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The Skeleton: Women And Partition

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Abstract:

This study will enable us to assess the condition of women during and after Partition. The purpose of this research is to find out the post-partition effects on women which inflicted more mental agony than physical pain. The aim of this study is to enquire into the life of women who were not only physically tortured but also mentally dislocated, suffered displacement and lost their identity in a patriarchal society due to Partition. This study will delve deeper into the sufferings that women of the sub-continent had to undergo because of the decision to divide the country on the basis of religion. For this purpose I have taken up the novel *The Skeleton* by Amrita Pritam. *The Skeleton* highlights the women's sufferings, exploitation and sacrifices because of their dislocation and abduction during Partition.

Keywords: Partition, women, abduction, rape, dislocation, sufferings

“Nobody realized that people would suffer so much – houses burnt down, neighbours killing each other, and women being abducted and raped...There was darkness all around. How could so many millions be dispossessed and displaced?” (Bhatia 7)

Amrita Pritam's *The Skeleton* is the story of Puro, who is ostracized by her own family and society. She is abducted by a Muslim boy, Rasheed before Partition and after becoming Rasheed's wife, she is given a new muslim name Hamida. She begins to suffer from identity crisis and becomes a hopeless skeleton, finding herself in the cage of Rasheed. Amrita Pritam writes: “she was just a skeleton, without a shape or a name” (Pritam 25). The novel accurately portrays the life of a woman before Partition who has been kidnapped by a Muslim lad, discarded by her family, her name was distorted, her religion was transformed, she was married to the man who abducted her. These circumstances reduced her to only a soulless skeleton. But still she tried to live her life in spite of the pain and sufferings.

Rashid the protagonist in *The Skeleton* prevents a shocked and distressed Puro from jumping into the village well and marries her the next day which is symbolic of the temporary dislocation of the woman-- from the Puro as a happy young woman eagerly waiting for her marriage day to the Puro, now an outcaste, having been abducted by a man, not only from another village but also of another religion. Puro, an epitome of violence against women and loss of humanity ultimate surrenders to existential fate. In *Borders and Boundaries* (1998), Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin remark: “We begin to discern some specific features of ‘communal’ crimes against women...women's sexuality symbolises ‘man-hood’; its desecration is a matter of such shame and dishonour that it has to be avenged...it is women ultimately who are most violently dealt with as a consequence.” (43).

The Skeleton highlights the women's sufferings, exploitation and sacrifices because of their dislocation and abduction during partition. Accordingly abduction and rape of women of one community by men of the other became a way of 'dishonouring' the other as actual and symbolic subjugation. Inherent in these acts also are the notions of women as belongings. In both the cases it is the women that suffer the humiliation. One night Puro escapes from Rashid's confinement and manages to return to her family, but her parents do not accept her. That is the social stigma of abduction that is responsible for Puro's ostracization and it is further clear from her mother's comments: "Who will marry you now? You are defiled! Your religion is polluted." (Pritam 28). Puro becomes the symbol of what women had to endure during Partition. The status of women in *The Skeleton* is to symbolize how the nation's status was abused during Partition. A traumatized woman abandoned by her family to keep up the family's honour tries to find peace and happiness in the arms of her abductor and tormentor. This is the fate of women in general who are always expected to reconcile themselves and like a liquid is expected to take the shape of the container in which she has been poured forcefully and unwillingly. The society is always oblivious to the mental agony that a woman undergoes when she is subjected to such situations. Sacrifice is what is expected from a woman since the ages of the *Vedas*, *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*.

The novelist critically explores the ways in which the fate of Puro eventually becomes the fate of thousands of women at the time of Partition. Puro as Hamida comes in contact with three women who were also the victims of gendered violence. Taro was disowned by her husband as she was suffering from some unknown disease and her husband began to live with another woman forcing Taro into prostitution. She preferred to die to free herself from the cage of life as situation became unbearable for her. Next Puro meets Kammo a motherless young girl. Being disowned by her father, she stays at her aunt's house who also illtreats and exploits her. Kammo finds a motherly figure in Hamida but her aunt does not let her meet Hamida as she is a muslim. She realizes the truth that it is woman who is ultimately victimized in all situations. "It was a sin to be alive in this world full of evil, thought Hamida, "it was crime to be born a woman" (65)

Puro's dilemma is repeated when Lajo (Puro's sister in-law) is abducted and captured by Muslims and Puro does her best to help Lajo return back to her home, thereby preventing the same from befalling another woman. Almost all the female characters in the novel are victims of one or the other type of violence and are oppressed by double yoke of patriarchy and dislocation. There is another character, a mad woman who was sexually assaulted and impregnated and was unaware of the violence inflicted on her body and a life growing within her. 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. According to Dr Archana Sinha, any conflict whether it's a war, a civil strife, communal riots or social disturbances, it is primarily women and children who become the prime victims of violence. Children are orphaned and women are not only widowed but also become victims of rape and abduction.

The Partition turned out to be a natural disaster, which drastically changed the form of relationship and friendship among the common people. *The Skeleton* bears a testimony to the travails of the woman victims of Partition, the true "wretched of the Earth", who were rebuked and discarded by their families, and were ultimately subjected to the violence that marked the Partition of the Indian sub-continent. They were forced to reconcile with the temporal dislocation and trauma of physical violation. When Puro is rechristened as Hamida, after her marriage to Rashid, she vainly tries to rub away her new name tattooed on her arm. Her temporal dislocation becomes permanent when she gives up her hope of freedom and accepts her name and fate. Puro reconciled to her fate as the wife of a Muslim farmer, and accepted defeat as she lost all hope of going back to her previous life. She tried to find contentment in her new life, the seemingly and supposedly natural gift possessed by women to be able to successfully "make adjustments to their lives in all given situations." The number of women who were abducted or raped were married several times during Partition, till they came to a settled conclusion over their predicament. Urvashi Butalia emphasizes the "women that both India and Pakistan forgot", while speaking of Partition.

Puro's character in *The Skeleton* is further symbolic of the power structures as they existed in some parts of India. The settlement of family disputes by abducting women from each other's clans reduces the body of a woman to a battlefield on which the clan and family battles are fought. The power-seeking men, the 'so-called protectors' of their family pride and honour take their revenge on the women of the other family by abducting her or raping her thereby violating her body and destroying her soul. Puro's body merely becomes a site for revenge, a zone of strife to the 'male protectors' of the family honor and pride. Puro is literally a non-existent woman whose role in safeguarding her family pride and prestige becomes exceptionally noteworthy in the novel. Her existence is felt when she becomes the victim of an age-old rivalry between two clans -her volition in the entire episode remains simple and unexplained until she helps her sister-in-law escape the clutches of her abductor and while doing so, she nearly acquires an aura of inordinate strength.

Conclusion:

Whether it was Puro or Hamida, Lajo, Taro, Kammo or the mad women or the naked woman, woman became the 'other' not only during partition but even today. That 'other' whose lives did not matter to anybody, whose voices were silenced, whose identities were oppressed and who remained at the fringe of power struggle and power equation and continued to be marginalized, uprooted and displaced at the cost of the self, *The Skeleton* thus gives a voice to this 'other' and their concerns of dislocation, marginalization, dual identity and powerlessness. Not only has the body of the woman ultimately succumbed to patriarchy, it now stands as the symbol of the supreme sacrifice. The narrative seems to naturalize the pain and trauma of this woman as a mode of reconciliation.

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