
**Bodies Without Borders: *The Woman as Other in Amrita Pritam's Pinjar*
and Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood***

¹Rakhpreet Kaur Walia

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Agricultural Journalism, Languages and Culture, Punjab
Agricultural University, Ludhiana, Punjab, India

ABSTRACT

This paper reads Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* (1950) and Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) through Simone de Beauvoir's account of woman as the Other—the being defined always in relation to a masculine subject rather than in and for herself. Although the two novels emerge from radically different histories—the communal violence of India's Partition and the colonial disruption of Igbo society in Nigeria—they converge on a single figure: the woman whose body is claimed, named, and moved by others while she herself is denied the standing of a sovereign self. Puro, abducted and forcibly renamed Hamida, becomes in Pritam's own phrase a "skeleton" belonging to neither the family that disowns her nor the community that seizes her; Nnu Ego, whose worth is measured entirely by her fertility, gives everything to her children and dies alone at the roadside, her motherhood "joyful" only in the novel's bitter irony. Reading the two together under the rubric of "bodies without borders," the paper argues that both protagonists are Others precisely because their bodies are made to cross borders—communal, national, marital, colonial—that their selves are never permitted to author. It attends to three shared mechanisms of othering: the body as communal or reproductive property, the erasure and re-inscription of the woman's name, and confinement to what Beauvoir called immanence. Drawing on Partition scholarship (Butalia; Menon and Bhasin) and postcolonial feminist critique (Spivak; Oy  w  m  ), the paper also asks where Beauvoir's largely European framework must be qualified, and locates in both novelists' insistence on their heroines' interiority a quiet but real refusal of the objecthood their societies impose.

Keywords: *Woman as Other; Simone de Beauvoir; Partition literature; motherhood; gendered violence; comparative literature*

INTRODUCTION

A border is meant to be a line that bodies either stay behind or cross with permission. In the two novels placed side by side here, it does neither: the border runs straight through the woman's body, and it is others who decide when that body will be moved across it. Amrita Pritam's *Puro* is carried over the fault line of Partition—from Hindu daughter to Muslim wife, from one household's possession to another's—without her consent ever being sought. Buchi Emecheta's *Nnu Ego* is shifted from her father's compound in Ibuza to a husband's cramped room in colonial Lagos, prized not for who she is but for what her body can be made to yield. Neither woman holds title to the territory her body occupies. Each becomes, in a precise sense, a body without borders of her own: claimed, renamed, relocated, yet never sovereign.

The concept that names this condition most exactly belongs to Simone de Beauvoir. In *The Second Sex* she argues that man has installed himself as the Subject, the Absolute, the measure of the human, and has fixed woman as his Other—the inessential, defined only in relation to his essential self. “He is the Subject, he is the Absolute,” she writes; “she is the Other” (Beauvoir 16). The formulation is deceptively simple, but its consequence is far-reaching. To be the Other is to be denied the standing of a self who acts, names, and chooses, and to be reduced instead to a being who is acted upon, named, and chosen for. Woman, in Beauvoir's account, does not author her own meaning; she receives it from a world that has already decided what she is for.

Pinjar (1950) and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) come from histories that could hardly be more different—the communal butchery of India's Partition on one side, the slow violence of British colonialism upon Igbo Nigeria on the other. Yet both novels return, with unsettling insistence, to the same figure: the woman whose body is the property of a community, whose name can be revoked and rewritten at will, and whose life is spent in the endless, unrewarded labour that Beauvoir called immanence. To read the two together is not to flatten their differences but to notice how a shared logic of othering survives translation across continents, religions, and empires.

This paper argues that *Puro* and *Nnu Ego* are Others in Beauvoir's precise sense, and that their othering is enacted through three linked mechanisms: the treatment of the female body as communal or reproductive property; the erasure and re-inscription of the woman's name; and her confinement to a life of immanence from which transcendence—the freedom to

undertake projects of one's own—is systematically withheld. I read these mechanisms under the sign of “bodies without borders”: both women who are made to cross borders themselves are never allowed to draw. At the same time, following the cautions of postcolonial feminist scholarship, I resist importing Beauvoir wholesale into South Asian and West African worlds she did not have in view, and I attend to the ways both novelists lend their heroines an interior life that quietly refuses the objecthood their societies impose.

WOMAN AS OTHER: BEAUVOIR'S FRAME AND ITS LIMITS

Beauvoir's most cited sentence—“one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir 293)—separates the biological female from the cultural role of Woman, and locates the Other not in nature but in a history of decisions. What makes her the Other, crucially, is the non-reciprocity of the relationship. In many encounters between a self and the other, Beauvoir notes, the othering runs both ways: each consciousness meets another that presses its own rival claim. Between man and woman this reciprocity fails. Man says “women,” and woman too says “women”; she does not, except in rare and formal moments, say “we.” She has taken into herself the very gaze that diminishes her. This internalisation is the most insidious part of Beauvoir's argument, and—as we shall see—the part that both novels dramatise most painfully: the Other is not only defined from without but often consents from within.

