

**Gender, Violence and Home: A Study of the Selected Works of
Amrita Pritam and Krishna Sobti**

**Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for the Award
of the degree of**

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

Sakshi Sundaram

Enrollment No. 01021690216



University School of Humanities & Social Sciences

Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University

Sector 16-C, Dwarka, New Delhi—110078

September 2021

© Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, Dwarka, New Delhi — 110078
All Rights Reserved

Conclusion

The present thesis is a critical feminist engagement with the selected works of Amrita Pritam (1919-2005) and Krishna Sobti (1925-2019). In their long writing careers, spanning over close to seven decades, the authors witnessed and experienced the famed syncretic culture of pre-Partition society, Partition, post-Partition social reconstruction, and the advent of the 21st century. Their bold and unselfconscious writing style has consistently challenged the dominant stereotypes regarding culture, history, religion, social beliefs, and gender in their respective works. Thus, the decision to engage in a critical reading of their chosen texts was motivated by the desire to look at their writings from the lens of the three key concepts of “gender,” “violence,” and “home.” Ergo, the thesis undertook a study of fifteen selected texts—eight by Pritam (*Pinjar; Ek Thi Anita; Dilli Ki Galiyan; Dharti, Sagar Aur Seepiyan; Aerial; Kore Kagaz; Aak Ke Patte; and Band Darwaza*); and seven by Sobti (*Daar Se Bichudi; Mitro Marjani; Surajmukhi Andhere Ke; Aye Ladki; Dil-O-Danish; Gujarat Pakistan Se Gujarat Hindustan; and Channa*).

These three terms—“gender,” “violence,” and “home”—define and restrict the physical, psychological, economic, cultural, social, familial, and personal space of an individual. “Gender” refers to a person’s social and personal identity that is bestowed by her/his society. The performance of it is governed by the cultural and moral frameworks that, for the most part, favour the male members. The women have to contend or come to terms with the codified gendered norms to be and become valuable members of society. Thus, it is always interesting to see how the women characters in literature challenge, subvert, resist, or push back against these constraints in their own ways.

On the other hand, “violence” in terms of physical aggression is an action performed with the intention of causing deliberate hurt as well as an insidious display of power over the

thoughts, feelings and everyday actions of the victim. Vulnerable groups like women and children are often at the receiving end of patriarchies, and so the appropriation of constructive violence is helpful and sometimes the only way in which the victims can gain some degree of power for themselves in the same space. Therefore, the domestic and sexual violence taking place within the familial spaces often mimics the same principles of dominance, control, subjugation, threat, physical assault and injury that are witnessed on the macroscopic level of a full-fledged war.

However, most often, in patriarchies, there is a deliberate silence around violence (domestic, psychological, emotional, sexual and interpersonal). Therefore, terms like “home” and “family,” notwithstanding their positive associations of comfort and familiarity, belie uneasy tensions underneath their calm exteriors. That is why socio-political acts of violence in public spaces spill over to the familial spaces and become a breeding ground for further violence, oppression, inhibitions, and physical-mental trauma.

Thus, when a person feels threatened in any way in her/his personal and familial relationships due to physical, mental, emotional or psychological acts of violence, it ultimately leads to a rupture of her/his sense of home and belonging. Moreover, within patriarchies, the women are expected and regulated to behave in specific ways, which is ensured at the cost of violent subjugation, oppression, and denial. This is why in patrilineal societies, such patriarchal politics drives a sharp wedge between a woman’s sense of “home” and “house” before and after her marriage.

Findings of the Study

Taking all of these arguments into consideration, the thesis has arrived at the following findings after a careful study of the chosen texts. First of all, with respect to women’s writing and feminist canon, the thesis has found that both Pritam and Sobti

creatively transform their personal life experiences as participants, witnesses, and bystanders into their creative aesthetics. Consequently, there is an unbreakable bond between their politics and writing that imbues the latter with a rebellious and transformative aesthetic credo. Such an intermeshing of personal life, socio-political history, and literature foreground the radical potential of women's writing in addressing the issues of gender inequality, violence, and homelessness in all of their complexities. Therefore, analysing their respective work under the rubric of women's writing will be fruitful to the discussion of their impact as "writers who are also women" and the issues that plague the genre in general.

