



ECHOES OF SILENCE: SUFFERING OF WOMEN DURING PARTITION: An analysis of Amrita Pritam's '*Pinjar*' and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's '*Independence*'

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ABSTRACT:-

The Partition of India was a disastrous incident that resulted in unprecedented violence, displacement and trauma. The worst sufferers of the violence were 'women', who had to suffer physical as well as mental brutality. "Estimates suggest that between 75000 to 100000 women were abducted, raped and forcibly converted during the partition riots" (Butalia, 12). Amidst the tumultuous accounts of violence, trauma and sufferings, the stories of women who bear the traumatic consequences of partition on their bodies and souls, remained silent. Their voices were somewhere suppressed in the historical accounts by the patriarchal norms of society. Attacking and molesting the women was the most heinous crime that both the communities committed in order to insult each other. As Priya Haleja has said in '*The Eerie Silence of the Women of Partition*'- "Abduction, rape and mutilation of women was an assertion of one group's identity and the humiliation of the rival..." (Haleja, 2023)

This paper will analyze Amrita Pritam's '*Pinjar*' and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's '*Independence*'. The purpose of this analysis is to understand the trauma and sufferings of women characters, who were unable to express their agony. However, the novels contain evidences of continuous dilemma in their minds, and unspoken questions about their tormented fate.

This paper seeks to perceive and analyze the echoes of those silent sufferers that captivate the partition narratives in a powerful manner.

Key Words :- Humiliation, silence, Trauma, violence, women.

INTRODUCTION:-

The Partition of India in 1947 was a tragic event that called for a horrible massacre. It devastated millions of lives, leaving behind a painful and 'never-healing' scar on the exquisite face of our independence. Decades have passed of that indelible tragedy, but the country has a notch of blood-bathed memories and unspoken sorrows. This land of divinity, peace, patience, enlightenment and non-violence of Krishna, Buddha, Ashoka and Mahatma Gandhi, has witnessed countless murders, merciless tortures and forceful conversions in the name of religion. As Shiv K. Kumar in his book, '*A River with Three Banks*' has said- "This continent has become a savage battlefield. We seem to have lost our sanity." (Kumar, 118)

There are numerous fictional and non-fictional books written on Partition. Scholars and writers are still working on this theme, perhaps for a better understanding of the human sufferings that historical documents didn't record.

Amrita Pritam's *'Pinjar'* depicts the story of a girl 'Pooor', who was abducted. She however, escaped her abductor and returned to her family, but was unkindly betrayed. She had no choice but to return to her abductor Rashida to whom she was married. The book explores her dilemma and silent sufferings.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *'Independence'*, also explores the lives of three sisters, whose lives were completely smashed by the partition violence. They lost their father, in the riots on the 'direct action day'. The story revolve around the struggles of their family to regain stability in life. This novel represents the horrific stories of women sufferings, that are not adequately addressed in the prevailing narratives of nationalism, politics and violence.

"When men go off to be heroes, do they even realize what it does to the women they leave behind?" (Divakaruni, 30)

'Pinjar' by Amrita Pritam:-

Amrita Pritam's *'Pinjar'* is a very powerful novel, which depicts the provoking story of a young girl 'Pooor', who was abducted by Rashida to avenge the abduction of his aunt by Pooor's uncle. The reason of that was the Sheikh family failed to repay the loans of sahukaars. Pooor, however had to suffer for no fault of her own. She escaped her abductor and reached her house, in a hope to get in life again but her family denied to accept her. She eventually returned to Rashida where she was married to him. She was renamed as 'Hamida'. In her dreams, her friends and family still called her 'Pooor', but in reality, she was now neither Pooor nor Hamida. "She was just a skeleton, without a shape or name." (Pritam, 25)

Pooor was a silent sufferer. She never complained about her mental troubles to anyone. She endured her inner turmoil silently. She even stopped shedding tears.

