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Our Bodies, Their Battleground: A Study of Gender-Based Violence in Amrita Pritam's *The Skeleton*

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This paper focuses on patriarchal dominance embedded in the everyday life of Indian society, which becomes the root cause of the gender-based violence that took place during the Partition. In a male-dominated society, rape and other sexual violence against women are likely outcomes since they provide space for men to exhibit and preserve their authority and power over women. As such, women's bodies become the site of violence in patriarchal displays of power. In this context, Amrita Pritam's novel, *The Skeleton* (2009), is basically concerned with both (personal and collective) forms of the gendered nature of violence, loss of control and autonomy over female bodies, and violation of bodily integrity in both the public and private space before and after the Partition of the Indian subcontinent. Through the textual analysis of the novel, this paper explores the connections between patriarchy and the gendered nature of violence perpetuated against women and the complex and complementary relationship between bodily integrity and women's empowerment, especially in the context of abduction and honour killing. It highlights the silent suffering of women who are coping with the traumas the female body endured. The act of abduction and honour killing of women is seen as

an embodiment of patriarchal, and not communal or political, power play of vendetta.

Keywords: patriarchal dominance, oppression, bodily integrity, resilience, women's empowerment

Introduction

> Violence against women during conflict cannot be separated from violence against women during 'peacetime', and forms of violence such as public rape, designed to humiliate communities, only function in a context where deeply held patriarchal views permeate society. (Pankhrust, 2008, p. 306)

All around the world, the female body is a contested terrain, as it remains a site where power is played out. Women's bodies are objectified and reduced to symbols of family or societal honour and are closely tied to sexual purity. Oftentimes, women's bodies are targeted during conflicts as a systematic strategy to be degraded and abused by different actors in various contexts worldwide. Specific forms of violence, especially sexual violence, are used against women in what has come to be defined as 'Gender-Based Violence' (GBV), violence that targets individuals or groups of individuals by virtue of their gender and gender identity. GBV is not in the slightest confined only to times of war, with the perpetrators being the 'Other'. Domestic violence against women, that is, violence that takes place against women in the 'private' sphere, including physical, emotional, and psychological abuse as well as financial control, perpetrated by a family member or partner (and which includes forms of sexual violence), is also a form of GBV that transcends differences of nation, social class, race, ethnicity, religion, and age.

Violence against women is framed within discourses on "gender justice, human rights, health and well-being, partner violence, intimate partner violence, battered women, gendered violence, sexual assault, woman abuse, wife abuse, rape, aggravated rape, marital rape, date rape" and so on (Chapman, 2014, p. 49). So prevalent is violence against women that it is referred to, in some echelons, simply as 'VAW'. It is an age-old, universal, and most prevalent method of subjugating women. VAW is normalised and socialised into conformity

in culture and society, which is reflected in literary discourses. Feminist definitions of violence use 'power' and 'domination' as the operative constructs to explain VAW. With the scope of this definition, violence arises because of unequal power relationships in society. It serves as a tool to maintain those unequal power relationships and reflects the power men have over women in society. As such, violence is seen as a strategy during the Bosnian War (1992–1995) and the Rwandan Genocide (1994), where systematic sexual violence was used to terrorise and assert dominance over opposing ethnic groups by using women's bodies as symbols of community honour and violating it to send political and ethnic messages—further illustrating how patriarchal ideologies globalise the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war. According to Johnson (1997), "It is in patterns of male violence and harassment . . . in the unequal distribution of power that makes oppression possible" (p. 87).

GBV and VAW are expressions and symptoms of a patriarchal social system. According to Walby (1990), "Violence has been identified as a social mechanism in the subordination of women by the men" (p. 128). For the patriarchal system to survive and sustain, violence is necessary. Feminist analysis thus states that a patriarchal society is a direct cause of GBV and VAW. According to Lerner (1987), patriarchy is "the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general" (p. 239). The concept of patriarchy was primarily created, developed, and used by feminist theories to explain why male dominance still persists in contemporary society. Contemporary feminist theories, including Liberal, Radical, Marxist, and Socialist theories, agree on the point that the patriarchy is a system of power relations resting on male domination; however, they diverge in explaining the sources of women's subjugation.

