

Chronicles of Women in Indian History and Her-story: A Critique of Partition Writings and Other Selected Texts

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Abstract

It has been a little over 77 years since India's partition in 1947, however, the trauma of the tumultuous event continues to haunt the spirit of every Indian, till date. While various works document first-hand narratives of men who experienced those trying times in their lifetimes, only a few works of historical fiction offer a peep into the minds of the women who witnessed them. It thus becomes essential to give voice to the hitherto unheard stories of women with regard to significant junctures of history. The proposed paper aims to analyse Amrita Pritam's novel *Pinjar* by juxtaposing it with Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* by reading both the works through the lens of feminism and gender history. The said texts are set in India's partition and offer its rich critique from the perspective of women. Taking a cue from the aforesaid texts, the study also endeavours to delve into the contribution of unsung women warriors of Punjab by critically analysing *Lioness of Punjab* by Anita Jari Kharbanda and *The Last Queen* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Close reading techniques will be applied in order to emphasise the importance of oral tradition in Indian culture.

Keywords: Feminism; History; Partition; Punjab; Women.

Introduction

Gallons of blood, genocide, exodus, mass rapes, hostile homes, abandoned homelands et al, the riots which accompanied the India-Pakistan partition in 1947 consumed not just a plethora of lives in its aftermath, but also gagged the voices of women who experienced its horrors first-hand. Women's bodies became sites of violence and the survivors carried the

scars of those trying times until they breathed their last. Men sought vengeance upon each other by outraging the modesty of women. Many women were displaced, abducted or raped during the riots that accompanied the partition. As if the brutal violence meted out to such women by their perpetrators was not enough, what made it worse was the blatant refusal of their parents and husbands to reintegrate them into the family when they were repatriated from Pakistan.

In 1948, Jawahar Lal Nehru, the then Prime Minister of India issued a statement on the burning issue as he condemned the act of people who turned down the women who were ravished during the riots which accompanied the partition, "I am told that there is an unwillingness on the part of their relatives to accept those girls and women (who have been abducted) back in their homes. This is a most objectionable and wrong attitude to take and any social custom which supports this attitude must be condemned" (Menon 99).

It thus becomes essential to give voice to the hitherto unheard stories of women with regard to significant junctures of history. Amrita Pritam's novel *Pinjar* is one such work which demands attention as it offers a rich critique of the partition from the perspective of women. The cinematic adaptation of the novel earned a lot of critical acclaim just like the text on which it was based for realistically bringing to the fore the horrid experiences of women in the aftermath of the India-Pakistan partition. The novel lays testimony to the observation made by Pritam with regard to feminism and gendered histories, "There are many stories which are not on paper. They're written in the bodies and minds of women" (Pritam).

Set against the backdrop of the India-Pakistan partition of 1947, Amrita Pritam captures the essence of the trouble brewing between Hindus and Muslims throughout that dark phase as she writes during the novel, "The Muslims had become very aggressive. Hindu girls never ventured out except in the broad daylight of the afternoon" (Pritam 12). The story follows the life of a free-spirited young girl Pooro, whose wings are clipped forever owing to her supposed "defilement" after a Muslim man Rashida abducts her. Akin to the way in which women become soft targets for men to seek their vengeance over each other during times of conflict, in the novel an ancestral enmity is cited as the reason behind her abduction. Pooro hopes to escape and be united with her family once again. Irony runs deep throughout the work but becomes absolutely unmissable when Pooro's father considers it prudent to stay mum about the matter to protect his family's honour.

The novel which doesn't stick to a linear timeline, starts by a pensive Pooro staring vacantly into space as she thinks about the past. The reader is then acquainted with the fact that she was forcibly abducted by a "Muslim lad" (Pritam 14) Rashida just a few days before her marriage to one Ram Chand. After leading a couple of months in captivity without any hope of escaping in sight, Pooro subsequently surrenders to her fate and finds herself reduced to a body without a soul, a skeleton, as the work's title suggests. She craves freedom and one fine day manages to flee from Rashida's clutches. On her return home, much to her dismay, she suffers mass character assassination even at the hands of her own family. To her shock, her own parents ask her to go back to Rashida in order to save the prestige of the family. It is during that crucial moment in the story that Rashida's earlier warning reverberates in the mind of not just Pooro but also of the reader, as they go back to the times when abducted Hindu women were turned down by their own families when they were repatriated from Pakistan. Majority of such women met the same fate as Pooro when their own parents and husbands refused to accept them with the bitter words that, "You have no place in that home now" (Pritam 23). Distraught, and shaken up by the disregard of her parents in taking her back she considers committing suicide until Rashida comes and reiterates that she must go back with him as nobody else will accept her anymore. That is when she becomes the mouthpiece of millions of other women like her who were subjected to the same fate.

