



The Metamorphosis of Female Consciousness in the Film Adaptation of the Novel Pinjar

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Abstract:

Amrita Pritam (1919-2005) is a renowned literary personality that cannot be forgotten in the history of Punjabi Literature. She is the gem that brought class and respect to Punjabi literature. Translated into various languages, she mainly wrote in Punjabi and Hindi. As a prominent Punjabi poet, novelist and essayist, she created wonderful stories about humanity. Her famous novel *Pinjar* (The Cage) in 1950 became an epitome of violence against women, loss of humanity and ultimate surrender to existential fate. The novel was later adapted into an award winning film *Pinjar* in 2003. The novel is set into backdrop of post-partition India and Pakistan and strongly voices the agony of women of the time. The filmmaker Chandraprakash Dwivedi attempted a brave task to adapt the story of the novel on the silver screen. In his endeavours to maintain fidelity to the text and the spirit of the novel, he goes very close to the borders. The cross border violence and chaos is palpably seen on the silver screen as they are poignantly depicted in the novel. This article tries to analyse whether female consciousness of the novel successfully travels from the novel to the film.

Keywords: partition, violence, love, adaptation, feminism,

Set in the backdrop of partition and violence, *Pinjar* tells the story of *Puro*, a young gleaming Hindu woman from Chattovani. While engaged to Ramchand from the neighbouring village Rattoval, she is quietly busy in her life preparing for her impending marriage. All of sudden, she is kidnapped by a Muslim man *Rashid* who abducts her to settle the ancestral scores of the past. Rashid is on a mission to restore the long lost pride of his clan. In the past, Puro's uncle had kidnapped one of Rashid's aunts to disgrace Rashid's family due to some unresolved financial disputes. Fatefully, Puro now becomes the victim of the situation and undergoes the anguish of smear and shame from her own and the unknown on both sides. What is worse, when she is able to escape from Rashid, she is rejected by her family on the pretext that she has already been to another man's home. Moreover, Puro is coerced to accept her fate to stop any untoward actions emerging from Rashid's family. Consequently, Puro is unwillingly forced to marry the man she never wanted to and is compelled to stay in a strange place she does not socially or culturally associate with. Besides, she is now given a new name '*Hamida*' that dissolves her Hindu identity. That is the journey of Puro - from being a devout Hindu woman to being Hamida - a faithful wife to Rashid. Her female consciousness is challenged and the voyage of numerous changes starts. Despite the change of name, she still is Puro from within and her yearning to unite with her kith and kin remains kindled throughout her life. When the torture and violence of partition surround her, she shows tremendous

amount of courage to bear all the pains and resolutely convinces herself and the others that love for humanity must be honoured and that selflessness heals the wounds of social, cultural and human differences.

We find an undying craving for life in the novel and Pritam loves to create a world of humans who prefer love to hatred and kindness to violence. Her story presents the struggles of an average woman who wants to live her normal life without the mars of divisiveness and without the oppression of patriarchal ego. Pritam perfectly emancipates the character of Puro of all those negative vibes that have been plaguing our social life for ages long. Without unnecessarily sermonizing on feministic undertones, Pritam leads her character from start to the finish and gives her just the enough fortitude to tide through the waves of man-made prejudices that have rocked the very existence of women.

The filmmaker, Chandraprakash Dwivedi, has tried to put all these pieces together in his movie *Pinjar* (2003). However, he does not boast of complete fidelity to the text. What is most obvious though is how Puro is consistently true to her beliefs as Amrita wanted her to be in her novel. The film certainly engages the audience with a deep soul searching of Puro who is stuck in the communal tensions of the partition violence.

When Dwivedi's film was made, Pritam was able to see it at home on a DVD although she was bedridden. She said,

"The most terrible happening of the times was the Partition. I still shiver when I think of those blood-drenched days. I had already spoken of the fate of women in the frenzy in my poetry... I would listen to the stranger than fiction stories that they told me. It was thus that Puro of *Pinjar* took shape and the novel wrote itself."ⁱ

It would not have been easy for Dwivedi to show the transition of Puro's life from one situation to another. Her journey is a metamorphosis that does not lose the truthfulness of life and Dwivedi had this trial to conquer in his film. The cross border animosity and the life of Puro had to be twined well and the breath of life oozing out of Puro's character could not be lost in the bloodshed of Partition. Laced with ethereal love story, the filmmaker not only manages to hold his sway but he also gives a very resounding message that violence cannot break the soul of humanity. A number of filmmakers had toyed with the idea of making a film on the novel and some contracts were also signed. But each time the project was given up because it was felt that the story would not be palatable to the masses. It was only when the new century came, did someone dare to film it.

