

Landscape as Witness: Ecological Memory and Gendered Violence in Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*

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Abstract

When nations are born through violence, women's bodies become the first contested territories. Amrita Pritam's 1948 novella *Pinjar* refuses to separate the devastation inflicted upon women during India's Partition from the ecological rupture that severed Punjab's ancient landscapes through newly imposed borders. This paper argues that Pritam deliberately constructs the Punjab countryside as an ecological archive of trauma—a living witness that registers and preserves the gendered violence that official histories systematically suppress. Through the protagonist Pooro's fractured existence as Hamida by day and Pooro by night, the novel encodes how both women and nature are reduced to skeletal remnants under patriarchal domination and nationalist frameworks. Using integrated ecocritical, ecofeminist, and geocritical approaches, this analysis demonstrates that Pritam maps gendered violence onto spatial geography through deliberate imagery of environmental decay, domestic displacement, and the symbolic rupture of the Sutlej River—transforming the river from life-giving waterway into militarized border that mirrors Pooro's own severing from family, community, and identity. The novel's ecocritical genius lies in revealing how women's oppression and ecological destruction operate through shared patriarchal logics of instrumentalization and control. Yet Pooro's extraordinary transformation from victim to nurturer—caring for abandoned children and women—articulates an ecofeminist ethics of interdependence and care that resists patriarchal domination. This paper ultimately establishes that *Pinjar* constitutes essential postcolonial and environmental justice literature, whose ecological and gendered analysis proves urgently relevant to contemporary climate displacement and violence against women environmental defenders.

Keywords: Partition literature; Ecofeminism; Gendered violence; Ecological memory and trauma; Landscape and witness; Postcolonial ecocriticism

Introduction

The 1947 Partition of India stands as one of South Asia's most catastrophic historical events, displacing approximately fifteen million people and claiming between five hundred thousand to two million lives, yet its most devastating impact fell disproportionately upon women, who became weaponized through systematic abduction, rape, and forced displacement (Kaur 2023). Among the countless narratives that have emerged from this trauma, Amrita Pritam's novella *Pinjar* (The Skeleton), originally written in Punjabi in 1948 and later translated into English by Khushwant Singh, occupies a unique and urgent position: it refuses to treat Partition as merely a political event, instead mapping its violence onto the intimate geographies of women's bodies and the landscapes that bore witness to their suffering. Published just three years after Partition, *Pinjar* offers not simply a chronicle of gendered violence during communal upheaval, but a profound ecocritical meditation on how women and nature become parallel sites of patriarchal domination and violation within nationalist frameworks (Pritam 1950). The novel's protagonist, Pooro, represents countless women whose bodies were weaponized during Partition—abducted, raped, forced to convert, and ultimately rendered social outcasts by the very communities that were supposed to protect them; when Rashid, a Muslim man from a neighbouring village, kidnaps Pooro in retaliation for a historical family feud between the Sahukars and the Shaikhs, her subsequent forced transformation into "Hamida" becomes emblematic of a larger historical pattern wherein women's identities were systematically erased and reconstructed along communal lines (Sobti & Kumar). Yet what distinguishes Pritam's treatment of this trauma is her insistent attention to the landscapes through which Pooro moves—the villages, homes, rivers, and borders that do not merely provide backdrop to her suffering but actively participate in inscribing it, functioning as what this analysis terms an "ecological archive of trauma." Crucially, Pritam

encodes this dual destruction in the novel's very title and in her devastating portrayal of Pooro's fragmented existence: "It was a double life: Hamida by day, Pooro by night. In reality she was neither Hamida nor Pooro; she was just a skeleton, without a shape or a name" (Pritam 17), a passage that literalizes how women under Partition are reduced to mere bodily scaffolding, stripped of the nourishing connections—familial, communal, ecological—that constitute identity and belonging. The Punjab countryside that once nurtured and defined Pooro becomes under Partition's violence a scarred and fractured terrain that mirrors the fragmentation of herself, and Pritam's depiction of this destruction operates on multiple registers simultaneously: the personal devastation of a young woman's life, the communal dissolution of a multi-religious village society, and the ecological destruction of a landscape defined by its fertility and interconnected waterways.

