used according to its wish,

In the major part of the first half of the novel we find that Puro's family is a happy family of two sisters and a brother. Puro is an obedient and ideal daughter, the darling of her parents. She unquestioningly accepts what her parents decide for her marriage and dreams about the future she is going to spend with Ramchand, her prospective suitor.

The turning point in the story arrives when Puro is abducted by Rashid, a Muslim boy who is forced to do it, to avenge for a similar act committed by Puro's uncle. Thus portraying how conflicts between families, communities and nation are so often brutally and mindlessly played out on the identities of women. Rashid does not rape Puro. She after struggling a lot manages to escape and goes home, but she is told by her father that there is no place for her in the family as she had been abducted which now puts her chastity and fidelity to question.

Her father refuses to accept her saying that he cannot keep her as nobody will marry her because she has lost her status and identity. Rejection from her own family to accept her is another form of violence she goes through. Rejection was a bigger blow of pain than her abduction. She has been doubly violated: firstly by the abductor (Rashid), who violates her physically and secondly she is violated emotionally by her own family. Puro is devastated and returns to Rashid to lead a life which is akin to that of a skeleton (Pinjar).

Puro's identity undergoes a drastic change. Rashid forces marriage on her and changes her to Hamida from Puro. She now has a new identity which she resists as she longs for her family and marriage to Ramchand. On the other hand Rashid is repentant for the crime of Puro's abduction and seeks redemption. He tries to provide love and care to Puro, but Puro is unrelenting as the wounds inflicted by Rashid are unforgivable

Some months following Puro's kidnapping, Puro's family forces themselves to move on and now marries their son Trilok to Puro's ex-fiance's sister, Lajjo. Lajjo wishes very much for Trilok to give her the attention she so

animately bestows upon him. However, Trilok, having turned cold ever since his sister's capture, cannot find himself get attached to Lajjo.

Parallel to the celebrations of the new marriage, is a celebration of Rashid: Puro is pregnant. While Rashid and his aunts rejoice, Puro finds herself horribly depressed, and purposely strains herself in household work in order to miscarry. After the miscarriage, however, Puro learns somewhat of Rashid's love for her. One day Puro walks dangerously close to the fields (that belong to Ramchand, her supposed-to-be husband) where she herself was kidnapped, and gets to see him just last time. But Ramchand is so much surprised to see her semi-covered face that by the time he starts realising it is Puro, she clears off leaving him in doubt. It may be perceived that she does so after getting disappointed to find Ramchand not quite recognising her.

Chaos ensues again for Puro's family as warfare occurs between the Hindus and Muslims, as the Republic of India finds itself liberated from Britain. As Muslims and Hindus flee from opposing sides for safety, Lajjo gets separated from the rest of the family to get kidnapped some time later by one Muslim boy.

She meets Ramchand who woefully tells her of Lajjo's situation. Puro begs Rashid to help her find Lajjo and rescue her, as Puro reminds Rashid that if he indeed has a heart, he will realize that it is not too late for Lajjo to be saved. As Puro underwent a ceremony to be branded - literally - as a Muslim, and be renamed Hamida, Lajjo had not as yet.

Racing from home to home under the alias of a saleswoman, Puro finally finds Lajjo, and with Rashid's assistance meets Lajjo and brother Ramchand at a Refugee camp, where Hindus and Muslims who found themselves in situations similar to Puro's and Lajjo's were finally allowed freedom and guarantees of safety.

Lajjo is welcomed lovingly by Ramchand, Trilok is also there in the camp who meets his sister Puro and explains her that she can finally return & Ramchand is ready to accept her even now. However Puro surprises Trilok and the audience by explaining that she is where she belongs - with Rashid. His dedication to helping her save Lajjo proved how much he indeed did love Puro, and for that Puro finds she can finally return his love.

And so in an ironic twist of fate, Puro seeks Rashid out in the camp and the two bid Ramchad, Trilok, and Lajjo farewell, forever.

Conclusion :-

Through the characters; Puro, Lajo, Taro, Kammo Amrita tries to unveil the facets of violence against women and her trauma. Here Amrita highlights the fact that women had to constantly prove their innocence and assert their right to dignity in our patriarchal society. Another form of violence against women portrayed in the novel is the parading a woman naked through the village and towns. One such incident is mentioned in the novel, where a young girl was paraded naked. There is another woman character, who was sexually assaulted and becomes pregnant. The woman was mad and was not even aware of the violence inflicted on her body and a child growing in her. There were many women who were mutilated and impregnated during the tumultuous time of partition.

The novel depicts different dimensions of violence against women; on religious, social and most prominently physical and mental levels. Amrita Pritam through her violated women characters in the novel brings forth the fact that women have been the prime victims in every communal strife, riots and wars. Whether it was Puro or Hamida, Lajo, Taro, Kammo or the mad woman or the naked woman, woman becomes that section of the society that suffered not only during partition but continues to do so even today. They are that other section of the society whose lives do not matter, whose voices are silenced, whose identities are subjugated and who remain at the periphery of the power struggle and power equation and continue to be marginalized and displaced. *Pinjar*, thus gives a voice to this other section of the society and their concerns of displacement, marginalization, dual identity and powerlessness.

Amrita Pritam rose to be the voice of the entire Indian womanhood and sowed the seeds of rebellion in the minds of her readers against values that were wrong and unjust, according to her. Not just a writer, she was indeed revolution personified. Amrita incarnates herself, through Puro, to express her hatred for social conventions and male lust. Resigning themselves to their fate is what lies in store for the entire womanhood of

India, according to Amrita. Throughout her life, Amrita has been a symbol of liberation for contemporary women writers. She has succeeded in presenting such themes with all the sophistication of a protagonist seeking to change social values. She has been in the forefront when it came to defying all that was outworn and obsolete in society. Amrita Pritam did not confine herself to the limits and boundaries of Punjab. She was the voice of women all over the world and hence the voice of humanity.

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