Both the authors prioritised their careers and financial independence and lived with their respective partners without worrying about social and moral conventions. This kind of unconventional thought and thinking also gets reflected in their writing and can be read as the presence of a latent feminist consciousness in their work. Their respective work highlights the agency of their women characters in selective but effective ways. "Selective" because the characters do not give out the clarion call for female independence in so many words and "effective" because their literary representations undermine the corrosive networks of power and patriarchy that constrict and homogenise women's diverse experiences as trivial or insignificant.

For instance, just like Pritam, her women characters choose to live as aberrations rather than be restricted by heteronormative norms. Kamini only accepts Nassir's proposal because he respects her as a writer, Anita conflates the image of her lover and son to feel erotic pleasure, Chetna hides the paternity of her child to avoid a marriage of convenience with her lover Iqbal, and Annie refuses to be a "broken" and dependant wife. Thus, while Pritam focalises on the dynamics of the man-woman relationships, she does not let the women's self-respect suffer in any way and extensively borrows from her own life experiences, as her autobiography *Rasidi Ticket* delineates.

Similarly, Sobti's women exhibit immense resilience and self-assurance in the most adverse of circumstances—Ratti does not indulge in self-abnegation or self-flagellation as a rape survivor, Mehak asserts her independence and authority as a free woman when she is denied the same by her lover Kripanarayan, Sobti Bai refuses to be bracketed as a weak “refugee” woman, and Channa proves a worthy heir to her Nana. Thus, Sobti's women belong to different strata of society and hold their own fort in the face of adverse opinions and situations, as she herself did in her personal life. Therefore, despite their reservations about feminism, the female protagonists of Pritam and Sobti are also feminist trailblazers in their own right and generate fresh debates and discussions around gender in/equality in Indian society.

Also, in the overall context of “violence,” the thesis has found that even though one cannot prevent or annihilate the occurrences of violence, one can undoubtedly mitigate the resulting trauma by forging a sense of community and camaraderie with one's self or the others. The survivors succeed in breaking the cycles of violence at great personal risks or by making strategic compromises with the same structures of power that subjugate them in the first place.

The traumatic effects of relocation, collective loss, the climate of pervasive hatred, and communal violence during Partition made Pritam question the laws of social morality, the concept of revenge, and patriarchal violence against women, which became a life-long concern for her. As a result, in her oeuvre, within the particular context of violence and trauma, there is a qualitative difference in the responses of her male and female characters. Her male characters withdraw deep into the recesses of their psyche, whereas the women take an active and agential role. For instance, Pooro rescues abandoned and abused women due to empathy, whereas Kammi rejects her abusive father and emotionally manipulative lover (Samesh) to become a single mother. On the other hand, Gautam resorts to superstition to

find out the whereabouts of Urmi whereas Pankaj is mentally so affected by the secret of his birth that he is finally unable to transcend his trauma. Thus, the female characters transcend the trauma of violence by forging female companionships, but men are rendered companionless in their suffering due to inward withdrawal into their own minds and dreams.

Similarly, after Partition, Sobti volunteered at Kingsway refugee camp in Delhi and saw the battered, tired, wounded, dismembered mass of people flooding a city that was ill-equipped to handle the load. She witnessed them fighting humiliation, derision, intolerance and apathy. Such witnessing of the effects and trauma of violence, especially on the female victims' bodies, lent Sobti the empathy to carry their voices far and wide to reengage with the aftermath of Partition and violence against women multiple times in her oeuvre.

However, akin to Pritam's, they refuse to be passive victims of violence and aggression. Pasho, Mitro, Ratti, Mehak Bano, and Sobti Bai undermine the authority of the Nation, family, society, religion, and culture through their sheer willpower. Pasho can rise above her traumatic childhood and past to bless everyone around her, Rati defends herself from all the verbal and psychological abuse by challenging her abusers head-on, Mitro unhinges the neat heteronormative norms of the family with her speech and desires, Mehak demands her lawful property at the cost of being excluded from her daughter's wedding, and Sobti Bai chooses to move out of the Royal service than see her name being maligned as a traitor.