Contemporary literary criticism has increasingly recognized the need to integrate ecological perspectives with historical and gender analysis, a movement that the ecofeminist scholar Ynestra King describes as essential to understanding how "patriarchal attitudes are the common root behind both environmental destruction and the exploitation of women" (Chakraborty et al. 2025), and this imperative becomes especially urgent when considering Partition literature, wherein the creation of national borders literally severed communities from their ancestral lands, rendering once-fertile agricultural regions into contested and militarized zones, just as women's bodies were severed from their social contexts and made into contested territories. In the context of Indian literature and history, while scholars have recognized Amrita Pritam and others as pioneering voices in depicting Partition's gendered consequences, *Pinjar* has rarely been systematically analyzed through an explicitly ecocritical and ecofeminist lens that attends to how landscape functions as both witness and archive of gendered trauma, how natural imagery preserves what patriarchal and nationalist

narratives suppress, and how women's subjugation becomes inseparable from the exploitation of the natural world. This paper argues that *Pinjar* employs natural imagery, spatial dislocation, and ecological symbolism to construct what may be termed an "ecological memory" of Partition—a way of remembering and preserving the experiences of women that official histories have systematically marginalized or silenced, while simultaneously revealing how ecological destruction and gendered violence operate through shared patriarchal logics (Uttamchandani 2011; Mehta 2014). The novel's central symbolic architecture—the skeletal body, the violated home, the destroyed landscape, the severed river—establishes that women and nature are not merely metaphorically interconnected but materially and historically implicated in each other's destruction; both are instrumentalized for utility and control, both absorb trauma without recognition or recompense, and both resist through their very persistence. Contemporary environmental justice scholarship increasingly documents how this historical pattern continues: women comprise eighty percent of those displaced by climate change, and women environmental defenders face systematic violence for mobilizing against extractive industries that destroy both ecosystems and human communities (Tran 2023; Upreti 2025).

Theoretical Framework: Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, and Spatial Analysis of Partition Trauma

Understanding Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* as an ecological archive of gendered violence requires a sophisticated theoretical apparatus that integrates three interconnected critical approaches: ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and geocriticism. Ecocriticism, which emerged as a formal critical practice in the 1970s when William Rueckert coined the term in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (1978), represents an intentionally broad interdisciplinary approach to literature that "analyzes texts that illustrate environmental

concerns and examine[s] the various ways literature treats the subject of nature” (Rueckert 2005). Rather than treating nature as mere backdrop or symbolic ornament in literary texts, ecocriticism insists on reading nature as an active agent and as what we might term a “text” or historical archive in its own right—a position especially crucial for understanding Partition literature, where the ecological destruction of Punjab’s once-fertile landscape became inseparable from the gendered violence perpetrated against women (Buell, Heise, and Thornber 420). As the ecocritical scholar Edward Adamson has argued, ecocriticism demands that literary scholars “redress the historic neglect of setting relative to plot, character, image, and symbol in literary works,” shifting attention from human-centred narratives to the material world that grounds and shapes human experience (420). Within the context of *Pinjar*, this ecocritical lens allows us to read the devastated Punjab landscape not as a metaphor for women’s trauma but as a co-protagonist that bears witness to, records, and preserves gendered violence through its own damaged ecology. Ecofeminism, which emerged as a theoretical movement when French feminist Françoise d’Eaubonne coined the term “ecofeminism” in her 1974 work *Le féminisme ou la mort*, represents what scholars’ term “a double political intervention, of environmentalism into feminism and feminism into environmentalism” (Sturgeon 169), insisting that “the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature are deeply interconnected, both rooted in patriarchal and capitalist systems” (Chakraborty et al. 2025). As the prominent ecofeminist scholar Ynestra King asserts, “patriarchal attitudes are the common root behind both environmental destruction and the exploitation of women,” a formulation that proves particularly generative for understanding how Pritam depicts women’s bodies and landscape as parallel victims of patriarchal nationalism during Partition (Gaard 2015; Chakraborty et al.).

In Pritam's novella, Pooro's maternal instinct and her original embeddedness within family and communal structures reveal her role as nurturer and transmitter of cultural memory, making her violence all the more devastating—her rape becomes not merely personal violation but also a violation of her capacity to nurture and sustain community life, just as Partition's borders sever the Punjab landscape from its ecological interdependencies. Geocriticism, theorized comprehensively by Bertrand Westphal in his work on spatial analysis, provides essential frameworks for understanding how space, trauma, and memory intersect in *Pinjar*. Westphal's geocriticism is grounded in the conviction that "places are not self-contained and autonomous, defined in stable, self-evident ways," but rather exist "in constant flux, loosely delineated by borders that are shifting, permeable, and always open to question" (Westphal 2011; Al Hamdany 2025). The four key elements of geocriticism—multifocalization, stratigraphy, intertextuality, and polysensoriality—prove essential for reading *Pinjar*'s spatial architecture: multifocalization demands that we examine the village not through a single perspective but through multiple overlapping experiences; stratigraphy requires that we recognize how the landscape contains archaeological layers of previous historical moments and meanings; intertextuality invites us to read textual representations of space alongside historical, geographical, and archival sources; and polysensoriality emphasizes that "the experience of spaces emerges from all senses, which deliver perception once they receive and analyze information through mental activities" (Westphal 113). Applied to *Pinjar*, geocriticism allows us to understand Chhattovani and Rattoval village not merely as setting but as a complex spatial entity that accumulates meanings, registers trauma, and transmits memory through its specific geography. Additionally, contemporary trauma theory emphasizes what scholars' term "body memory" or "embodied trauma," wherein trauma is literally sedimented into the lived body and landscape, such that "memory may be non-

conceptual and lacking in propositional content, yet retain pre-reflectively embodied affective, physiological, perceptual, social, and temporal features” (Casey 2000; Fuchs 2012; Fuchs 2017).