"She simply held her head between her hands and remained where she was for a long time." (Pritam, 29)

She and Rashida settled in another village called 'Sakkar'. With the passage of time, she delivered a son. Out of the whole world, full of betrayers- her parents who denied to accept her, Rashida who shattered her dreams by abducting her, and the society which must be considering her 'impure', this child was the only one whom she felt as hers. "...In all the teeming world, this boy was all that really belonged to her." (Pritam, 34)

However, she continuously faces inner dilemma in the novel. She initially felt a silent conflict between love and hatred for her husband as well as the child. Moreover, Pooor, often in her dreams was living her bridal life. She dreamt of wearing silk dress and wedding bangles. She imagined her palanquin taken to Ramchand's house. This shows how she silently lamented the loss of a happy and grand marriage, which her parents had planned for her.

Pooor, despite of her own plight, was indeed a kind woman. She empathetically embraced the dead madwoman's child and started nurturing him like her own son. With the course of time, she got affectionately attached with the child. However, the Hindus of the village got concerned about the religion of the boy and snatched him away from her. They claimed that the mad woman was a Hindu, so her child should not stay in the house of Muslims. Pooor was disheartened with this loss of hers. She thinks in mind that why not the people, now claiming rights over the little boy took care of him from beginning. Why they let her eat cumin seeds to enrich the flow of milk for the baby. She was both raged and tormented. However, the boy was returned to Rashida and Pooor, when the villagers failed to take care of him. He was not taking food without Pooor, whom he must be feeling to be his mother. People thought that he will soon die as he was already half dead with pale skin and dull color. Therefore, the villagers returned him, to escape from taking the curse of a child's death as a 'sin' on their souls.

The mistrust between communities was so deeply engraved in the hearts of people that it led to the ignorance of the feelings of humanity and affection. When the Partition violence began, Pooor thought that it may be a "mass hysteria" (Pritam, 84) which would be normalized in a day or two. She, however was wrong. The violence became so cruel that cannot be sufficiently put into words. Her heart twinged when she heard of

abduction and tortures of women of Hindu as well as Muslim community. Many were raped, many abducted or killed. Many women were forced to convert and marry. These incidents made Hamida furious. She stayed silent but helped two girls to escape their abductors. One was found hiding in her fields, whom she handed over to Ramchand in a Hindu refugee camp, who were to be taken to India. Another one was Ramchand's sister and her brother's wife 'Lajo'.

With every girl's suffering, Pooro was reminded of her own abduction and betrayal. In a passing convoy of Hindus from 'Rattoval', she encountered 'Ram Chand', her former fiancé. She then came to know that his sister, who was also her brother's wife was abducted while leaving the village. There is an incident in the novel when Pooro sees a group of 'hooligans' dancing around a woman, who was forced to walk naked. She then thinks that- "It was...a crime to be born a girl." (Pritam, 87)

She with her husband Rashida, however rescues 'Lajo', and helped her reunite with her family. While going to Lahore for handing over Lajo to her brother and husband, Pooro was very excited as well as nervous. She was going to meet her long lost brother for the first and last time. The thought that was sinking her heart was that this reunion would be of a very short duration, accompanied by a life-long separation.

There she got a chance to return to her family when her brother asked her to accompany them to India. She however, chose to stay in Pakistan, for now she has started admiring the kind and humane aspects of Rashida's personality. She realized that though he has done a non-forgivable crime by abducting her, he has taken care of her since then. Moreover, perhaps she must have thought that the patriarchal Indian society will never accept her graciously, that too with a child born from a Muslim man. There are experiences of numerous women who were forced to leave their children as they were considered the symbols of shame. As Priya Haleja says-

"Women... if they had had children, they had to leave them behind. If they were pregnant, they were encouraged to abort." (Haleja, 2023)