In the Indian context, violent behaviour of men against women can best be understood as a part of a patriarchy that subjugates women through socio-cultural values and norms of society that dictate and define the place, roles, and conduct of women. In a male-dominated society like India, rape and other sexual violence against women are

likely outcomes since they provide space for men to exhibit and preserve their authority and power over women. Such a space was presented during the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, where GBV was perpetrated against women. The Partition gave rise to a wide series of riots, chaos, mass murders, and bloodshed on both sides of the border, yet women faced the worst of it. Urvashi Butalia (2017) says, "About 75,000 women are thought to have been abducted and raped by men of religions different from their own (and indeed sometimes by men of their own religion)" (p. 3). These women were dislocated, publicly humiliated, and had their genitalia mutilated. Many were killed in the name of honour by their families and forced to die by suicide in an attempt to protect their chastity. The people of the other religious parties forced these abducted women to become domestic servants or sold them into prostitution. According to Andrew J. Major (1998), the widespread breakdown of law and order in 1947 was accompanied by a breakdown in moral standards among many men who lost their humanity and purposefully trampled on the virtues of women whose only 'crime' was that they belonged to a different religious community.

Out of all the several factors that can explain this historical event, this paper focuses on patriarchal dominance embedded in the everyday life of Indian society, which becomes the root cause of the GBV and VAW that took place during the Partition. Women's bodies become the site of violence in patriarchal displays of power, including that of Partition. This watershed movement witnessed two kinds of GBV. Firstly, the violence inflicted on women by men of the opposing religious group, which involved abusing and degrading them as a symbol of attacking the honour and purity of the religion or country to which the women belonged. A second form involved violence perpetuated by the male members of the family by killing the women or manipulating them to commit suicide so that their chastity and honour remain unsullied by the other religion. In this context, Amrita Pritam's novel, *The Skeleton* (2009), is basically concerned with both the forms of the gendered nature of violence, loss of control and autonomy over female bodies, and violation of bodily integrity in both the public and private space before and after the Partition of the Indian subcontinent.

Through the textual analysis of the novel, this paper explores the connections between patriarchy and the gendered nature of violence perpetuated against women and the complex and complementary relationship between bodily integrity and women's empowerment, especially in the context of GBV and VAW. It highlights the silent suffering of women who are coping with the traumas the female body endured and the act of abduction and honour killing of women as an embodiment of patriarchal, and not communal or political, power play of vendetta.

Female Bodies as the Site of Male Violence

The Skeleton (2009) underlines the GBV against women within their ordinary, everyday life experiences, which is deeply entrenched in the patriarchal social system, even before the beginning of the Partition tension. Exhibiting a complex entanglement between systemic violence and women's oppression, Pritam asserts in the novel that the very condition of being a woman in a patriarchal society is traumatic. The novel shows VAW in two widely different contexts: pre-Partition Punjab and Partition Punjab. In both scenarios, the abduction of a woman becomes an embodiment of male dominance rather than the outcome of rival religious identities. A woman is abducted to dishonour the family or community to which she belongs, and in retaliation, the opposing party initiates a similar abduction to gain their lost honour.

In this context, the novel narrates the story of a young girl named Pooro, who is abducted by a Muslim boy and forced into marriage, against the backdrop of pre-Partition Punjab. It delves deep into the violence Pooro faces in pre-Partition Punjab and the trauma of her displacement and her silent suffering. Pooro belongs to the Sahukars, a Hindu family of moneylenders living in Chatto village. In her family, a girl child is considered a burden because of the need to provide a dowry, and Pooro's parents resolve to "lighten themselves of the burden of a daughter" and arrange a marriage for her (Pritam, 2009, p. 3). Mitchell (1971), a feminist psychologist, uses patriarchy "to refer to kinship systems in which men exchange women" (p. 24). In this regard, a woman is considered nothing more than a commodity

