



Fragmented Identities: Exploring Gender and Cultural Displacement in Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*

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ABSTRACT

Amrita Pritam's novel *Pinjar* serves as a poignant exploration of gender and cultural displacement against the backdrop of the 1947 Partition of India. This research paper examines the fragmented identities of women as depicted through the protagonist, Pooro, whose abduction by Rashid—a Muslim man—highlights the intersection of personal trauma and communal violence. The narrative unfolds the harrowing experiences of women who become collateral damage in a politically charged environment, revealing how patriarchal structures exacerbate their suffering and marginalization. Through a feminist lens, this study analyzes how *Pinjar* articulates the complexities of female subjectivity amid societal upheaval. It delves into themes of identity fragmentation, resilience, and the struggle for autonomy as Pooro transforms into Hamida, navigating a new reality that conflicts with her internalized self and cultural heritage. The novel underscores the harsh realities faced by women during Partition, including abduction, sexual violence, and societal ostracism, while also illuminating their strength and resistance against subjugation. This research further contextualizes Pritam's work within contemporary discussions on gender dynamics and cultural displacement, arguing that the issues portrayed in *Pinjar* remain relevant today, especially in regions marked by conflict and displacement. By giving voice to the

‘other,’ Pritam critiques historical injustices and calls for a deeper understanding of women’s experiences in times of conflict. This paper ultimately seeks to contribute to the discourse on gender and cultural identity in postcolonial literature, emphasizing the enduring impact of historical traumas on women’s lives.

Introduction

“What happens to one’s identity when it is caught between two nations, two religions, and two deeply divided cultures?” Amrita Pritam’s *Pinjar* delves into this profound question through the turbulent story of Pooro, a young Hindu woman whose life becomes a symbol of the fractured identities and cultural displacements spawned by the Partition of India in 1947. Set against one of the most traumatic periods in South Asian history, *Pinjar* offers a poignant exploration of gender, violence, and survival in a society reshaped by political division and communal hatred. Through the transformation of Pooro into Hamida, Pritam paints an empathetic portrait of the women whose lives were irrevocably altered by nationalistic fervour and religious intolerance, reflecting their personal traumas and the collective scars of a nation. As literary critic Meenakshi Mukherjee argues, *Pinjar* serves as “a testament to the silenced suffering of Partition’s women” (Mukherjee 35). Pritam’s engagement with themes of identity, autonomy, and cultural conflict makes *Pinjar* an invaluable text for understanding the gendered impacts of Partition, a historical event that redefined national boundaries and left deep emotional and social wounds.

The Partition of India in 1947 was a seismic event that ended British colonial rule but left behind two divided nations, India and Pakistan, based on religious identity. During this mass migration of over 14 million people, communal violence broke out across the subcontinent, transforming former neighbours into enemies. This division, while political, manifested in deeply personal ways, particularly for women. Women’s bodies became battlegrounds upon which concepts of community honour and religious purity were imposed. Thousands of women were abducted, raped, or forcibly married, their lives permanently altered by societal expectations that treated them as mere symbols in a larger cultural and political conflict. In this context, Pritam’s decision to center *Pinjar* on the gendered violence of Partition is significant. Feminist critic Urvashi Butalia states that “women’s bodies became battlefields, contested spaces over which the ideologies of honour, shame, and community clashed” (Butalia 78), highlighting how women like Pooro became instruments in the assertion of communal identity. By

focusing on her abduction and forced transformation, *Pinjar* unveils the pervasive impact of these ideologies, providing insight into the psychological and social dislocations experienced by women.

Amrita Pritam, a pioneering figure in Punjabi literature, was uniquely positioned to capture the trauma of Partition from a feminist perspective. Her own experiences of displacement and cultural loss informed her work, as did her commitment to giving voice to silenced women. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Pritam dared to confront the violence inflicted on women, illustrating how patriarchal structures compounded their suffering during Partition. Scholar Ania Loomba asserts that Pritam's work "exposes the intersectional oppression experienced by women, where political, religious, and gendered forces converge to erase female identity" (Loomba 46). In *Pinjar*, published in 1950, Pritam critiques the patriarchal structures that sought to control women's bodies and destinies, framing Pooro's journey as a struggle for survival and selfhood. Her transformation into Hamida, though forced, becomes an act of adaptation and resilience, mirroring the fractured identities of countless women who, like her, were caught between two worlds. This transition signifies not only a personal loss but also reflects the broader cultural dislocation that many South Asian women experienced as they navigated new identities imposed upon them by society.