Three aspects of the framework organise the readings that follow. First, otherness works through the body. Woman is identified with flesh, with reproduction, with the perpetuation of the species, while man claims the realm of projects and ideas; Beauvoir treats reproduction as a servitude that binds woman to immanence—the repetitive maintenance of life—while man reserves transcendence, the reaching beyond the given toward self-chosen ends. Second, otherness works through relation. A woman is a daughter, wife, mother, always someone's, and rarely simply herself. Third, otherness is naturalised: it is made to seem the order of things rather than the outcome of a history, so that the woman who suffers it is taught to call it fate.

Applying a mid-century French philosopher to a Punjabi novel of Partition and an Igbo novel of colonial Lagos demands caution. Oyérónkẹ Oyéwùmí has argued that the category of “woman”—a group defined by anatomy and subordinated as such—is not a cultural universal but a specific product of Western history, and that reading African social worlds through it can distort as much as it reveals. Her warning is salutary: seniority, motherhood, lineage, and spiritual standing cut across gender in ways Beauvoir's binary does not anticipate. Gayatri

Chakravorty Spivak's question—whether the subaltern, and especially the subaltern woman, can speak, or whether she is spoken for until her own voice becomes inaudible—presses in the same direction. I take these cautions not as reasons to abandon Beauvoir but as reasons to use her carefully: as a lens that clarifies the othering of Puro and Nnu Ego without pretending to exhaust the meaning of their worlds.

PINJAR: THE BODY AS COMMUNAL PROPERTY

Pinjar—literally “skeleton”—opens in the money-lending household of a Hindu family in pre-Partition Punjab and turns, almost at once, into an act of possession. Puro is abducted by Rashid, a Muslim man, to settle a debt of honour incurred generations earlier, when her family wronged him; his elders, he confesses, “made me take an oath” to avenge the insult (Pritam 15). She is, from the first, not a person but a counter in a transaction between men. When she protests to him—“If my uncle abducted your aunt, what fault was that of mine?” (Pritam 15)—she names the injustice exactly: her body is conscripted to pay a bill drawn up by her forefathers. Partition will soon generalise the violence. Pritam's narrator watches whole communities break apart “like a peeled orange” splitting “into many segments” (Pritam 45), the Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs of the Punjab falling away from one another. Here the Beauvoirian Other appears in its starkest South Asian form: the woman as the medium through which male communities conduct their quarrels.

The novel's most searing image of othering is the moment Puro is renamed. Rashid brings a stranger to the house and asks his wife “to stretch out her arm”; the man “tattooed on it the new name she had been given” at her forced marriage (Pritam 18). From that day, Pritam writes, “Hamida” is “inscribed on her skin in dark green letters” and everyone begins to call her by it (Pritam 18). The scene literalises Beauvoir's claim that woman is simply what man decrees. Puro does not choose her name; it is written on her body by a man she did not choose, at the instruction of a man who abducted her. That the inscription is a tattoo—permanent, subcutaneous, unerasable—makes the point with almost unbearable precision: her otherness is not a role she can lay down but a mark she will carry in her skin for life. A smaller, devastating parallel confirms the pattern. The corpse of the “mad woman” is identified as Hindu by the sacred “Om” tattooed on her arm, and the lost Lajo is later known by the name “tattooed on her arm” (Pritam 49); women are read, claimed, and sorted by the signs cut into their bodies, and none is asked what she is. Out of this claim comes the condition of the title names. Living as Hamida by day and mourning Puro by night, she is, in

the novel's own words, "neither one nor the other," a "skeleton, without a shape or a name" (Pritam 18). The phrase is the book's theoretical heart. To belong fully to neither the Hindu world that bore her nor the Muslim world that took her is to fall into the gap between borders and to lose, in that fall, the very substance of selfhood. A skeleton has no face and no name; it is the residue left when a person's social identity is stripped away. Beauvoir's Other, defined only relative to others, always threatens to thin into exactly this—a form without an interior, a body without a self.

The cruelty Pritam refuses to soften is that Puro's othering is completed not by her abductor but by her own family. When she escapes and returns home, her parents turn her away, and to her plea to be taken along the reply is pitiless: "Who will marry you now? You have lost your religion and your birthright" (Pritam 17). A defiled daughter cannot be reclaimed without staining the family's honour; the community that should have been hers now reads her body as polluted and closes its border against her. Here the novel meets the historical record recovered by feminist historians of Partition. Urvashi Butalia and, in a parallel study, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin have shown how the abducted woman's body became the ledger on which communal and national honour was kept—how her "purity" was treated as the property of her community, and how the state's own recovery operations, in "restoring" such women to their original families and nations, frequently overrode the women's own wishes. Puro's rejection is not an aberration but the ordinary working of a system that valued a woman's symbolic function above her survival. Her family would rather have no daughter than a compromised one.