to be traded between two patriarchal families. This is the tradition within which the circumstances of Pooro's abduction and her successive life are to be understood, wherein she becomes another object in the male power of vendetta. Rashida, a Muslim boy from a rival clan of Shaikhs, abducts Pooro to restore his family's honour. In the past, Sahukars mortgaged the Shaikhs' house for a loan. When the Shaikhs couldn't repay, the Sahukars evicted them, and Pooro's uncle abducted Rashida's aunt, holding her for three days. Despite his reluctance, therefore, Rashida abducts Pooro as her wedding preparations are underway. Thorstein Veblen (2009) argues that women were the first form of property—beginning with "the seizure of female captives" to serve as trophies (p. 20). Consequently, by the logic of an eye for an eye, the honour of the Shaikhs stands restored because of the abduction. However, the victims of these codes of honour are the innocent women who are considered as trophies and properties. This portrays that the pre-Partition norms and codes of men's honour are based on women's suffering and unswerving dismissal, if not elimination, of the recognition of the woman's value, dignity, and honour.

When she eventually escapes from her captor, her parents shun her, citing that Pooro's body has been dishonoured and in connection her family's honour too. Her father responds thus to her entreaty to take her along with them to Thailand: "Who will marry you now? You have lost your religion and your birthright. If we dare to help you, we will be wiped out without a trace of blood left behind to tell of our fate" (Pritam, 2009, p. 22). Family honour and the perception of women as property are two motifs deeply rooted in the patriarchal-social-cultural basis of Indian society, with both men and women often supporting killing on grounds of dishonour. Social groups with prevalent GBV believe that individuals who violate honour codes bring dishonour to their families, which represents a significant threat to the family's future and even its survival. The main consequence for violating the honour code is "exclusion from the group" (Stewart, 1994, p. 111). As the patriarch of the family, her father decides to uphold the honour of the family by abandoning his daughter in the hands of the enemy. Though the mother grieves for her daughter, she

accepts her husband's decision fearing for the safety of the men, "Daughter, it would have been better if you had died at birth! If the Shaikhs find you here they will kill your father and your brothers. They will kill all of us…" (Pritam, 2009, p. 23). Pooro's mother sacrifices her daughter to protect the male members of the family, highlighting that females are seen as dispensable while males are considered indispensable protectors. Consequently, Pooro is deemed "dishonoured," her family readily excludes her to avoid exclusion and taunts from the community. By this act of refusing to give shelter to their own daughter, Pooro's parents force her to commit suicide. As mentioned earlier, VAW is justified when family members try to remove the stain of dishonour from the collective through the emotional, social, or physical coercion of the person whose actual or imputed actions have brought about the (perceived) dishonour. Pooro's family's callous abandonment amplifies her helplessness and hopelessness and drives her to take her own life: "There was one hope for her: escape in death" (Pritam, 2009, p. 23). They make no effort to stop her when she leaves the house. However, Rashida comes searching for her and finds her before she could commit suicide. Pooro is then married to Rashida and converted to Islam.

Significantly, Rashida's decision to relocate to Sakkar from Chatto does not elicit any response from Pooro because the abduction has already disrupted her psyche, and her parents' abandonment shatters her hope and affects the normal coping mechanisms and ruptures the very core of her personal identity. As she is violently uprooted from her home, family, and community and thrust into a new domestic sphere and place, Pooro suffers in silence. Pritam's portrayal of Pooro's abduction and subsequent trauma finds a powerful parallel in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988), where the character Ayah is similarly abducted and becomes symbolic of the silenced, violated female body. A traumatic experience—such as abduction—produces a breach in what Veena Das (2007) calls "the relation between the subject and the world" (p. 4). Concurrent with Das's claim, the trauma of abduction produces a breach in the relation between Pooro and her world, disrupting her sense of self and fragmenting the familiarity of her world, distorting her own individual self to a fragmented self

permanently marked by the gendered nature of violence. Pooro inhabits a split self: "She was Pooro by the day and Hamida by the night" (Pritam, 2009, p. 25). Her life 'acts out' the split in ordinary activities of everyday life. She feels detached from reality, performing household chores robotically without reacting to her husband or others around her. The psychological and emotional damage wrought by the abduction distorts her perception and emotions, making her feel disconnected from herself and the world around her. She, thus, continues to suffer in silence and live with Rashida as a non-being "without a shape or a name" (Pritam, 2009, p. 25).