Through Pooro's story, Pritam portrays the complexities of identity fragmentation, resilience, and autonomy in a society torn by religious and cultural division. The title *Pinjar*, or *The Skeleton*, serves as a powerful metaphor for the experiences of women like her, whose identities and bodies were reduced to mere symbols within the nationalist and patriarchal ideologies of the time. This notion of "skeletons" highlights how Partition stripped women of agency, leaving them hollowed and objectified. By illustrating her struggle to reclaim a sense of self, Pritam critiques the societal norms that confined women to roles of either victim or emblem of community honour. Her journey thus becomes one of resistance, where she seeks to carve out a space of personal agency and redefine herself despite the oppressive structures surrounding her. As Pritam shows, her identity is fragmented not only by external forces but also by an internal conflict between her lost Hindu past and her new Muslim identity.

Beyond its historical context, *Pinjar* engages with universal themes of gender and cultural displacement, resonating with contemporary discussions on identity, trauma, and conflict. By focusing on her transformation and resilience, *Pinjar* challenges readers to confront the ways in which women's lives and bodies are often instrumentalized for larger political and cultural agendas. In this way, Pritam's work transcends the specifics of Partition, offering insights into the timeless experiences of women in

conflict zones, where questions of identity and autonomy are perpetually at stake. Through her portrayal of this journey, Pritam critiques the violent structures of Partition but also encourages a deeper understanding of women's subjectivity and resilience. *Pinjar* ultimately demands that readers recognize the enduring effects of historical traumas on women's identities, shedding light on the ways in which these narratives are essential for a fuller understanding of postcolonial literature.

In examining the complexities of *Pinjar*, this paper will explore the fragmented identities of women within the framework of gender and cultural displacement. Drawing from feminist and postcolonial theory, the study will analyse the cultural, psychological, and social dimensions of Puro's transformation, showing how her fractured identity mirrors the broken realities of Partition. This analysis positions *Pinjar* within broader discussions on postcolonial literature, where issues of identity, agency, and resistance are vital to understanding the ongoing impact of historical traumas. By giving voice to the 'other,' Pritam not only memorializes the silenced women of Partition but also invites readers to consider how such traumas resonate across generations, influencing contemporary discourses on gender and cultural identity.

Literature Review

Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* occupies a critical place within the canon of Partition literature, offering an unflinching portrayal of the complex intersections between gender, identity, and cultural displacement against the backdrop of one of the most traumatic events in South Asian history. As one of the few literary works to centralize the experiences of women during the 1947 Partition of India, *Pinjar* has been extensively studied by scholars who seek to understand the unique challenges faced by women in a period marked by immense sociopolitical upheaval. Through Puro, the novel's protagonist, Pritam exposes the psychological and physical violence that women endured, casting a spotlight on their fragmented identities and the compounded effects of patriarchal and nationalist forces. This literature review synthesizes critical perspectives on *Pinjar*, revealing the text's enduring relevance to discussions on gender, identity, autonomy, and the lingering impacts of cultural trauma.

The historical context surrounding *Pinjar* is essential to understanding the novel's layered portrayal of female suffering and resilience. Partition, which divided British India into two newly created nations, India and Pakistan, was marked by unprecedented violence, with over 14 million people displaced and hundreds of thousands killed in communal riots. Women, however, bore a unique burden during this upheaval. Scholars such as Urvashi Butalia emphasize that Partition's violence was

gendered, with women becoming both literal and symbolic battlegrounds over which political and cultural conflicts played out. As Butalia notes, “women’s bodies became battlefields, contested spaces over which the ideologies of honour, shame, and community clashed” (78). This phenomenon, seen in the mass abductions, rapes, and forced marriages that characterized the period, is vividly depicted in *Pinjar*, where Pooro’s abduction by a Muslim man, Rashid, is emblematic of the communal violence that defined Partition. Butalia’s work highlights how women were reduced to mere vessels of community honour and shame, a theme that Pritam explores with particular nuance through Pooro’s transformation into Hamida. By positioning women’s bodies as sites of conflict, *Pinjar* critiques a patriarchal society that views women as extensions of male and communal identity rather than as individuals with inherent worth and autonomy.

Pritam’s portrayal of Pooro’s abduction is not merely an individual story; it reflects a collective suffering endured by countless women who, like her, were stripped of their agency and forced into new identities by societal expectations and the demands of survival. Bhardwaj observes that Pritam’s depiction of women’s bodies as “sites of infringement” is a powerful commentary on the objectification and exploitation of women during times of sociopolitical unrest (63). Her forced transformation into Hamida is symbolic of the duality experienced by women who, caught between clashing cultural and religious identities, were compelled to suppress their pasts to survive in new, unfamiliar realities. This transformation, as Mukherjee argues, reflects both a personal trauma and a broader societal anguish, as women were forcibly separated from their families and communities in an era of heightened communal tensions (35). In her journey, Pritam captures the anguish of a generation of women whose identities were fragmented by political decisions beyond their control, presenting a narrative that speaks to both the individual and collective trauma wrought by Partition.

