
**Unheard Cries: A Comparative Study of Women's Plight in
Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man*
(Cracking India)**

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Abstract:

Partition is still a defining moment in our nation's history, a chilling chapter that the people of our country carry with them to this day. The extraordinary cruelty, including the loss of millions of lives and acts of looting, burning, and mass mayhem, will be remembered throughout history. Women were found to be the most defenceless and disproportionately impacted individuals in this terrifying tale. On a scale never seen before, kidnapping, rape, and mutilation were endured by countless victims. By analysing two literary works through the lens of the women's voices that are absent or underrepresented, this research hopes to shed light on a hitherto unexplored aspect of the divide. These tales are obscured by silence, as pointed out by Urvashi Butalia, demonstrating how gendered erasure is present in historical discourse. For a long time, women have been marginalized and stereotyped because of the prevailing narratives around nationalism, community identity, religion, and division. Viewed through the prism of 'honour' and 'impurity,' their pain intensifies their marginalization and keeps them trapped in a vicious cycle of being stigmatized and blamed for their own problems. In an effort to shake up these long-held beliefs, this article will focus on women's stories from the partition, highlighting their strength, autonomy, and real-life experiences. It seeks to provide a more complex and comprehensive understanding of the gendered aspects of partition and its lasting effects on the lives of women in the area by centering their narratives.

Keywords: Partition, Gendered Erasure, Women Voices, Marginalization, Nationalism, Religion, Community Identity, Trauma, Autonomy.

Both the nation's history and its people's collective memory hold the sorrow of division as a somber turning point. As a result of an unprecedented surge of savage violence, which included killings, plundering, and burning against the "other" group, millions of people perished. The majority of the victims of this brutality were women; many were abducted, raped, and disfigured. The official history narrative mostly focuses on the formation of a new country, but it completely ignores the tremendous pain that millions of people, especially women, went through as a result of the loss, relocation, and bloodshed. In the shadows of the real tale of partition, women endured unspeakable psychological and bodily harm. Layers of silence are entrenched profoundly throughout these tales, as Urvashi Butalia notes. The identities of women as living, feeling, thinking persons were erased under the male-dominated frames of country, community, religion, and division.

Literature on both sides of the border during the partition attests to the immense physical and mental suffering endured by women, as well as the heinous acts of rape and kidnapping that were authorised and unapproved of. Postcolonial theorists and female authors call attention to the gaps and silences that arise when oversimplified identifications are made. They challenge divisive ideas by acknowledging the commonality of pain, even as religious and social identities became more rigid and attempted to eradicate women's uniqueness. In addition to providing a more complex picture of women's lives during partition, these stories highlight their agency and resilience, which challenges long-held preconceptions. The literature challenges the prevailing historical narrative by highlighting these underreported experiences, which in turn highlights the need of retelling this tragic chapter in a way that is more inclusive and compassionate.

Separation along religious lines created the modern-day nations of Pakistan and India on the Indian subcontinent just before its 1947 independence from British control. Many people's lives were drastically altered by this disaster. While most accounts of 1947 focus on India's independence from Britain, they fail to include the atrocities committed during the partition due to communal animosity. August 14, 2022 was designated as Partition Horrors Remembrance Day in commemoration of the anguish caused by this partition. Modern ideas of nationhood have their roots in the practice of kidnapping women from other ethnic groups.

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Both "Pinjar" by Amrita Pritam and "Ice-Candy-Man" by Bapsi Sidhwa depict the terrible mistreatment of women who identify as Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, or Parsee. Using their bodies as weapons to gain social recognition and respect is a theme that runs across these works, which bring attention to the mental and physical suffering of women. The authors attack the nationalist rhetoric in these stories for its idealisation of independence and its failure to address the plight of women. These stories call into question the conventional wisdom about the historical record by highlighting the agency and power of women during partition and calling for a kinder and more inclusive interpretation of its effects.

Pooh, portrayed by Pritam, is a voice for the oppressed women who have been the targets of the animosity and wrath of their communities. In "Pinjar," Pooro's strong sense of identity as Hamida is overshadowed by her Hindu background and the 'honour' of her family, which was shattered by her kidnapping out of revenge. Disputes involving honour and vengeance often involve female bodies. The physical manifestations of jealousy and revenge are shown by Ayah, a character in "Ice-Candy-Man." played by Sidhwa. After being dehumanised and made into a national idol, Ayah is subjected to societal punishment. According to Urvashi Butalia, "women as a person did not count" (191).

Pain, perseverance, and agency are all shown in these stories of women. By giving a platform to women's hitherto unheard perspectives, Pritam and Sidhwa demand a more compassionate historical viewpoint that embraces women's terrible partition experiences, which has been a central element of the famed independence story. By focusing on Pooro and Ayah, the authors encourage readers to reconsider the independence celebration in light of the ways in which gendered historical trauma impacts women.