Many women were abducted, violated and left to live a life of shame devoid of agency, during the dark phase. During the course of the novel, Pritam mentions that even refugee camps ceased to be safe places for women as men of the other religion proliferated the area and mercilessly captured women. One of the characters shudders at the thought when she narrates the stark reality of the refugee camps to Pooro, "There was a refugee camp in the adjoining village set up for the Hindus and Sikhs. The camp was guarded by Pakistani soldiers. After sunset, bands of goondas and Muslim men stole in, picked out women they liked and took them for the night; they were returned to the encampment in the morning." (Pritam 66). The girl breaks down while telling Pooro how she was forced to spend the preceding nine nights with different men, until she finally escaped from their clutches and hid in the sugarcane fields where Pooro finally found her. The plight of the woman sends a chill down Pooro's spine. Her heart goes out to the girl and she cries in pain, "It was a sin to be alive in a world so full of evil...It was a crime to be born a girl" (Pritam 66).

The novel examines the various dimensions of violence against women

on physical, mental, religious and social levels through the character of Pooro. The novel also touches upon Stockholm Syndrome, which is a psychological response wherein a captive quite incongruously begins to identify closely with the captor. The Stockholm Syndrome that Pooro starts suffering from becomes evident when her brother and the man of her dreams Ram Chand offer her an earnest chance to bid farewell to the life of captivity she has been forced to lead with Rashida in Pakistan by going to India with them, Pooro shows no signs of happiness. She frantically looks for Rashida and when she cannot see him around, she is rendered problematically restless. She decides to stay with Rashida in Pakistan and turns down the only chance she had of going to her homeland India perhaps because of the cementing of the bond with her captor Rashida.

There are many other moments in the beautifully crafted work where Amrita Pritam tugs at the heartstrings of the readers. She leaves her readers with many lingering questions pertaining to the status of women which follow them around long after they have finished reading the book. The loss of identity is also hinted at on multiple levels during the work. Pooro is compelled to sever all ties her maiden Hindu name and upbringing after her forced Nikah (marriage) with Rashida. She is given the name Hamida and she is compelled to get it inscribed on her forearm with indelible ink as a constant reminder of the same. The incident brings to light the theme of loss of identity and sense of homelessness for innumerable women.

With the passage of time, Pooro becomes pregnant with Rashida's child and ends up miscarrying it. In order to fill the void, she adopts a deceased Hindu woman's child and raises it as her own. Religious disturbances loom large as a result of which the Panchayat orders her to return the child so that he can be "purified" and given a Hindu upbringing. The realistic portrayal of women's plight during the partition era, sensitises one to the social milieu which existed during those times.

While women's side of the story was seldom heard back in the day, it is only recently that writers and other history scholars have started exhuming the hitherto unheard voices of women from under the rubble in a bid to offer a true picture of the turmoil that followed the partition. With the unearthing of hidden stories of women from the recesses of this dark phase, some women's writings have started to address the absence of women's voices from the majority of the documented history of those times. It thus becomes essential to examine true accounts of the hitherto unheard experiences of women from significant junctures of history. In order to achieve the aforesaid aim, the present paper proposes to analyse

celebrated Feminist Historiographer Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. Butalia highlighted the significance of oral tradition in India in helping one understand the real experiences during the partition as she famously noted that "There is no way we can begin to understand what Partition was about, unless we look at how people remember it."

The selected work brings back the conveniently forgotten experiences of women into the archives where they were denied an entry so far. Although Butalia is quick to admit that memory serves as a rather unreliable source, she holds the view that oral histories offer a humanistic dimension of historical events, which is in contrast to the tendency of history books to look at everything mainly through a political angle. The book which has often been hailed as a feminist retelling of history sees Butalia weaving together first-hand narratives of people who experienced partition in their lifetimes. Many members of Butalia's family were partition refugees and hence she grew up listening to personal narratives about the partition at her place, that is when the idea hit Butalia that "there was a discourse, a replaying of private memories inside homes which was really very active but which found no articulation in the public world..." ("The Other") and suddenly she "began to hear their stories in a way that I (she) had never heard". By focussing on the lived experiences of women, children and Dalits who witnessed partition during their lives, Butalia juxtaposes facts and memories together in order to bring forth untold stories where women's bodies were metamorphosed into battlegrounds by men who wanted to avenge deaths of their kith and kin.