As the new patriarch of the family, Rashida uses his authority to demand Pooro's body in exchange for economic support. His behaviour is shaped by the social and cultural context in which he lives. To assert complete control over her body, he tattoos the name "Hamida" on her arm without her consent, treating her like branded livestock to signify ownership. DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2009) state, "A substantial number of injurious male actions, values, and beliefs are microsocial expressions of broader patriarchal forces" (p. 33). In a public display of patriarchal power, a woman's identity is changed, which destroys the self and violates bodily integrity and autonomy. He even thinks impregnating her will finally win her over: "The gamble had paid off. Pooro was no longer the girl he had abducted and made his mistress—not a woman he had brought in as a housekeeper. She was, Hamida, the mother of his son" (Pritam, 2009, p. 33). In the pre-Partition Punjabi culture, he is conditioned to think that objectifying and taking possession of the female body and forcing physical intimacy can cure her aversion to him and bring about positive emotions in their marriage.

However, even within the bounds of marriage, Pooro considers Rashida's touch as an invasion of her body: "What more do you want of me? I have given you my person and I have given you a son. I have nothing more to give" (Pritam, 2009, p. 33). She endures the sexual intercourse because she feels powerless to stop his sexual advances as it is conducted within the socially and culturally sanctioned rights of the highly institutionalised construct of marriage. Furthermore, she is forced to live with her abductor, with whom she is unable to establish

a sense of belongingness. The child created from such congress disgusts her even more: "If her body was a pea-pod inside which she carried a slimy, white caterpillar" (Pritam, 2009, p. 1) and a life was "planted inside her by force, nourished inside her womb against her will- and was now sucking the milk from her breasts, whether she liked it or not" (Pritam, 2009, p. 35). She thinks her body is unclean and wants to pluck the child out of her womb. In a patriarchal society, the idea of motherhood is always glorified, where a woman protects and nurtures her child. However, the contradictory behaviour of Pooro, such as wanting to harm her own child, reveals that she considers the child as a symbol of violation of her bodily integrity. Thus, the deeply entrenched patriarchal belief that a woman's body is owned by her husband strips Pooro of bodily freedom and reduces her into a birthing machine with no room for agency or dignity. Kanchan Mathur (2008) claims, "A woman is identified primarily with her bodily functions, seen essentially as a vehicle for male sexual satisfaction and reproduction and its natural corollary, childbearing, rearing and nurturing. Her entire life, her roles, her position and status in society, are defined by this primary bodily function" (p. 55). The denial of bodily autonomy further reinforces the belief that a woman's body is exploited against her will and denied the right to make informed choices over her body and sexuality. Patriarchal control over the female body violates bodily integrity, rendering them powerless.

In Sakkar, Pooro's interaction with other women brings forth the gendered violence and violation of bodily autonomy and integrity ingrained in the patrilinear society and the manner in which it structures their lives. Taro, a sickly woman ill since her wedding day, reveals to Pooro in one of her fits that her husband was already married and her status in his house was of "a common prostitute" (Pritam, 2009, p. 46). Her in-laws silence her, saying that they feed and clothe her, and her parents also leave her to her fate, as evident in her mother's words, "It's up to her husband to treat her as he likes. It's a man's privilege" (Pritam, 2009, p. 47). In the patriarchal system, men and women behave and aspire differently because they have been taught to think of masculinity and femininity in ways that condition difference. It does not question a man's infidelity, abuse, and violent behaviour;

rather justifies it as his right, and a woman, in contrast, has to endure these in silence. The mad woman's body, which is vulnerable to physical and sexual attacks, becomes a site of sexual violence as she is raped and left to fend for herself. The mad woman mocks the honour and chastity allocated to a woman's body by running about in the lanes of Sakkar with a naked bosom, laughing hysterically in the face of the established patriarchal social system, which did not save her lunatic body from sexual violence. Her vulnerable body is objectified as a target of male sexual desire and stripped of bodily integrity: "She is neither young nor attractive; she is just a lump of human flesh without a mind to go with it . . . a living skeleton . . . a lunatic skeleton . . . a skeleton picked to its bones by kites and vultures" (Pritam, 2009, p. 53). She dies in the final process of giving birth to a child that resulted from an opportunistic sexual violence.