Pooro represents the victim women, who bore the weight of traumatic sufferings in stoic silence. She harbored the hurt in a quiet, unyielding heart. However, a fire of agony was continuously sparkling in the depths of her soul. As Pritam has said- "There was a spark somewhere deep down within her which also refused to go out." (Pritam, 79)

When she heard that her brother came to take her with him and failed to get her whereabouts, he burnt Rashida's farms with a vindictive intent. Pooro did not react but she felt a sense of pride and satisfaction as her brother "...had grown to be a man and was filled with a desire to avenge the insult to his sister..." (Pritam, 93). Her excruciating and implicit sufferings dwindled her faith in God. The echoes of her unspoken sufferings are evident in the novel as "she often used to say that Allah was her step-father or she the step-daughter of Isvara, because neither the one nor the other had given a fig for her sorrows." (Pritam, 100)

The novel ends on a very emotive note, when Pooro beseeched her brother that if he will be successful in getting his wife accepted in family with respect and affection, he may feel that his sister also returned 'home'. Pooro, with her eyes closed says to herself- "... whoever reaches her destination, she carries along may soul too." (Pritam, 127)

'Independence' by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni :-

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's '*Independence*' is another influential novel based on the struggles and sufferings of Ganguly family. Dr. Nabakumar and Bina had three daughters- Deepa, Jamini and Priya. The story revolves around the struggle of these sisters after their father is killed on the 'Direct Action Day'. Dr. Nabakumar with his friend and partner Dr. Abdullah had been a part of the 'Salt March'. They quit their jobs and joined the revolution, responding to the call of Mahatma Gandhi for the 'Dandi March'. They proudly boast about their adventures of the 'March' and jail. Bina, however gets furious about these things. She vehemently articulates her problems and struggle which she and her little daughters faced during those hard days.

Dr. Abdullah is very distressed about the news of Partition. He says that it was the land for which our people belonging to different religious sects fought for. No one may have thought that this country would be divided on the basis of religion. He could not believe his ears when he heard Jinnah declaring his stubborn demand for Pakistan. He quotes Jinnah- "We will have a divided India or a destroyed India." (Divakaruni, 28)

On the 'Direct Action Day', while going to his clinic in Calcutta to help the injured ones, Nabakumar got attacked by the rioters. He was destined a painful death. This turned Bina furious about the Muslims. She started hating the community. Her family was scattered and she with her daughters had to face a tough struggle for stability. The sufferings ignited the spark of rage in Bina's heart and shook her faith in God, who did not save her husband's life. She said to her daughters-

"Which God should I pray to ? ...The God who allowed your Baba to be butchered?" (Divakaruni, 58)

Perhaps this hatred for the other community made Bina more furious about Deepa's affair with Raza. She disowned her. Deepa had no choice other than going to her beloved. Raza was however, very helpful to her. He found her a job in Muslim League's office of writing speeches and slogans for the leaders. She stayed silent and did the tedious jobs. She loves Raza, but she knows she has chosen a path which has no retreat. People at office likes her because "...she expresses no opinions, and who does not like that in a woman" (Divakaruni, 118).

Deepa's life also resembles the silent sufferings of many women, which she cannot express in words but very deeply feels. When her Muslim colleagues make fun of the auspicious Durga Puja, she felt offended but was compelled to stay silent. Deep down in her heart, she knew she was alone among those who have very different social and cultural values than hers. She felt isolated in crowd. "Her throat aches with loneliness" (Divakaruni, 119). She loved Raza very much but she knew that this path of love will never allow her to retreat towards her family. She silently misses her mother and sisters and sometimes craves for an affectionate reunion. She wrote to Priya as she wanted to meet her mother for one last time before leaving for Dacca. However, she was sure that it was not possible as Bina will never forgive her.