Gendered Violence and the Female Body as Contested Territory

The construction of women’s bodies as battlegrounds wherein communal violence, patriarchal authority, and colonial-nationalist frameworks violently intersect, transforming individual female flesh into contested territorial spaces over which competing masculine and communal interests wage war. The novel’s narrative unfolds through the traumatic abduction of Pooro, a young Hindu girl engaged to Ramchand, by Rashid, a Muslim man from a neighbouring village, in an act explicitly framed as retaliation for a historical wrong: decades earlier, Pooro’s uncle had abducted Rashid’s aunt as payment for a debt, an act that establishes the genealogy of revenge trauma that will be inscribed upon Pooro’s body. As Pritam writes, “Abduction of Pooro was to settle the past scores” (Pritam 77), a deceptively simple statement that reveals how women’s bodies become fungible commodities within patriarchal systems of honour-debt, where women are treated as replaceable markers of masculine shame and vengeance rather than as autonomous human beings. The initial abduction itself constitutes violent corporeal violation, yet what proves more devastating is the institutionalized rejection Pooro experiences when she escapes Rashid’s house and returns to her own family—a rejection grounded entirely in patriarchal ideology wherein women’s worth is measured exclusively through sexual purity and chastity. When Pooro desperately pleads with her parents to accept her return, her father responds with a statement that crystallizes how women’s bodies function as repositories of family honour, saying: “You have lost your faith and birthright. If we dare to help you, we will be cut down and finished without a trace of blood left behind to tell our faith” (Pritam 16). This response is devastating

precisely because it reveals that Pooro's biological and social reality—that she was never sexually violated by Rashid despite her abduction—is entirely irrelevant to her parents' calculus of shame; the mere fact of her abduction by a Muslim man renders her defiled in patriarchal logic, regardless of physical actuality. The paternal voice here explicitly equates women's sexuality with communal honour and religious faith, establishing that women's bodies are not their own but rather collective property whose violation constitutes violation of the patriarchal-communal order itself.

Confronted with total rejection by her family and community, Pooro returns to Rashid and is compelled into marriage, a forced union that initiates her symbolic death as a Hindu woman and her rebirth as a Muslim one. This transformation is marked through the ritualized renaming of Pooro into "Hamida," a process that Pritam depicts not as administrative name-change but as violent ontological erasure. As Pritam writes, "In her dreams, when she met her old friends and played in her parents' home, everyone still called her Pooro" (Pritam 25), establishing that Pooro's subconscious maintains her original identity even as her social and legal existence is claimed by her new Muslim name. The novel explicitly references that Hamida's new name was "tattooed on her hand," a bodily inscription that literalizes how women's identities become written upon and owned by patriarchal authority (Singh 1950; Sobti and Kumar). This double life—Hamida by day, Pooro by night—becomes the foundation of Pritam's ecocritical-gendered analysis: Pooro's fragmented consciousness mirrors the skeletal fragmentation referenced in the novel's title, such that her very body becomes a "pinjar" or skeleton—stripped of flesh, agency, and coherence. Scholar Priyadarshini Das Gupta captures this trauma, observing that "Now she is Pooro only in her dreams and in her reminiscences of her parents' home. This duality she cannot take affably to and is soon reduced to mere skin and bones" (Das Gupta 2013: 5), underscoring how the

psychological trauma of identity bifurcation manifests as physical deterioration, the body literally wasting away under the burden of enforced duality.

Landscape as Archive and Witness of Trauma: Nature's Testimony to Gendered Violence

Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* constructs the Punjab landscape not as passive backdrop but as an active witnessing presence that registers, records, and preserves in its damaged ecology the testimonies of gendered violence that patriarchal and nationalist narratives systematically suppress. The novel's spatial geography—its villages, homes, rivers, and seasonal cycles—operates as an ecological archive wherein nature becomes complicit in bearing witness to human suffering through processes of accumulation and memory that exceed human consciousness. As Oxford scholar Anindya Raychaudhuri argues in his analysis of Partition's riverscapes, "Rivers survive in memory as both places of comforting familiarity, and horrifying sites of violence," establishing that "through the act of narration, rivers manage to signify both continuities and discontinuities, both the homely and the unhomely" (Raychaudhuri 2019: 178). In *Pinjar*, the Sutlej River—ancient waterway that had for centuries bound together the communities of Punjab—becomes a literal and symbolic boundary inscribed by Partition, severing landscapes that had maintained ecological and cultural interdependence for millennia. The river transforms from what historian Britannica describes as a life-giving sacred source "rising on the north slope of the Himalayas at an elevation above 15,000 feet" and flowing "north-westward and then west-south-westward through Himalayan gorges" to become, after Partition, a militarized border that separates communities and prevents the ecological circulation of water across newly-imposed political boundaries (Britannica 2025). This rupture of the river's flow mirrors precisely Puro's rupture of self: just as the Sutlej is severed and contained within national borders, Puro is