Thus, Sobti's women characters show courage, resilience, and an undefeated attitude towards violent subjugations. Their will to live, survive, and thrive acts as a counter-force to upset the hold of terror and confinement in their lives. However, in contrast to Pritam's female characters, Sobti's characters suffer the worst of psychosexual violence and multiple displacements. Also, Sobti engages with a wide array of violent contexts and the resulting

trauma, in tandem with the socio-cultural realities of Indian families and societies. On the other hand, Pritam restricts her exploration to the specific context of man-woman relationships and the psychological, emotional, and physical forms of violence that go in them.

Nonetheless, the respective female characters of Pritam and Sobti never lose the will to speak or subvert the authority of their oppressors. They channel and sublimate the impact of the trauma by reaching out to other women characters in times of desperate need and hopelessness as support and survival strategies. Such forms of female companionships also help the women protagonists in navigating the violent realm of patriarchy, war, and psychosexual abuse and allowing them to stand tall even in the face of massive socio-political upheavals like Partition and the Anglo-Sikh War. Thus, both Pritam and Sobti focus on the mundane lives of ordinary citizens to uncover the networks of power and oppression. These overt or hidden networks seek to crush the characters' spirits but instead get toppled by the potent sites of resistance that germinate in the nooks and crannies of internal revolts and silences.

Further, with regards to the concept of "home," the thesis has found that the meaning of the words "home" and "homelessness" is intricately connected to the personal experiences and lives of both Pritam and Sobti. In other words, owing to their shared roots in the pre-partition Punjab and subsequent immigration to post-partition Delhi as refugees has lent both Pritam and Sobti an acute understanding of what it means to be "at home" and being "homeless." Therefore, the profound sensitivity towards female subjectivity with the shifting ideas of "home" can be linked with the writers' biographies.

Pritam was uprooted from her birthplace Gujranwala (now in Pakistan) and witnessed the bloodshed and communal riots from close quarters as a pregnant woman. Unlike many

other unfortunate women of that era, she was sheltered from rioters' bodily harm, but the psychological scarring was still there. Moreover, being acquainted with the eminent social activists, who were involved in the controversial Recovery and Rehabilitation programme of the abducted women, provided her with an added insight into the questionable "homecoming" process of the newly-formed nations, India and Pakistan. In a manner, Pritam's *Pinjar* paved the way for later scholarly feminist research on Partition's female victims.

That is why Pooro's final denial to reunite with her natal family in *Pinjar* is a critical early feminist intervention that challenged the patriarchal benevolence and absolute authority of the two newly formed Nations. Similarly, Pritam's unconventional treatment of women characters in the novels can be attributed to her eccentric life choices. She dared to walk out of her loveless marriage with Pritam Singh, and as a mother of two children, chose to live in with her partner Imroz while maintaining her economic independence as an author. Thus, Anita, Kammi, and Annie walk out of the confines of matrimony and false relationships rather than stay in disrespectful alliances that do not value them as women in their own right. Therefore, Pritam's protagonists embrace the condition of "homelessness" to carve spaces and distinct identities for themselves in the male-dominated world.

Similarly, Sobti had to leave her hostel and ancestral haveli in Gujrat, Pakistan after Partition. Members of her extended family and friends lost their property, life, and loved ones in the ensuing carnage and mayhem. The loss made her revisit Partition in her autobiographical novel *Gujarat Pakistan Se Gujarat Hindustan*. Further, her life-long focus on the socio-economic, cultural, and oppressive aspects of Indian families has made her protagonists constantly engage and renegotiate with the various thresholds. Pasho goes in and out of many houses and carries her "home" in her head, Mitro transgresses and comes back to her familial fold when faced with the threat of homelessness, Ammu finally agrees and

appreciates her daughter's financial independence and single status that will not constrict her life upon her marriage, Mehak accepts her homelessness as inevitable and finds her home with Khan Sahib, and Channa rescues her paternal and maternal houses from the clutches of her cunning relatives to become the sole mistress of both. Thus, Sobti grants her female characters the knowledge of the structures of oppression and the audacity to break free or break even.