Reclaiming Bodily Integrity and Autonomy

The impact of violence goes well past impacting selfhood. Beyond physical and psychological problems, GBV can affect survivors on personal, social, and spiritual levels, impacting their ability to connect to themselves, others, and the world around them. According to Allen and Wozniak (2010), recovering from violence is "a social, spiritual, cultural, and psychological process" (p. 37). Therefore, one should actively strive to integrate their GBV experience into their identity and move toward a future where their trauma does not limit their ability to connect with others and pursue their goals. In this context, the concept of resilience helps victims of GBV to bounce back after adverse life events. Pooro's resilience helps her to recover from the trauma of her abduction, loss of bodily autonomy, and feeling of disconnection from her body, her sense of self, and other people. Resilience is, thus, conceptualised as, "the ability of individuals facing adversity to utilize resources within psychological, social, and cultural domains that sustain their well-being and promote adaptive outcomes" (Schaefer et al, 2018, p.18). It motivates Pooro to emerge from her silence and suffering and connect with others like Kammo, whom she nurtures like a mother.

Moreover, using her current social environment as a resource, she establishes relationships and maintains connections with the people in the village and settles in Sakkar as if she has always belonged there. Thinking of her son as a part of her family's bloodline changes her disgust to motherly love. Adopting the mad woman's baby and nursing the child in her own bosom helps Pooro in reclaiming her bodily autonomy and integrity and reconnecting with the self. Rashida's ready acceptance of the mad woman's baby into the family encourages Pooro to forgive him. Furthermore, he did not abandon Pooro like the mad woman after impregnating her, which helps her in reconciling with him. Subsequently, the protagonist adapts to her married life and psychologically and emotionally establishes a sense of belongingness with her husband and children and cultivates worthiness. The act of reclaiming one's body is, therefore, crucial in dismantling the patriarchal control that objectifies the body of the woman as a battleground over which violence can be perpetrated and politicised.

Furthermore, Pooro's trauma of abduction recurs on a massive scale during Partition as thousands of women on both sides of the border are rendered skeletons. In contrast to Pooro's personal trauma in pre-Partition Punjab, the Partition period exposes widespread, collective GBV against women across communities. The two worlds—GBV on a personal level to collective—intersect in the circumstances surrounding Partition through the juxtaposition of abduction in the two different contexts. The novel delineates that the GBV inflicted on women during Partition is, above all, a reinforcement of patriarchal gender dynamics in a communally charged situation. The Partition of India and Pakistan forced women to become victims of violence as they were abducted, raped, mutilated, and killed. Hearing of the abduction of Hindu girls by Muslims and of Muslim girls by Hindus both shames and angers Pooro. Women are forced into marriage; some of them are murdered, and some are stripped and paraded naked in the streets. This harrowing depiction of GBV during Partition is also echoed in the works of Saadat Hasan Manto, especially in Partition stories like *Colder than Ice* (2011a) and *The Return* (2011b), which similarly depict how women's bodies became contested spaces of power, honour, and revenge. Like Pritam, Manto portrays abduction

and rape not simply as acts of communal hatred but as symptoms of entrenched patriarchal ideologies that operated even in times of extreme communal upheaval.