severed from her homeland and contained within patriarchal borders—the borders of a Muslim household, a Muslim name, a Muslim identity imposed upon her Hindu body. The geographical severing operates simultaneously as ecological and gendered trauma, such that Pooro's forced displacement from her native village mirrors what theorist Melketo terms "development-induced displacement," wherein "women were frequently compelled to relocate and look for new resources in order to establish new subsistence patterns," while simultaneously losing access to "land, housing, and resources" that had constituted their identity and belonging (Melketo 2023: 5). When Pritam describes Pooro's movement away from her family village, the landscape itself becomes estranged, transformed from nurturing home to alien terrain. The village where Pooro was born—a place of intimate social and ecological integration—becomes through Partition's violence what the feminist scholar Crenea terms "marginalization," wherein "due to the problems arising in the native community where displaced households are," women find themselves "in a position of weakness or insignificance" both within the family and within the landscape itself (Crenea 1996; Melketo 8).

Crucially, Pritam uses imagery of environmental decay and seasonal deterioration to represent the withering of both Pooro's body and the Punjab landscape under Partition's violence. The once-fertile Punjab, known for centuries as a prosperous agricultural region dependent upon sophisticated water management systems and seasonal rhythms, becomes under Partition an increasingly devastated terrain. Contemporary environmental scholarship documents that Punjab's ecological crisis—what researchers term an "environmental crisis in context of agriculture"—emerged not merely from Partition itself but from the interconnected logics of nationalist development and ecological exploitation that accompanied territorial division (Gill and Singh 2024: 1). The depletion of groundwater, soil degradation, and

pesticide pollution that now characterize Punjab represent the long-term consequences of the severing of irrigation networks and water-sharing systems that Partition initiated; as the Central Ground Water Board reports, “nearly 80% of the state’s blocks are categorized as over-exploited,” with groundwater levels declining at “0.49 meters annually” such that “over 70% of the state’s districts [are] classified as critical or over-exploited” (Central Ground Water Board 2024, cited in Saving Punjab 2025). This ecological devastation parallels the devastation inflicted upon women’s bodies and psyches during Partition: both woman and landscape are rendered skeletal, drained of their generative capacity, left with only the appearance of surface continuity masking internal structural collapse. In *Pinjar*, Pooro’s body becomes literalized as ecological wasteland—the “double life” wherein she functions outwardly as Hamida while internally remaining Pooro establishes precisely these dynamics of surface appearance masking internal devastation, much like the Punjab landscape that appears to continue agricultural production while its groundwater and soil are being systematically destroyed.

The novel’s treatment of the home as violated domestic space further extends this ecological-gendered analysis, establishing that displacement operates through the destruction of intimate architectural spaces that had constituted women’s primary sphere of agency and belonging. Scholar Ananya Jahanara Kabir observes that “abducted women who returned home, were not accepted or their suffering and trauma remained unheard even after their acceptance,” establishing that “women’s displacement in partition” represents not merely physical relocation but “untold sufferings and resilience of the female protagonists” who must navigate the collapse of home as sanctuary (Kabir 2023: 3). When Pooro is rejected by her parents and forced to remain with Rashid, the home she had known—her parents’ house—becomes inaccessible, transformed into a space that actively rejects her presence.

This forced severance from the home-place parallels what contemporary research on “gendered analysis of development-induced displacement” identifies as a primary trauma: “the full transfer of land ownership to men” and “the loss of access to land, housing, and resources” disproportionately impacts women, because “women were frequently compelled to relocate and look for new resources” while experiencing “marginalization within the family” and “marginalization within the family” structures of land distribution (Melketo 2023: 5-7). The village itself—the collective home—becomes similarly inaccessible to Pooro through Partition’s violence. As scholarly analysis of *Pinjar* documents, “She had to undergo pangs of separation from her family, village and country together. Partition created havoc with her life. Rootlessness, isolation and alienation crept inside Pooro’s mind” (Bedi and Singh 2024: 4). This triple displacement—from family, from village, from nation—operates through interconnected ecological, domestic, and geopolitical violences, such that Pooro’s forced separation from place mirrors precisely the ecological separation that Partition imposed through the severing of river systems, irrigation networks, and agricultural interdependencies.

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