Finally, the research has found that eventually, there is a strong connection between the three concepts of "gender," "violence," and "home" in the writings of both Pritam and Sobti, which ultimately seeks to challenge, subvert, and topple the patriarchal hold on women's lives, minds and bodies through an active and activist engagement with the issues of violence and homelessness. At times, it becomes difficult to separate one from the other because each of these three entities seamlessly merges in their respective works. To put it succinctly, the experiences of violence and trauma disrupt a person's sense of "feeling at home," and these experiences are often gendered. Therefore, Pritam and Sobti posit women's voices and experiences as important counter-narratives in masculine canon and official histories.

Limitation of the Study

The research accepts and acknowledges the limitation of its study as it could not include the detailed analysis of specific texts like Pritam's *Nagmani* and Sobti's *Zindaginama*, *Samay Sargam*, *Yaron Ke Yaar*, and *Tin Pahad* owing to the constraints of time and scope. Including these works may give a future researcher a deeper and richer understanding of the works of these two great contemporary women writers from the perspective of "gender," "violence," and "home."

However, the study regrets that it could not go into a full-fledged psychoanalytic criticism of various dreams, motifs and symbols that pervade the palimpsestic narratives of both Pritam and Sobti. Also, the research could not give space to a detailed and in-depth analysis of Pritam's poetry which is highly essential in understanding her overall perspective regarding history, politics, marriage, women's oppression, unfulfilled desires etc. Similarly, it could not tap into the rich potential of Sobti's non-fictional works, including her three volumes of *Hum Hashmat* that would have provided a holistic view of her craft and poetics.

Therefore, the study hopes that in future, these aspects would be studied more in detail by incorporating more works of these authors or maybe with other authors to see how women's condition reflects or is reflected by their immediate social realities and what strategies these women writers employ in inverting, subverting, renegotiating with the dominant societal forces like patriarchy, religion, caste-class politics, colonialism etc.

At present, the thesis has focused on specific forms of violence like Partition, honour killing, domestic abuse, sexual, psychological, emotional, and verbal. However, further studies could take the aspects of suicide, violence against elderly people, and psychological disassociation to see further nuances of the concept of violence. (Disassociation is a hallmark of Pritam's later writings where her male characters lose a sense of self, sensory capabilities, and immediate reality.)

Additionally, the research could not delve into the idea of home concerning the concept of "Nation as home." So, future research studies on Pritam and Sobti could factor the same into account as well.

Works Cited and Consulted

Primary Sources

- Pritam, Amrita. *Aak Ke Patte. Amrita Pritam: Chune Huye Upanyas*. Bhartiya Jnanpith, 2016, pp. 237-314.
- . *Aerial. Aerial*. Hind Pocket Books, 2020, pp. 9-78.
- . *Band Darwaza. Kammi Aur Nanda*. Kitabghar Prakashan, 2018, pp. 6-84.
- . *Dharti, Sagar Aur Seepiyan. Ratna Aur Chetna*. Kitabghar, 2011, pp. 8-164.
- . *Dilli Ki Galiyan. Kaili, Kamini Aur Anita*. Rajpal and Sons, 2011, pp. 87-168.
- . *Ek thi Anita. Kaili, Kamini Aur Anita*. Rajpal and Sons, 2011, pp. 171-271.
- . *Just An Aerial (Eriyal)*. Translated by Prabhakar Machwe, *Mahfil*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1968, pp. 99–113. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40874274. Accessed on 15 Aug. 2017.
- . *Kore Kagaz*. Bhartiya Jnanpith, 2015.
- . *Pinjar. Amrita Pritam: Chune Huye Upanyas*. Bhartiya Jnanpith, 2016, pp. 11-91.
- . *Pinjar: The Skeleton and Other Stories*. Translated by Khushwant Singh, Tara Press, 2009.
- Sobti, Krishna. *A Gujarat Here, A Gujarat There*. Translated by Daisy Rockwell, Kindle ed., Penguin Books, 2019.
- . *Aye Ladki*. Rajkamal Prakashan, 2008.
- . *Blossoms in Darkness*. Translated by Kavita Nagpal, Vikas Publishing House, 1979.
- . *Channa*. Rajkamal Prakashan, 2019.
- . *Daar Se Bichudi*. Rajkamal Prakashan, 2014.
- . *Dilo Danish*. Rajkamal Prakashan, 2018.
- . *Listen Girl!*. Translated by Shivanath, Katha, 2002.