As Butalia researched for her book, she encountered several harsh realities which left her aghast. Accounts of women she spoke to revealed to her that the violence against women existed at multiple levels, they were made to suffer not just at the hands of their perpetrators but their own families, particularly Sikh and Hindu families, made them suffer the atrocities in silence, under the garb of protecting their own honour. When women from their families were abducted, raped, impregnated by men belonging to the other religion, their families chose to kill those women rather than reporting those incidents to the police. The work ponders over the undercurrent surrounding these discussions on sexuality when it brings forth the account of her friend Lina Dhingra's aunt Damyanti Sehgal who lived through that time. The said woman (Damyanti), who rescued some of the abducted women narrated their personal ordeals when missing reports were finally lodged in police stations following which they were forcibly sent to their "natural" homes based on their religion. Many were

rehabilitated in ashrams as their families refused to take them back on the basis of the widespread presumption that “since they had had sex with Muslim men they were polluted now” (“The Other”). The revelations that surfaced during Butalia’s encounters with oral histories of women from those times, made her believe that history books do not do justice to the word partition as there are a lot of unfinished histories from those times which are waiting to be heard.

Not only were the horrid recollections of women from that tumultuous period brushed under the carpet in mainstream works of historical fiction and partition writings penned by men, but the contributions of women in Punjab’s crusade against the Mughal rule also seldom found a mention in standard books of history. It thus becomes important to acquaint oneself with the strength and resilience showcased by women who deserve to be remembered and commended for their formidable stand against tyranny.

Author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni realised how “history pushes women to the corners” (“The Last”) when she could not identify Maharani Jind’s portrait presented by William Dalrymple on the screen during one of his events on his work *Koh-i-noor*. She blushed scarlet at her ignorance to be blissfully oblivious of the heroic deeds of the last queen of Punjab, although she knew about her husband - Maharaja Ranjit Singh and son, Maharaja Duleep Singh. Also known as the ‘Mother of Khalsa’, Maharani Jind’s story was waiting to be heard by people who had conveniently forgotten all about her.

Divakaruni took it upon herself to change how things were and that prompted the inception of her celebrated work *The Last Queen*. She immersed herself into the books on the fall and rise of the Sikh empire and found nothing but only a few paragraphs on Maharani Jind Kaur. “She was written out of history as were many other women” and this lamentation made Divakaruni even more determined to bring the Maharani “to the centre-stage” (“The Last”). Divakaruni observed during one of her interviews during the Jaipur Literature Festival that she did not want women’s stories written through the voices of men and hence, “It was very important for me to tell the story through the female gaze” (“The Last”). True to her endeavour, the book brings to light the fearlessness of Maharani Jind who was last queen of the Sikh empire but the first one to appear in public and lift her veil in order to gain her army’s allegiance. After Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s demise, Maharani Jind battled the British relentlessly until her own troops turned traitors to her cause during the Anglo-Sikh war. Intimidated by the show of her indomitable spirit, the British started

seeing her as a thorn in their flesh which must be plucked and thrown away from their way.

A fiery young queen in her prime, Maharani Jind did not originally come from a royal descent. She came from a kennel keeper's house who looked after the dogs and horses of the royal family. Maharani Jindan caught Maharaja Ranjit Singh's eye when she managed to pacify a horse who was otherwise extremely aversive to people. The duo got talking and during their free-wheeling conversations, the Maharaja discovered that there was more to her than met the eye, not only was she beautiful but what endeared her more to the Maharaja was the fact that she was also enchantingly intelligent. He soon developed an interest in her when he found out that he could talk to her about anything under the sun and she would not be at sea...right from the state matters that he discussed with her to him sharing his vision of uniting Punjab, she possessed the intellect and keen eye to understand it all. During their courtship period, apart from assisting the Maharaja in the affairs of the state, Maharani Jind broke another gender stereotype when she decided to propose to Maharaja Ranjit Singh rather than waiting for him to pop the question, which was something almost unthinkable back in the day. Her courage and intelligence soon made her very dear to the Maharaja and he promised to her that she would be his last queen and that he would not get betrothed to anybody else after tying the knot with her.

After her marriage with the Maharaja, Maharani Jind charismatically took over the new role accorded to her. Since the Maharani had the disposition of calling a spade a spade she earned a lot of enemies for herself, but Maharaja Ranjit Singh took it all in his stride and actually "listened to her" before taking any major decisions. She was not the sort to sugar-coat things unlike the other sycophants who surrounded Maharaja Ranjit Singh during his reign, and hence he could always rely on her when he wanted someone's true opinion on something. After Maharaja Ranjit Singh's demise, his son Maharaja Duleep Singh ascended to the throne, however since he was merely five years old at that time, Maharani Jind was declared the Regent of the Sikh Empire from 1843 to 1847 on her son's behalf.