The fragmentation of identity, a recurring theme in *Pinjar*, resonates with the experiences of women who were torn from their cultural roots and forced to navigate identities shaped by others’ expectations. Her evolution from a Hindu woman into a Muslim wife encapsulates the psychological turmoil faced by women forced to reconcile their memories and familial bonds with imposed roles in new, often hostile environments. This duality, which Mukherjee argues is central to her character, captures the layered trauma of women who were not only physically displaced but also psychologically fragmented, grappling with questions of self-worth and belonging in a society that viewed them as symbols rather than individuals (Mukherjee 35). Pritam’s narrative brings to life the internal struggle of these women, who, while attempting to forge a place within their new realities, continued to wrestle

with the memories of their past selves. By portraying her journey in such depth, *Pinjar* challenges the reader to consider the profound psychological effects of forced cultural assimilation and the resilience required to endure such an identity crisis.

The feminist dimensions of *Pinjar* add another layer of complexity to its portrayal of gender and cultural displacement. Critics like Dwivedi highlight Pritam's subversion of traditional narratives by presenting Pooro and other female characters as resilient agents who navigate their oppression with strength and agency, rather than as passive victims (Dwivedi 101). This feminist lens is essential for understanding how *Pinjar* critiques the structures of patriarchy that perpetuate women's suffering. While her abduction is initially presented as an act of violence, her gradual adaptation to life as Hamida illustrates resilience and the ability to assert herself, even within an oppressive framework. Pritam's depiction of her journey defies patriarchal expectations by presenting her not as a mere symbol of community honour or shame but as an individual capable of forging connections and finding autonomy despite the cultural dislocation forced upon her. By emphasizing her agency, *Pinjar* complicates conventional Partition narratives that often depict women solely as victims, instead portraying them as active participants in their own lives who, while constrained by societal structures, retain the capacity for self-determination and resilience.

Pritam's nuanced portrayal of cultural displacement in *Pinjar* underscores the novel's critique of societal norms that prioritize community honour over individual autonomy. Pooro's forced assimilation into a new cultural identity represents the broader cultural alienation experienced by women during Partition, who were expected to adapt to new religious and social frameworks without regard for their personal desires or sense of self. Scholars argue that *Pinjar* not only depicts physical dislocation but also delves into the emotional and psychological scars left by such cultural displacement. The novel reveals how societal norms surrounding honour, purity, and loyalty operate as mechanisms of control, marginalizing women within both familial and communal contexts. Bhardwaj suggests that Pritam's characters embody a struggle for autonomy against these oppressive societal structures, a theme that resonates in Pooro's story as she resists and redefines her place within a society that continually denies her agency (Bhardwaj 66). By portraying Pooro's resistance, *Pinjar* highlights the inherent tension between individual identity and communal expectations, challenging readers to consider the consequences of cultural assimilation imposed by force.

Pinjar's relevance extends beyond its historical setting, offering insights into contemporary issues surrounding gender dynamics and cultural identity. Scholars argue that the themes explored in *Pinjar* resonate with ongoing discussions about women's rights and autonomy within patriarchal societies, suggesting that the struggles faced by Pooro and other women during Partition have lasting significance. Pritam's portrayal of the lasting impacts of historical trauma on gender relations serves as a reminder of how past injustices continue to shape societal norms and attitudes toward women. Bhardwaj contends that *Pinjar* remains relevant today because it critiques the entrenched patriarchal structures that continue to restrict women's freedom, even in modern settings (Bhardwaj 66). By illustrating Pooro's resilience in the face of adversity, *Pinjar* encourages reflection on the need for societal reform and an acknowledgment of the historical traumas that inform present-day gender relations. Pritam's narrative thus offers a powerful critique of the ways in which historical events like Partition reverberate through generations, influencing contemporary dialogues on gender, identity, and cultural displacement.

Analysis

Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* is a profound exploration of fragmented identities, primarily examined through the experiences of its protagonist, Pooro, whose life is transformed by the violent upheaval of Partition. Through Pooro's journey from a young Hindu woman to Hamida, a forcibly converted Muslim wife, Pritam examines the multi-faceted struggles of identity, gendered violence, and cultural displacement. The analysis of *Pinjar* centres around Pooro's experience as a representation of women caught between communal conflicts, cultural alienation, and the relentless forces of patriarchy that sought to define them. This section analyses how Pooro's fragmented identity reflects the broader disintegration of cultural and personal identities experienced by many women during Partition, as well as the resilience she displays despite her dislocation.