As an abducted woman who has known the loss of home and loved ones, Hamida is determined to help other abducted women reach a safe haven and reunite with their families. One evening, Pooro finds a young girl hiding in her sugarcane field. The girl is from a nearby refugee camp and is waiting to return to India. Pakistani soldiers at the camp take bribes to let men choose women for the night. The girl has been abused for nine nights. Filled with anger and shame, Pooro hides her in her room. The next day, a convoy of refugees passes through the village, and Pooro sees her ex-fiancé, Ram Chand, in the crowd. She pretends to sell provisions in the camp and leaves the girl in his care. From Ram Chand, Pooro learns that his sister, Lajo, married to her brother, has also been abducted. Pooro finds Lajo in Ram Chand's old house, now occupied by a Muslim family. With her husband's help, Pooro saves Lajo and hides her at home while waiting for her family to contact them. When suspicion turns towards Pooro, she boldly claims, "Look, my name is Hamida, she said, drawing back the sleeve of her left arm and showing the tattooed letters" (Pritam, 2009, p. 116). Consequently, she subverts the tattoo, which acts as a patriarchal symbol of ownership, into a liberating factor that saves her from another threatening patriarchal force, thus challenging bodily oppression and fully empowering herself with the new identity "Hamida" on her own terms.

In order to bring back the abducted women, both the Indian and Pakistani governments took initiatives to find and reunite them with their families. The Abducted Persons Recovery and Restoration Ordinance was transformed first into a Bill and later, in 1949, into an Act (Butalia, 2017, p. 114). The novel portrays how this Act restores abducted women to their families across borders and how the parents from both sides have exhorted the governments to receive their abducted daughters back. As such, resentment surged in Hamida because religion had once been an insurmountable obstacle when she was abducted, neither her parents nor her soon-to-be in-laws were willing to take her back, and "now, the same religion had become so

accommodating" (Pritam, 2009, p. 100). She puts aside her personal feelings and looks after Lajo. Hamida sees herself in Lajo—both suffering the same fate of abduction, uprooted from their families and communities. Lajo is fearful no one will come looking for her or accept her, but Hamida assures her that Lajo will certainly go back and is not to blame for what happened to her. Hamida reasons that she was not accepted because "then I was the only one. My parents did not have the courage to face the taunts of their neighbours and relations. Now, it's not just one or two, but hundreds of thousands that have been taken away from their kindred" (Pritam, 2009, p. 119). People are taking back their wives, daughters, and sisters. Hamida never gives up her hope when Lajo loses heart, and sometimes even when Rashida despairs. When her brother and Ram Chand arrive to take Lajo, Hamida makes them promise never to let the slightest bit of slur be cast upon Lajo. When the bus starts off, her brother asks her to go with him to India. Hamida is tempted for a moment, but she says, "When Lajo is welcomed back in her home, then you can take it that Pooro has also returned to you. My home is now in Pakistan" (Pritam, 2009, p. 127). Thus, she affirms that in the process of reclaiming her bodily integrity and embracing her new identity, she has reconciled with her husband and accepted her new home and life. Reclaiming her autonomy assists her in rescuing women from similar circumstances, alleviating their fear, and restoring them to their families.

Conclusion:

The Skeleton (2009) underlines the GBV against women within their ordinary, everyday life experiences, which is deeply entrenched in the patriarchal social system, even before the beginning of Partition tension. The novel shows VAW in two widely different contexts: pre-Partition Punjab and Partition Punjab. In both scenarios, the abduction of a woman becomes an embodiment of male dominance rather than the outcomes of rival religious identity. The protagonist's trauma of abduction recurs on a massive scale during Partition as thousands of women on both sides of the border are rendered skeletons. The two worlds—GBV on a personal level to collective—intersect in the circumstances surrounding Partition through the

juxtaposition of abduction in the two different contexts. The novel delineates that the GBV inflicted on women during Partition is, above all, a reinforcement of patriarchal gender dynamics in a communally charged situation.

In conclusion, women's resilience to GBV aids them in recovering from the trauma of abduction, loss of bodily autonomy, and feelings of disconnection from their bodies, their sense of self, and other people. Women like Pooro and Lajo move from suffering in silence to reclaiming bodily autonomy and integrity through their own actions and efforts, which is crucial in dismantling the patriarchal control over them. It is, therefore, a prerequisite for women's empowerment to challenge bodily oppression and reconstruct their identity. Healing after GBV, a woman empowers herself to rebuild self-trust, reconnect with the self, cultivate worthiness, and establish a sense of belongingness, which leads to liberating other women from similar circumstances.

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