Examining the experiences of female characters in the given literary works via a feminist lens, this study will focus on how violence impacts their recollection and sense of self. As the film progresses, we will see them fight for their autonomy by overcoming patriarchal society and their own inner demons. The article's goal is to highlight diversity as an essential part of "unity" and to recognise the unique perspectives that each woman's narrative has. By delving into each woman's unique stories, the study hopes to get a comprehensive knowledge of the hardships they faced

and the strength they displayed. It recognises that their shared identity is shaped by a variety of experiences that are interconnected.

Both the novella *Pinjar/The Skeleton* (1987) by Amrita Pritam and the book *Ice Candy Man* (1988) by Bapsi Sidhwa provide gendered viewpoints on the division from opposite ends of the border. These works, first published in Punjabi by Amrita Pritam and then translated into English by Khushwant Singh, explore the partition-era kidnappings of women and show how they sought to break out of their victimisation, become change makers, and provide assistance to other women. They delve into the ways in which women's bodies, seen as symbols of communal pride, vengeance, and pain, defy and surpass societal and religious conventions.

The stories show the horrific brutality that many women face, and it's not limited to the main characters. Intercut with pictures of men torturing women and shots of women hanging from ceiling fans, *Ice Candy Man* depicts a train from Gurdaspur that arrives with all passengers dead, no women, and gunny bags full with women's breasts. The portrayal of women in these works reduces them to inanimate objects, elevating only their communal, religious, and national identities above their personal ones.

Families, social classes, communities, and nations all play a role in the protagonists' lives in these two novels. These overlapping identities are personified by the ayah in *Ice Candy Man*. She is a Hindu housekeeper in a rich Parsi family. She represents the country and is sought after by men of all faiths, Hindu, Muslim, and British and goes by the name Shanta alone. Her body becomes a place of vengeance and hate when her former lover, the Icecandy-man, rallies a mob to abduct, rape, and prostitute her. The brutality she endured highlights the ways in which her Hindu identity has desecrated her body, marking her with the marks of revenge and alienation.

These tales show how women's bodies are disputed places in the fight for national identity, as Menon and Bhasin point out, echoing the customary transformation of the motherland's body into that of a victimised foreigner. These narratives call for a more compassionate and inclusive view of history by critiquing the idealised accounts of independence and drawing attention to the brutal gendered violence of division. The mob:

“Drag[s]her by her arms stretched taut, and her bare feet that want to move backwards are forced forward instead.... Her violet sari slips off her shoulder, and her breasts strain at her sari-blouse.... a sleeve tears...The men drag her in grotesque strides to the cart.... Four men stand pressed against her” (183). The physical harm inflicted against her body highlights the harsh and oppressive power relations that are in operation. The ripping of her sari-blouse not only represents a physical transgression, but also an attack on her dignity and sense of self. The woman's resistance, represented by her feet going in the other direction, underscores the inherent battle against tyranny, while the deformed steps of her captors emphasise their lack of humanity. The depiction of four men exerting pressure on her highlights the communal aspect of these acts of brutality, indicating the involvement of society in the continuation of such violent behaviour.

Pooro returns knowing that she has been shunned by the society she was born into. This is the first step in the dehumanisation of Pooro, which is furthered by highlighting the similarities between her and a dumb animal that may be fastened to any peg or a stone "statue" that is incapable of responding to the living, she is as one deceased. The Muslim identity is actually imprinted on Pooro's body, with the name "Hamida" that Rashid has inked on her arm "in dark green letters," overwriting the identity and sense of self that she is born with (22). She thereby receives a brand-new identity that is prescribed by the religious community once more. She makes an effort to reject the forced identity and stubbornly holds onto the one she chose. In fact, the stress on the "purity" of the Hindu woman's body, according to Kamlabehn Patel, a social activist working with the recovery of women, was not only imposed by the community from above but also profoundly ingrained in the mentality of the women themselves. Because Hindu women fully internalise this tradition of "purity," the women felt "sullied," "stigmatised," and "impure." But even while she feeds the baby, she is still torn by conflicting feelings. In this bizarre universe, the child was truly hers, so a part of her yearns to hold the child up to her and sob uncontrollably. Pooro continues to be a living being and is only a skeleton. In actuality, during the division, the skeleton becomes overwhelmingly a symbol of the woman, stripped of all other identities except from the one imprinted on her by the patriarchal ideologies of religion, state, and partition.

Partition, according to Butalia, was seen as a "violation of its body," and the nation

was "pictured in feminine terms, as the mother" (Butalia 186). Given that establishing a Muslim homeland meant "a loss of a portion of itself," the idea of women as a nation elevated the Restoration of Women to a symbolic act of returning to one's ancestral homeland. In "Ice Candy Man," however, getting the Ayah back is the whole process. It was possible for Lenny's aunt and mother to rescue abducted women and bring them back to their families or rehabilitation centres because of the social intervention in Pakistan that helped rehabilitate women. These ladies played the role of gendered subjects, helping families cross the border to their new home and freeing women who had been kidnapped. Unable to understand her mother's attempts, the young narrator Lenny finds herself distressed. Her mother saves petrol and puts it in the trunk of her automobile.