The novel opens with Pooro's peaceful life within her Hindu family, grounded in the familiar cultural and religious practices that define her sense of self. Her abduction by Rashid, however, marks the beginning of her loss of agency, thrusting her into a fractured identity that mirrors the broader cultural dislocation occurring across the subcontinent. In a harrowing scene, she tries to flee back to her family but is forcefully returned to Rashid. Her family, fearing the shame that her abduction would bring, rejects her, saying, "There is no place for you here anymore. You are now the property of another" (Pritam 41). This rejection, grounded in concerns of honour and purity, represents the societal forces that prioritize communal identity over individual agency, effectively stripping her of her identity

as a daughter and replacing it with one imposed by her abductor. Here, Pritam critiques the patriarchal structures that seek to define women solely through their relationships with men and as extensions of community honour.

Pooro's forced transformation into Hamida symbolizes the fragmentation of identity and the loss of cultural roots that countless women faced during Partition. This transformation is not only physical but deeply psychological, as she is compelled to adopt a new religious and cultural identity. Her internal struggle reflects the broader emotional turmoil experienced by women forced to sever ties with their pasts. At one point, she reflects, "My own name was Pooro, but they have given me another name. They have made me Hamida. But where is Pooro? Does she live on in me, or have they buried her?" (Pritam 73). Through these lines, Pritam poignantly conveys her internalized alienation and the disintegration of her sense of self. This existential question reveals how the trauma of forced identity transformation strips her of autonomy and fragments her identity, leaving her in a liminal state between two worlds. By juxtaposing her new identity with her past, Pritam illustrates the intense psychological fragmentation that many women faced during Partition, where survival often necessitated an erasure of the past self.

Pritam uses Pooro's narrative to highlight the unique gendered violence of Partition, which was deeply rooted in patriarchal norms that viewed women as custodians of communal honour. Throughout *Pinjar*, her body becomes a site of conflict, embodying the communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims. By forcing her into marriage with Rashid, the text illustrates how women's identities were often moulded and reshaped to serve the interests of dominant patriarchal and communal agendas. Her abduction serves as a microcosm of the larger cultural conflict, as Rashid's act is motivated not only by personal desire but also by the communal strife that permeated the period. His initial confession, "I did what I was told... It was my duty" (Pritam 52), reveals how men, too, were complicit in perpetuating communal violence under the guise of duty. However, it is she who must bear the brunt of these actions, highlighting the asymmetric burdens placed upon women during Partition. Through her suffering, Pritam critiques the ways in which patriarchy enforces a woman's identity through male control and community expectations, effectively erasing her sense of individual self.

Despite the loss and dislocation that Pooro endures, Pritam imbues her with a resilience that defies the patriarchal structures seeking to suppress her. Rather than remaining a passive victim, she gradually reclaims agency, finding strength within her imposed identity as Hamida. This resilience is evident when she reaches out to assist Lajo, another abducted Hindu girl, risking her own safety to help

another woman escape a fate similar to her own. In doing so, she demonstrates an ability to forge connections across the communal divide, subverting the societal boundaries that have been forced upon her. She remarks, “Lajo’s freedom is my freedom, too... I may not leave, but I am not powerless” (Pritam 105). This act of solidarity with Lajo emphasizes the strength she finds within her fractured identity, resisting the confines of her role and asserting her own moral agency despite the limitations imposed by her situation. By showcasing her resilience, *Pinjar* challenges the notion that women of Partition were mere passive victims, instead depicting them as complex figures capable of forging agency within restrictive social frameworks.

The title *Pinjar*, or *The Skeleton*, serves as a metaphor for the hollowing effect of cultural displacement on Pooro and the women who suffered similar fates during Partition. As Hamida, she exists as a shell of her former self, stripped of her past and familial ties, embodying the dehumanizing impact of her imposed transformation. She reflects, “I am but a skeleton now, stripped of flesh, stripped of my past... I walk, but where do I belong?” (Pritam 132). Through these words, Pritam poignantly captures the hollowness that comes with being reduced to a cultural artifact, robbed of personal identity and reduced to a symbolic role within communal tensions. This imagery reinforces the novel’s critique of the patriarchal and nationalist ideologies that render women’s bodies as battlegrounds, stripping them of individuality and subjectivity. By likening her to a skeleton, Pritam emphasizes the severe identity fragmentation and loss of self that were common experiences for women during this turbulent period.