And yet *Pinjar* is not only a chronicle of victimhood. As the narrative closes, Pritam grants Puro a genuine act of choice. When her brother's wife, Lajo, is abducted in the Partition chaos, it is Puro—now Hamida—who helps recover her and return her to her family. Offered the chance to leave with them and reclaim her Hindu life, Puro chooses instead to stay with Rashid—"My home is now in Pakistan," she tells her brother—and sends Lajo home in her place. "Whether one is a Hindu girl or a Muslim one," she reflects, whoever "reaches her destination... carries along my soul also" (Pritam 66). The gesture is ambiguous, and rightly so. It can be read as resignation, but it can equally be read as the first sovereign decision Puro is permitted to make—a decision that reframes her as an agent who rescues rather than an object who is rescued. Within the narrow room her world allows her, she authors something. The Other, for a moment, says "I."

THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD: THE CAGE OF FERTILITY

If Pritam's Puro is othered by communal honour, Emecheta's Nnu Ego is othered by a value that first looks like exaltation: motherhood. In the Igbo world of *The Joys of Motherhood*, a woman's worth is her fertility. Nnu Ego, daughter of the proud chief Agbadi, learns this before anything else—to be a woman is to become a mother, and to fail at motherhood is to fail at womanhood itself. When her first marriage produces no child, she is snubbed and sent back; in the judgement her community takes for granted, “a woman without a child for her husband was a failed woman” (Emecheta 62). Her plight is shadowed, too, by her *chi*, the personal god Emecheta identifies with “a slave woman who had been forced to die with her mistress” at burial (Emecheta 9)—so that Nnu Ego's very destiny is entangled with a woman who was owned. The title's promised “joys” are set from the outset against this brutal measure of a woman's meaning.

The novel's irony is total and deliberate, and its bite is there in the heroine's very name. At her birth her father prices her—“this child is priceless, more than twenty bags of cowries”—and so she is called Nnu Ego, “twenty bags of cowries” (Emecheta 26): named, from the first, in the currency of wealth. Remarried in Lagos to Nnaife, who launders clothes for a British household and is known as “Nnaife, the washerman” (Emecheta 47), she bears child after child into deepening poverty, starving herself so that her sons might eat and be schooled. Her identity dissolves into her function; she becomes the mother of Oshia, prized for her sons, defined by her reproductive output. Beauvoir's account of woman reduced to womb and ovary finds an almost literal illustration here. What deepens the tragedy is that Nnu Ego has been taught to want precisely this reduction—to measure her own value in children, and above all in sons—so that her othering is not merely imposed but embraced. She is the Beauvoirian Other who consents from within, mistaking her servitude for her glory.

What makes Emecheta's diagnosis sharper than a simple lament for lost tradition is her attention to history. The traditional Igbo compound, for all its patriarchy, offered a woman a web of co-wives, shared childcare, and communal support. Colonial Lagos strips that web away. Nnaife's wage labour for a British household, the cash economy, the single rented room—these dismantle the old supports without dismantling the old expectations. The predicament is often described as a “double colonization”: the Nigerian woman is subordinated at once by an indigenous patriarchy and by an imported colonial order that reorganises her world for its own ends. Nnu Ego is thus doubly confined to Beauvoir's

immanence, condemned to the repetitive upkeep of a life whose conditions are dictated from two directions and authored by neither her tradition nor herself. Her co-wife Adaku, tellingly, refuses this fate. “I am going to be a prostitute,” she declares; “Damn my *chi*!” (Emecheta 168)—trading respectability for an independent income and choosing a kind of transcendence that Nnu Ego, bound by faith in the old order, cannot imagine for herself.

Worn down late in the novel, Nnu Ego arrives at a lucid despair that Emecheta lets her voice aloud: “God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself,” she prays, “not anybody’s appendage?” (Emecheta 186). The bitter recognition follows a page later—“I am a prisoner of my own flesh and blood” (Emecheta 187)—the Beauvoirian Other coming, too late, to consciousness of her condition. Emecheta then reserves her most devastating stroke for the close. Having poured her whole life into her children—several of whom scatter, some abroad, in pursuit of their own advancement—Nnu Ego dies at the roadside “with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her” (Emecheta 224). The woman whose only value was motherhood is abandoned by the very children who were meant to be her recompense. The final irony arrives after her death: honoured with a shrine and petitioned by other women for the gift of children, she withholds it—“Nnu Ego had it all, yet still did not answer prayers for children” (Emecheta 224). Read one way, this is a ghost’s refusal, a mute verdict on the ideology that consumed her. The Other, silenced in life, delivers her critique in the only register left to her—withholding.