So, while her son Duleep Singh became the nominal head, all the major decisions related to the affairs of the kingdom were taken by Maharani Jind. During her reign, Maharani Jindan emerged as a fine administrator. Not only did she govern impeccably, but she also kept the army together and managed to keep the kingdom immune from British usurpation for as

long as she could. She motivated the Khalsa army to retaliate with all their might against an annexation attempt by the British. When the Sikh Empire was dissolved in 1847 after losing the first Anglo-Sikh war, the Sikh community claimed Jindan Kaur as their Maharani and declared her the successor of Maharaja Duleep Singh. The British, however, paid no heed to the claims and took complete control. Nonetheless, since the Britishers felt threatened by her fiery spirit, they decided to send her into exile. She was separated from her son Duleep Singh and was sent to different prisons and forts as far away from Punjab as possible, because the British knew that she was deeply adored for her leadership in Punjab. She kept fighting against the British even in exile. Her fearlessness continued to engender great fear in the British in India and she cleverly escaped incarceration by fleeing from Nepal.

When Maharani Jindan Kaur finally reunited with her son Duleep after the passage of over thirteen years of separation, she could not hold back her tears. The tears came trickling down her cheek not because of the momentous occasion but more so because of her lamentation at everything that the British had taken away from her. When she felt Duleep's short hair on her fingertips as she caressed him, the realisation immediately set in that Maharaja Duleep Singh had been forced to convert his faith from Sikhism to Christianity. It angered her beyond measure that the British snatched so much away from her plump-cheeked son, his throne, his kingdom, the Kohinoor and even his religion. The ire that Maharani Jindan Kaur expressed on becoming acquainted with that fact showcased the spine of steel that she still possessed even when her body had grown physically frail with old age. She firmly posed an incisive question to her son "The British have taken everything from you, Beta...I know you were too young to stop them, but your religion, how could you let them take that too?" ("The Last"). Even though the British stripped even the Maharani of everything she maintained a fighting spirit and dreamed of reinstating the Sikh Empire, until she breathed her last. Such was her stature that even the British labelled her the "Messalina of the Punjab" (Fredriksen).

According to Divakaruni, it is a shame that her book is perhaps the only one which chronicles the acts of valour of the last queen of Lahore- Maharani Jindan née Jind Kaur who fearlessly fought against the British and yet her name seldom finds a mention in standard books of history. With not much information available about the Maharani on record, the selected novel is a product of Divakaruni's extensive research wherein she got to know about the Maharani's life by reading letters written by her apart from a thorough study of the journals maintained by Maharaja Duleep

Singh's guardians. Divakaruni's firm resolve to bring Maharani Jind's tale out of the long forgotten lanes of history is captured succinctly in her remark, "I thought, a spirited woman like her deserved to be better known and celebrated, and so I decided to write this novel" (Fredriksen). Maharaja Duleep Singh becomes the mouthpiece of the author when he ponders on the implications of his mother's absence from the pages of history while immersing her ashes into the sea, "People revered his father as the Lion of Punjab, but his mother is the one they should have called Lioness. In her way, wasn't she braver than Ranjit Singh? Didn't she fight greater obstacles? (Tata)"

Another text which illuminates the fierceness exhibited by a woman during an important juncture of history is *Lioness of Punjab* by Anita Jari Kharbanda. Much like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the author of the book at hand, Anita Jari Kharbanda always knew that if she were to ever write a story then "a Sikh woman would be at the forefront of it. I will tell it in her voice through all of her challenges and triumphs ("11 Questions")." The work is a tribute to Mai Bhago, a woman highly revered in the Sikh community, who courageously led forty men during Punjab's crusade for liberation from Mughal rule. Although Mai Bhago is hailed as the first woman Sikh warrior and is revered in Sikhism Anita Kharbanda felt that "yet very few details are known about her life. So I wanted to give a voice to the one who deserved it" ("11 Questions").

Strangely enough, during her pursuit to write the book, Anita stumbled upon a lot of books on Sikhism which were available with the Sikh Research Institute, the Gurudwaras and the local libraries, however, "in almost every book it was almost the same, approximately two paragraphs about Mai Bhago. There was very little information" ("11 Questions").

Mai Bhago who was born as Bhag Bari never complied with stereotypical expectations that society affixed on women. Her resilience startled those around her when she declared, "I will not accept my fate as a woman" (Kharbanda). She requested her father to teach her how to correctly wield a weapon so that she could combat the rampant injustice prevalent in the society. When the tenth Guru of Sikhs - Guru Gobind Singh was attacked by the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb in 1705, Mai Bhago motivated the army which was on the brink of desertion to get back on the battlefield and fight against the opponent with all their might. Her powerful words sprung the warriors back into action as she commanded, "We will fight here... We are strong. We will have no fear. As Sikh warriors, we are ready to fight for justice. Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa! Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh!" (Khar-

banda).

The selected texts have finally started giving voice to the women who had been obliterated from history despite displaying formidable resilience, fearlessness and courage in the face of danger. The aim of the study is to encourage further research on the lives of other such women so that standard books of history undo the erasure of women's voices from public memory.

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