However, Deepa's life was thrown into complete chaos with Raza's death under suspicious circumstances. A man whom she suspected to be the mastermind behind her husband's murder was pressuring her to marry him. When Priya learnt about these mis happenings, she instantly postponed her journey back to America. Bina's anger too, turned into affectionate anxiety. She got desperate to bring Deepa and Sameera back. Priya along with Hamid, Amit and Jamini went to rescue her beloved eldest sister and niece. Jamini, who never seemed so affectionate towards her sisters, decides to endanger her life to save Deepa and little Sameera. This shows that though she was a person filled with rage of physical inferiority, who always was keen to snatch her share of happiness, was indeed a person who can sacrifice her life for her sister. The relationship of the three sisters resembles their unbreakable bond and unexpressed love towards each other. They finally succeed in rescuing Deepa and her daughter, though they lost Amit.

Priya's life was saddened and shattered. She lost her father, her love, added with an expulsion from the Women's College in Philadelphia. She however, began working at Calcutta clinic which belonged to Nabakumar and Dr. Abdullah. She tried to learn the medical methods, and very affectionately served the patients. She soon got a chance to meet Sarojini Naidu, a symbol of women empowerment and an ideal for her. Mrs. Naidu not only wrote a recommendation letter to Calcutta medical college for providing Priya a fair chance of admission, she also boosted her morale. She said-

"You are a daughter of independence, the country's future...You may fall from time to time. We all did. What is important is to get up again." (Divakaruni, 278)

These words of motivation ignited the spark of self-confidence in her. She not only completed her course in medicine from Calcutta Medical College, but became an efficient and renowned doctor, and a moral and financial support to her family. She refused all the matches for marriage suggested by Manorma. When Somnath, whom she considered her guardian and owe the credit of all her success asked her to marry for getting entitled to a happy life ahead, she firmly said that she was happy and contented. She silently and willingly cherished her sacred love with Amit in her memories.

CONCLUSION:-

There were numerous women like Pooro, who never talked about their horrific experiences of violence, abduction or rape, mostly because of shame or the pressure of the patriarchal social norms which prevented them to open out their emotional trauma. The society considered them 'impure'. They had to carry a heavy weight of brutality as well as social discrimination on their already tormented heart and soul.

Chitra B. Divakaruni has described in her book '*Independence*', that the newly formed native Government of India was making remarkable progresses. The constitution was taking shape. The independence which costed numerous sacrifices was cherished by every Indian. However, there were people whose troubles were big and deep enough to feel the happiness of national pride and progress. There were people, especially women like Priya, who were keen about knowing the advancements of nation on the path of independence. However, their pains were big enough to eclipse their joys of breathing in an independent country. Priya's mind is mapped in the following lines from the book-

"It all seemed unreal to her; her personal troubles...overshadow even the greatest national gains."
(Divakaruni, 237)

There were many women who were recovered from the abductors and returned to their families or were settled in rehabilitation centers, if their families denied to accept them. They somehow collected the shattered pieces of their hearts and tried to begin a new and normal life. Therefore, in many cases, they didn't want the misfortune of their past to ruin their present lives, so they chose to remain silent about their sufferings. The hearts of women, who experienced trauma and were not able to express their grief, must be like molten lavas waiting for eruption anytime, but they perhaps were forcibly silenced. As Urvashi Butalia has said in '*The Other Side of Silence: voices from the Partition of India*' –

"...speaking about them...not only meant opening up of old wounds, but also being prepared to live with the consequences – perhaps another rejection, another trauma." (Butalia, 360)

During the partition violence, numerous women were abducted and tortured by men of other community to prove the superiority of one religion over the other. Abductors used to feel a sense of victory over the religion, to which the abducted or raped female belonged to. Moreover, the most beloved daughters of the families, when abducted, if managed to escape somehow, were spurned by their own families. They were considered to be 'impure' and became a matter of 'shame' for their families in the society. Rajeev Shukla in his book, "scars of 1947: Real Partition stories" has written-

"...the daughters, who already must have gone through a lot trauma, suffered further by being spurned by their own flesh and blood." (Shukla 64)

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