BODIES WITHOUT BORDERS: A COMPARATIVE READING

Set beside each other, the two novels disclose a shared grammar of othering that outlasts their particular histories. In both, the woman’s body is treated as property held in common by men and communities—Puro’s as the currency of a communal feud, Nnu Ego’s as the reproductive engine of a lineage. In both, the woman’s name is an index of her subjection: Puro’s is overwritten by force, while Nnu Ego’s dissolves into “mother of” until her individual self is scarcely nameable at all. In both, the horizon of life is immanence—survival, service, the endless upkeep of others—while transcendence is reserved for the men and, tellingly, for the one woman in each book who breaks ranks. And in both, the deepest wound is the internalisation Beauvoir warned of: Puro half-accepts her family’s logic of shame, and Nnu Ego actively cherishes the ideology that destroys her. The Other, in Pritam and Emecheta alike, is made not only by what is done to her but by what she has been taught to want. Both women are also subaltern in Spivak’s sense: their speech is muffled by

structures that speak over and for them. In Pritam's Punjab the silencing is stated outright, as folk wisdom—"when a girl is given away in marriage," one woman observes, "God derives her of her tongue, so that she may not complain" (Pritam 27). Puro's wishes are irrelevant to the men who abduct, disown, and recover the women around her, and the historical "recovery" of abducted women during Partition was itself a transaction conducted above the women's heads. Nnu Ego's aspirations are legible to her society only when translated into the language of sons and sacrifice. That both authors are women writing these silenced women into speech is not incidental. Pritam and Emecheta perform, at the level of narrative, the very act their protagonists are denied: they grant Puro and Nnu Ego an interior life, a point of view, a claim on the reader's attention as subjects rather than objects. The novels are, in this sense, counter-othering machines—restoring to the Other the inwardness that her world has confiscated.

The differences matter, and to flatten them would betray both texts. Puro's othering is acute, spectacular, tied to a specific historical rupture; Nnu Ego's is chronic, structural, woven into the slow fabric of everyday economic life. Pritam's mechanism is communal and religious honour; Emecheta's is the collision of indigenous patriarchy with colonial capitalism. Here Oyèwùmí's caution earns its keep. To call Nnu Ego simply "a woman oppressed as women are oppressed" risks missing how thoroughly her status is bound up with motherhood, seniority, and lineage—categories that Igbo society weighted in ways Beauvoir's European frame does not fully register. The value placed on Nnu Ego's fertility is not only a cage; within her own cosmology it is also a source of standing she has real reason to prize. Beauvoir illuminates the cage; Oyèwùmí and Emecheta together remind us that the woman inside it is reasoning within a world that has its own logic, not merely suffering a universal fate.

What finally binds Puro and Nnu Ego is caught in the image of the border. Puro's body is dragged across the literal border of Partition and the figurative borders of religion and family, and comes to rest in the no-man's-land the novel calls the skeleton—belonging nowhere, named by others. Nnu Ego's body is moved across the border between village and colonial city, between tradition and modernity, and is worn out in the crossing, valued only for what it produces on the far side. In each case the body is mobile and the self is not; the borders the body is made to cross are borders the woman is never permitted to draw. To be a body

without borders, in these novels, is not to be free. It is to be a body whose meaning is always assigned by someone standing on the other side of a line she did not choose.

CONCLUSION

Beauvoir wrote that woman is defined and differentiated with reference to man—that he is the Subject and the Absolute while she is the Other. Read across the distance between Punjab and Lagos, *Pinjar* and *The Joys of Motherhood* give that abstract proposition two unforgettable faces. Puro and Nnu Ego are Others in the fullest sense: bodies claimed as communal or reproductive property, selves overwritten or dissolved by the names others impose, lives confined to an immanence from which no transcendence is allowed to escape. Their tragedies are not identical—one is forged in the fire of Partition, the other in the long attrition of colonial poverty—but they rhyme, and the rhyme tells us something about how patriarchy, in wildly different idioms, keeps arriving at the same reduction of women to Others.

Yet neither novel leaves us only with the reduction. Pritam gives Puro a final act of choice; Emecheta gives Nnu Ego a posthumous refusal; and both give their heroines what their societies withheld—an inner life rendered with such care that the reader cannot mistake them for mere objects. If to be the Other is to be denied the standing of a subject, then the very existence of these novels, written by women who insist on the subjecthood of the women they portray, is itself a form of resistance. The border still runs through the body. But in the act of telling, Pritam and Emecheta begin, at least, to let the woman draw a line of her own.

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