Jain (1996)ⁱⁱ quotes from Virginia's Wolf's 'A Room of One's Own'- the ironical paradox of a woman's life : Men need her, love her, worship her and write about her but they do so in relation to their own selves, "Imaginatively she is of the highest importance practically she is completely insignificant, she pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history"ⁱⁱⁱ Likewise, Pritam depicts the sensibilities a woman portrays in various moments of life especially in the most trying times and Dwivedi did the same with the movie too.

Unlike in the novel, the film is structured in a linear time. Puro's exuberance is effervescent and her presence among her own is full of positivity. Her femininity is very vibrant and Pritam decisively gets her strong persona shine brightly in the in the dark shadows of male chauvinism. Dwivedi starts off with highlighting the role of Puro by giving her prime importance in the movie. His cinematic vision of the female protagonist is unambiguously focused and sorted. Other characters are not allowed to eclipse her aura. Rashid, in the novel, is instantly in love with her

despite the fact that he had abducted her to bring shame to her family. The film presents the relationship between Puro and Rashid as described in the original text. The filmmaker does not fiddle with the relationship between Rashid and Puro for the sake of his cinematic creativity. Rather, he preserves Pritam's narration by maintaining the textual details.

As the character of Puro evolves, she is but caged and becomes a skeleton (Pinjar) - A body without a soul. Metaphorically, this journey is very significant as it tells us how a woman of the time got mired in the malice of male hegemony that did not at all care for her life and existence. First as a Puro and later as Hamida, she travels her journey alone bearing the disgrace of all the ignominies that befell her.

In the novel, Pritam depicts Puro in her pensive mood and in her disturbing thoughts: "In her dreams, when she met her old friends...she was Puro but at other times she was Hamida. She lived a double life: Hamida by day, Puro by night. In reality she was neither one nor the other. She was just a skeleton, without shape or a name."

The film has similar instances where Rashid seeing her getting pale day by day says,

"I see that you are very sad these days. You wake up in the middle of the night. You don't sleep well. Neither do you have wholesome food."

Thus the movie very strongly portrays her sensibilities and depicts those distressing moments which she bore because she is a woman. Dwivedi has done well to particularly touch those excruciating instances that projected the sad realities of women in partition days.

Imtiaz Ali, a noted filmmaker, in one of the interviews to Rakesh Anand Bakshi (2015) says,

"I believe direction is not about knowing everything or even anything in particular. It is largely about having a story to tell, and those stories will not come from textbooks. They will arrive to you from your experiences, your perception of life. To engage with life is important"^{iv}

Amrita learned from her personal experiences as a woman before the partition. The pre partition India had very little to offer to women as writers. The little recognition that she received definitely told the sorry sight of women as a progressive writers in the colonial times. The trauma of partition was so lasting that she came out with a heartfelt poem '*Aaj Aakhaan Waris Shah Nu*' in 1947. The poem is a testimony to how women were subjected to horrors and violence of partition in 1947. Later when *Pinjar* germinated in her mind, she could not stop herself from letting out the cries and pangs of women of the time. As a feminist voice she strode confidently in the realms of literary world.

Dwivedi has openly supported the women's perspectives of Pritam and allowed his storytelling to be guided by her soul. However, the biggest difference that Dwivedi brings in his film is the episode wherein Puro suffers miscarriage. He wanted to add his own perspective and created a new script for Puro and Rashid here. Pritam wanted Puro to bear the child even when she was undergoing deep anguish before the baby was born. Puro hated being impregnated. She calls it something 'stabbing inside her' and in the movie as well Puro tells Rashid how she views the whole thing: 'the fruit of Rashid's sins'.

Kakkar (1981) writes:

“Whether a woman’s family is poor or healthy, whatever her caste, class or region, whether she is fresh young bride or exhausted by many pregnancies and infancies already, an Indian woman knows that motherhood confers upon her a purpose and identity that nothing else in her culture can.”^v

The film adaptation comes out very strongly and carries on with Pritam’s portrayal of women being ruled by societal norms that keeps them subjected to the vagaries of men when it comes to making all important decisions on women’s issues. Pritam shows how Puro is let down by her own when she returned from her abductor. Her decision to reunite with her parents and family was considered wrong and it made her look imprudent. She could not return because she was a woman and she could not decide on who she should marry because she was a woman. In the film, Dwivedi goes forward to address these issues with different approach. But he definitely does not undermine Pritam’s perspectives.

Stam (2000) records that one way to look at adaptation is to see how novel’s text is being transformed by the complex series of operations: selection, amplification, concretization, actualization and extrapolation, The source text in this case can be seen as a situated utterance produced in one medium and in one historical context and transformed into another equally situated utterance that is produced in one medium and in a different context and different medium. While making the film, Dwivedi certainly might have come up with these transformations.

