



IIT ROORKEE



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CERTIFICATION COURSE

# Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema

LECTURE 29 – ACCOUNTS OF THE SURVIVOR

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# Pinjar – Identity

- Rashid's mother embeds a tattoo on Pooru's hand named 'Hamida,' thus compromising her identity. Pooru, a Hindu name that could cause much disquiet in a Muslim-majority society, is overwritten by the newly tattooed name Hamida, which symbolizes status-quo.
- Like the rest of her body, which is beyond her control, her hand bears out her changed identity and witnesses her becoming visibly Muslim. The tattoo is intended to forcefully seal the process of her abduction and religious conversion, through negating her past identity and relationships.
- The identity of Hamida, especially the way she herself uses it to disguise as a blanket-seller, allows her the freedom that would be unimaginable to either a Hindu betrothed woman or an abducted riot victim.



# Pinjar - Identity

- Her figuration of Hamida is that of a poor Muslim woman who sells wares and is behaviorally not dictated by the strictures of the upper-class. She can enter an unfamiliar household, freely associate with unknown people and ultimately play the savior of another female victim.
- After assuming the identity of Hamida, Pooru treats Rashid as an equal partner who supports her personal goal – a kind of man-woman relationship that she had earlier never experienced with any other male relative in the past.

# Identity

- Rashid also helps Pooru in rescuing another abducted Hindu woman from a Muslim household. This woman is Pooru's brother's wife. Pooru uses her tattooed name Hamida to her own advantage for winning the confidence of the abductor's family and helping her sister-in-law escape captivity. This is an instance of Pooru translating her body marking into a site of power.
- Pooru's tattoo is not etched on her body in normal times; it permanently defines her as a war prize. Yet it also delineates a reverse journey for her, from being the figure of an outsider that inspires communal rivalry and sacrilege to becoming kin to her abductor's family and his immediate cosmos, which begins to trust and espouse her within the new space.

# Pinjar - Identity

- Hamida becomes the new reality while the partially razed ghost of Pooru keeps coming back to haunt the former now and then. Even after being forced to marry Rasheed, Pooru fantasizes her marriage with Ramchand.
- There is a clear tension between her two identities when Pooru's brother, as a way of avenging Rashid's crime sets fire to his crops, but Hamida's household suffers the consequences of this rash action.
- This is a common moment in the post-Partition period, when hostility between two men from enemy communities centering a woman imperils the latter. By rescuing her sister-in-law, Hamida/Pooru spares her the painful fractured existence like herself.

## Pinjar - Identity

- The issue of identity crisis doesn't restrict itself to Pooru's case, but extends to all such women who had to face religious conversions across both sides of the border, entering a new cultural and geographical space. As an example, had Laajo not been rescued by Pooru, she would have continued to live in that household with a re-invented identity.
- We see a personality conversion of both Pooru and Laajo after their abduction and rape. They transform into silent, unhappy women from lively, happy young women.

# Pinjar - Identity

- While Pooru's miscarried pregnancy symbolizes an unfruitful sexual union, adoption of a child suggests an attempt on Rashid's part to connect with Pooru/Hamida through recognizing and amending for the trauma he has caused to her.
- Afterwards, the village headmen dispute over the possible communal identity of the dead woman and her child, and decide that Pooru/Hamida, being the wife of a Muslim man, cannot claim the child's custody.
- Paradoxically, the tattooed name Hamida looms large on Pooru's failed motherhood, yet this tragic episode is also the beginning of Pooru's conscious intersection with Hamida. It enables reciprocal humane feelings between Rashid and his wife.

# The Mad Woman

- The entry of a mad woman in the narrative stirs the anxieties of masculinized and communalized groups. Her nakedness is a metaphor for her non-religious identity. It causes alarm, even though she harms no one.
- Amrita Pritam introduces a note of irony here. A communally divided society marginalizes the non-sectarian identity as ‘mad, alarming and a source of terror.’ The mad woman becomes pregnant, a further comment on the dehumanized society.
- Ultimately, she dies giving birth to a boy. Was this the death of an individual’s identity?

## Continued...

- Hamida adopts the mad woman's child. A panchayat of Hindus believes: 'The mad woman was a Hindu. The Muslims have grabbed a Hindu child. Under the very noses of Hindus, they have converted a Hindu child into a Muslim.'
- Hindu elders of the village snatch the child from Hamida, 'purify' it, and give it to the water-carrier's wife for his upbringing.
- A powerful statement on the dominance of aggressive religious assertions and their impact on social relations before Partition.