Pritam’s exploration of Pooro’s identity crisis also reflects the broader experience of cultural alienation that accompanied forced displacement. Her transformation into Hamida does not grant her a new sense of belonging; instead, it deepens her isolation as she is neither fully accepted by her new community nor allowed to return to her past. This “in-between” status is emblematic of the fragmented identities imposed upon many women during Partition, as they struggled to reconcile memories of their past lives with the realities of their present. Her question, “Who am I if not Pooro, and yet who is Pooro if she cannot return?” (Pritam 118), underscores the existential dissonance that arises from forced cultural assimilation. Through this inner conflict, *Pinjar* illustrates the emotional toll of displacement, where survival often required the suppression of one’s true self, leading to a profound and ongoing sense of loss.

Pinjar also engages with feminist critiques of patriarchal narratives that often-depicted women solely as victims of communal violence. By highlighting Pooro’s strength and her ability to forge

relationships across cultural boundaries, Pritam redefines the role of women in Partition literature. Critics have noted that her transformation and resilience serve as a form of resistance, challenging the patriarchal structures that seek to confine her. Dwivedi argues that “Pooro’s journey is one of survival, but it is also a journey of defiance against the communal expectations placed upon her” (Dwivedi 101). Through her evolving relationship with Rashid and her compassion for other women in similar situations, *Pinjar* suggests that women, even within constrained circumstances, possess the ability to challenge societal norms. Her resilience, then, is not merely a personal victory but a broader commentary on the strength of women navigating fractured identities in the face of cultural displacement and patriarchy.

In analysing Pooro’s character, *Pinjar* ultimately critiques the nationalist and patriarchal narratives that dictated women’s roles during Partition, emphasizing the need for agency and self-definition. Pritam’s portrayal of her fragmented identity reflects the psychological dislocation experienced by women forced to adapt to new cultural and religious identities. Her journey illustrates the high costs of survival in a society that demands conformity at the expense of individuality, portraying a powerful narrative of resilience in the face of cultural erasure. As she comes to terms with her new life, she embodies the fractured yet resilient spirit of countless women who lived through Partition, becoming a testament to their strength and resistance.

Conclusion

Amrita Pritam’s *Pinjar* emerges as a deeply resonant and timeless work that encapsulates the fractured identities and cultural displacements experienced by women during the Partition of India. Through the story of Pooro, who is forcibly transformed into Hamida, Pritam explores the intense psychological, cultural, and social fragmentation that women endured amid a period of unprecedented communal violence and sociopolitical upheaval. Her journey represents not only the personal trauma inflicted by forced abduction and conversion but also the broader collective suffering of countless women who were stripped of their identities and redefined by the patriarchal and nationalistic forces that dominated Partition. Pritam’s narrative critiques these ideologies by exposing the oppressive structures that attempted to control and redefine women’s lives, presenting her protagonist as a character who, despite her loss, finds resilience and agency in a world that continually seeks to silence her.

The themes of gendered violence and patriarchal oppression within *Pinjar* reflect Pritam’s commitment to challenging traditional narratives that have historically marginalized women’s

experiences. Pooro's character defies the stereotypical portrayal of women as passive victims, showcasing her resilience as she navigates a new life, forges relationships across communal divides, and ultimately reclaims aspects of her autonomy. By illustrating Pooro's strength and compassion in the face of overwhelming adversity, Pritam provides a feminist critique of societal norms that prioritize communal honour over individual identity, revealing how women, even in constrained circumstances, resist and subvert the roles imposed upon them. This feminist perspective not only enriches the text but also situates *Pinjar* as an essential work within postcolonial literature, addressing universal themes of identity, agency, and resilience.

Pinjar's relevance extends beyond its historical context, resonating with contemporary discussions on gender and cultural identity in conflict zones around the world. By highlighting the lasting impact of historical traumas on women's lives, Pritam's work underscores the importance of understanding past injustices to inform present-day gender dynamics and discussions on women's rights. The novel's themes of survival, resilience, and identity fragmentation speak to ongoing struggles surrounding cultural displacement and autonomy, suggesting that Pooro's story, though rooted in Partition, is emblematic of broader, universal experiences faced by women throughout history.

Pinjar remains a vital text for examining the intersecting themes of gender, identity, and cultural displacement in postcolonial literature. Through Pooro's fractured yet resilient identity, Pritam critiques the patriarchal and nationalistic forces that sought to impose roles upon women during Partition, while also celebrating the strength and agency of those who defied these constraints. As a powerful testament to women's endurance and resistance, *Pinjar* continues to offer invaluable insights into the lasting scars of historical trauma and the resilience required to navigate fractured identities in a divided world.

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