There are enough reasons and instances to say that Pritam wrote her story not only to show the pains suffered in the partition circumstances but also to depict the general truths of the times. The very title ‘*Pinjar*’ assumes notions regarding women’s exploitation. Pritam's story is somewhere between a realist account of a particularly vicious aspect of women's experiences of the partition, on the one hand, and a more internal psychological portrait where realism is only a secondary goal, on the other. In the end, on more careful reading we come across the themes of the torture and failures suffered by women.

Pritam writes in her autobiography (1994),

“Oh, the pain of it as I look back on those days before partition! The very air was rent with the most fantastic rumours. Apart from my marriage, I had not been involved in any noteworthy incident. Engaged at the age of four...”^{vi}

It is worth mentioning how Dwivedi avoids showing the feministic turbulence in his movie though. While Pritam does not mince words in addressing the core concerns, Dwivedi layers them with related concerns of the time. Pritam has three women epitomizing her core issues: *Kammo*, *Taro* and *pagli* (mad woman). No woman of the time has written as direct as Pritam advocating the apprehensions of women. The trauma of communal riots was worst felt among women. They were kidnapped, ravaged, abandoned and left homeless. Thus she is considered an outright campaigner of feminism among the foremost writers of Punjab and India. The novel testifies to all these facts when Pritam mentions: “For two years I have had to sell my body for a mess of pottage and a few rags...once we give away a daughter our lips are sealed. It’s up to her husband to treat her as he likes. It is a man’s privilege...there is no justice in the world; nor any God. He can do what he likes; there is no God to stop him. God’s fetters were meant only for my feet. (Woman’s feet).”

It took almost fifty years for Indian cinema to adapt the novel into a moving movie. Dwivedi offers tributes to all those women who are represented by Puro in the novel by Pritam. How women's vulnerability is exploited by always lurking men is very well showed by Pritam as well as Dwivedi. Although the horrors of partition have been forgotten by many today, the anguish of the women's plight is far from over. Pritam's courage to stand by her firsthand experiences in her writings is clearly a sign of her abilities to withstand criticism. Similarly, Dwivedi's decision to make his movie on women's causes by adapting *Pinjar* is also a bold statement to the world.

Kannan (2000) writes,

“Women are trapped in cultural values that offer no scope for individualizing the self”^{vii}

Pritam's India then was struggling with the questions of freedom and stability as a nation. Historically, India's culture has been idolized much written about. The rich colours of India's rich social fabric have always made a mark in the pages of history. However, when colonialism dented it strongly, women - the ordinary women from ordinary households suffered the most. Pritam's novel in 1950 shows those dark truths. Nothing has changed since. The gender bias is still rampant and normal and the perspectives towards women are still the case of slow transition. The evolution of women's consciousness needs some power push and sympathetic understanding from within the cultural threads of our society. Because, the word 'freedom' takes two different meanings in society. For the male, freedom would mean realizing of the self: without any curbing of spirit and living with his multiple existences through women. For the female, it is conforming to the social attitudes, norms, behaviour and code of conduct. She has to fit into so many roles without crossing boundaries. Her life is controlled by male sanction and authority.^{viii}

Interestingly, Dwivedi does not dedicate much screenplay on these matters. Thus, we greatly miss a chance to see the Puro of Pritam. She is wretched though in the film in some parts but her heroine-like figure did not come up on the screen. Pritam makes Puro the darling of her story. She is a suffering kind but she is not a loser. She fights back and has courage to find ways and means to protect suffering women.

Fellini, the famous Italian filmmaker, (1988) says,

“My preferences are for original subjects written for cinema...it is the feeling that matters, the atmosphere, the imagination, the illumination, in sum interpretation. Literary interpretation of events has nothing to do with cinematic interpretation of those same events. They are two completely different methods of expression.”^{ix}

To make the film appear original, one has to research on the customs and thinking patterns of the people of the specific period. The film looks true to the period and its authenticity appears on the screen. Dwivedi has looked into those details in making his movie. From customs to costumes and from rituals to rendition of local music and songs, everything seems authentic on the screen. Thus, Dwivedi justifies his fidelity to Pritam not only in words but also in the spirit of the geographical settings in the then Punjab.

At the end of the movie, we are left with the all important question: Does Puro remain Puro or she is totally metamorphosed into Hamida? Ironically, the woman within these two identities has not changed at all. She remains the same woman before and after. Her consciousness has bore the brunt

of her struggles. Despite the trauma and troubles of the times, she still hovers around the questions of her autonomy.

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