# Continued..

- Pooru makes a strong statement criticizing the impregnation of the helpless woman, saying, “...she who had no beauty, no youth, only a body of flesh, the one without a conscience, only a skeleton, a mad skeleton. The eagles devoured her too.”
- The rape of the woman, her impregnation and the politics over her child stands as an example of how patriarchy is central to communal disputes.
- Pooru being a woman had taken a social decision, which is discarded by a panchayat of men and their decision is imposed on her.

# Pinjar

- In times when religious identity became a brutal blueprint of territorial boundaries and nationalism, Amrita and her female protagonist critique the overlapping of religious community with ‘nation’, highlight patriarchal hypocrisy and challenge nationalist obsessions.

# Amrita Pritam's life

- Nonica Datta about the partition experiences of Pritam - “In 1947, Lahore was turned into a graveyard,” Amrita writes. “It was the politics of hate that swept Lahore in flames; at night one would see houses being in flames, hear cries of desperation, and witness long hours of curfew during the day” (Pritam 1999:14). “In Lahore, at night, I ... could hear those shrieks which got suppressed in the day-long curfew.... At night, I would watch Lahore burning from my rooftop.”
- The rise in the communal temperature reminds her of her father's persecution by religious bigots. “Does this land not belong to those who are born here? For whom are those spears flashing in their hands?” (Pritam 2001, 5).”

# Amrita Pritam

- Her narrative problematizes the ‘experience’ of Punjabi women; as a witness and narrator, her account differs from narratives drawing on Punjab’s religious and communal traditions.
- Partition is the most crucial moment in defining her worldview; it enables her to forge a *kainaati rishta* (fraternal relationship) with the universe, and to create her world in accordance with Punjab’s language, culture and social history.
- Amrita Pritam’s life history reveals how she locates herself in family, community, and nation in the aftermath of Punjab’s Partition, and attaches inner meanings to religious languages.

# Amrita Pritam

- Amrita Pritam interrogates the logic of Partition – “There was no basis for Partition....It had fragile foundations. Punjab’s legacy is a shared one: our poetry starts with Baba Farid in the twelfth century...”
- Punjab’s literary cultures gave her the sensibility to respond to the violence and pain of Partition, and to cope with her anguish after her uprooting and displacement.
- She narrates- “The Partition of India continued to become a festered wound in the bosom of history. Nobody would ever know how the dreams of so many girls of this country were slaughtered...”

# Amrita Pritam

- Amrita Pritam's idea of cultural community and identity testifies to a plurality in Punjab that exemplified through cultural symbols, motifs, and landscapes.
- She does not identify with national borders, which are political constructs and imagined projections of territorial power. For her, Partition was a destructive but also a creative moment. She feels rootless, separated from her lover and her homeland.

## Pritam's poems

Pritam writes a poem 'Tavarikh' (history) which echoes the voice of a young girl, who like thousands of other such girls, got lost somewhere.' She compares Punjab's Partition with the anguish of an abducted woman.

“Nobody to consult the stars  
The honour of the house was crushed in the bazaar.  
Where is the mother who is queen?  
The father who is king?  
Who has cursed the daughter?  
Where are my own sisters, my own brothers?  
Who has torn apart the ties of wood?  
Where are the childhood friends, my own village?  
Who can I tell what happened to me—  
As if my limbs had been torn from my body?...”

## Pritam's Poems

- Without using the categories of religion, community and caste, Amrita Pritam underscores a woman's experience of Partition as universal and irreparable in 'Tavarikh'. "Who can sense the pain of such a girl—the youth, whose body is forced into motherhood" (Pritam 2001: 12).
- Amrita Pritam describes the trauma of rape in her poem "Helplessness" through the metaphor of a mother's womb. The womb is a victim of Partition's madness: "I am the symbol of that accident." Partition is like the accursed child born of the womb.
- Like the surgical operation on the womb, Punjab is divided into two parts. The helpless womb is compared to the helpless Punjab, and it bore "fruit," when "the trees of Independence were in bud." The child that was born was in fact a "blackened spot."

# Pritam's poems

- Pritam expresses her disillusionment with Independence, nation, and the newly drawn territorial boundaries that destroyed the rhythm and dreams of everyday life.
- In her poem, 'The Story of Punjab'- she mourns that a flourishing Punjab was cut down in its green age.' The poem poignantly captures the rural landscape and the shattering of everyday life.

# Pritam

- Pritam offers an alternative voice in history. In many ways, her life history constitutes a counter-narrative to dominant histories of 1947 and it serves as an alternative archive of Partition (Burton 2003: 134).
- Her relationship with her own religious community remains ambivalent, distant, conflictive.
- Amrita Pritam's account informs us that a refugee's anguish is not necessarily rendered into a communalized consciousness, but can also be transform into poetic sensibility.

# Thank You