Upper-class Parsee women, Lenny's mother and godmother, transcend class and ethnic borders in their heroic rescue of "Ayah, a Hindu servant lady who was both a sexual and political victim of the animosities between Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu males" (Hai, 390). Their lack of bias and extensive social networks enable Shanta's old lover to rescue her from the clutches of Hira Mandi's prostitutes. Knowing the Hindu woman's "purity," the Godmother encourages Shanta to stay on as his maid and says, "worst things are forgiven." As the story progresses, it implies that the residue of our pasts is progressively ground down by the demands of the present, raising the question, "What if your family refuses to accept you back?" (262).

While Pooro in "The Skeleton" by Amrita Pritam stays in India, Ayah in "Ice Candy Man" by Bapsi Sidhwa decides to go back to India despite her sadness and Ice Candy Man's promise to help her. Being associated with Pakistan's newly formed state complicates Sidhwa's identification as a Parsee, a "neutral" community. In the wake of division, personal and communal history intertwine, adding layers of complexity to the lives and choices of the individuals, highlighting the complicated dynamics of belonging and identity.

The women's camaraderie in rescuing Ayah underscores the hard fact that victims of abuse or the ethnic "other" like Ayah are not welcome in the new country. The law, society, and families all turned their backs on children born of forced marriages, classifying them as "abducted persons" and "illegitimate." Neither staying behind nor bringing their "illegitimate children" with them was a choice that was forbidden to

recovered mothers. The offspring of abducted women were not recognised by law, custom, or community because of the insistence on rigid boundaries of identity and blood purity.

On both sides of the border, postcolonial female authors shake up historical meta-narratives that celebrate nationalism and independence. This is accomplished by Sidhwa via the use of a female child narrator from a marginalised community, "challenging the prominence and exclusivity of Pakistani and Indian male supremacist master narratives" (Hai 389). She uses humour to discredit nationalist ideas; for example, she makes fun of Gandhi by comparing him to Hari the gardener and making jokes about enemas and constipation, even though nobody dared to touch his dhoti. Just like Nehru, the crafty politician who turned a blind eye, Jinnah, the shrewd lawyer, is unable to outwit him.

Subtly challenging prevailing narratives, Pritam also captures her dissident voice. The news of the kidnapping of Hindu females by Muslims and Muslim girls by Hindus infuriated Hamida. Tragically, others had been slain, forced into marriage against their will, or even stripped and paraded barefoot through the streets. Society as a whole is unwilling to accept individuals who do not fit its strict standards of legitimacy and purity, and this is mirrored in the marginalisation and forced isolation of Ayah and her children. This exemplifies the complicated and sometimes painful interconnections of gender, nationalism, and identity, and it also highlights the ingrained biases that continued even in the newly independent states.

Both *Ice Candy Man* and *Pinjar/The Skeleton* portray women as victims of heinous and extraordinary violence. However, they also depict these women as subjects who challenge the boundaries and divisions that oppress them and lead to the deaths of millions in the name of religion, community, and nation. These women take on the responsibility of agency to save others and, more importantly, subvert these divisions through their actions. Although the Parsee women in *Ice Candy Man*, like Sidhwa, identify with their new country of Pakistan, they become agents in locating and rescuing the kidnapped Ayah from prostitution, where her former admirer, the Ice Candy Man, has placed her. Similarly, Pooro acts as an agent in rescuing abducted

women and questions the very religious tensions by adopting a Hindu woman's child. As Dutta notes, "survivors' tales cannot be limited to 'violence' alone but contain various narratives, storylines, and meanings" (21). The experiences of Pooro/Hamida underscore this complexity. Unlike those who remained firmly entrenched in patriarchal communitarian solidarities, Amrita Pritam and Pooro identify with various alternative strands and spaces in Punjab's vibrant culture and history (Dutta, 21). Despite the fact that women are often viewed merely as extensions of their communities or religions in dominant patriarchal ideologies, both texts depict women not only as victims of horrific violence but also as individuals who, through empathy, recognize and alleviate the suffering of other women. Moreover, they subvert the very divisions that oppress them and cause widespread devastation. These narratives powerfully illustrate that women's roles extend beyond their victimization. Through acts of empathy and resistance, they challenge and disrupt the patriarchal and communal boundaries that seek to confine them, thereby redefining their identities and forging new paths of agency and solidarity.

Finally, during the chaos of separation and community violence, Ice Candy Man and Pinjar/The Skeleton provide light to the complex roles played by women. Though these stories show them as victims of horrible crimes, they also present them as heroes who are fighting for a better world by standing up to the polarising forces of religion, nationalism, and community. Empathetic, resistive, and united, these women defy patriarchal standards and community conflicts, exemplifying strength and bravery under pressure. Thus, these writings are potent testimonies to women's resiliency and their ability to fashion stories of redemption and hope in the midst of history's darkest periods.

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