Embodied Borders: Spatial Trauma and the Gendered Experience of Nationhood in Pinjar

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Abstract- **This article examines Chandraprakash Dwivedi's *Pinjar* (2003) through the lens of spatial trauma and gendered nationhood during the 1947 Partition of India. Drawing on spatial theory and postcolonial trauma studies, it explores how female bodies become sites of contested borders, memory, and displacement. The protagonist Puro's journey from familial belonging to forced abduction and eventual exile reflects the transformation of physical and symbolic spaces into zones of violence and fragmentation. The paper argues that *Pinjar* maps a gendered cartography of trauma, where homes, borders, and landscapes are haunted by loss, silence, and the impossibility of return. By foregrounding the entanglement of body, space, and nation, the film exposes how Partition not only ruptured geography but also inscribed lasting wounds onto women's identities and movements. This analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of how spatial trauma operates as a mechanism of both personal and political erasure in postcolonial contexts.**

Keywords: **Spatial Trauma, Partition of India, Gendered Nationhood, Postcolonial Memory, Embodied Displacement.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Based on Amrita Pritam's eponymous book, Chandraprakash Dwivedi's 2003 film *Pinjar* presents a poignant cinematic portrayal of the 1947 Partition of India through the lens of gendered sorrow and displacement. Set against the background of growing religious tensions in Punjab, the film follows Puro, a young Hindu lady kidnapped by a Muslim man in a personal act of retribution that quickly becomes caught in the greater tragedy of Partition. *Pinjar* foregrounds the individual and societal suffering that women stranded between homes, religions, and countries endure when national borders are forcefully redefined. Through its narrative and visual framework, the film highlights how space—domestic, political, and emotional—is fragmented and weaponised during partition, therefore rendering the female body a primary site of territorial and ideological struggle. Among the most horrific and transforming events in South Asian history is India's 1947 Partition. Defined by the split of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan, it resulted in the forced relocation of more than fourteen million people and the deaths of maybe one to two million others. Beyond the astonishing figures, Partition unleashed widespread gendered violence: abductions, rapes, and the symbolic exploitation of women's bodies as symbols of communal honour and retribution. Although the historical account usually revolves around political figures and geographical boundaries, Partition's most severe wounds were etched into common areas—houses, villages, and borderlands—and on the bodies of women who carried the most weight of its violence. Examining how physical environments are linked in the experience and transmission of trauma, this study analyses *Pinjar* via the theoretical perspective of spatial trauma. Inspired by Henri Lefebvre's concept of socially generated space and Doreen Massey's relational spatiality, the study investigates how *Pinjar*'s environment is created, disturbed, and occupied in ways that mirror the gendered character of Partition trauma. Furthermore, guiding the understanding of Puro's silence, memory, and corporeal displacement is postcolonial trauma theory, especially the writings of Cathy Caruth and Veena Das. Examining *Pinjar* as a spatial story of trauma helps one see the movie not just as a historical rupture but also as a profoundly lived experience shaped by dislocation, violence, and contested boundaries. The spatial manufacture of trauma, the metaphor of the female body as territory, the haunting of memory over space, and the cinematic techniques rendering these themes apparent will all be discussed in the following sections.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Spatial Theory: Space as Lived, Gendered, and Produced

The basic idea of Henri Lefebvre's 1991 The Production of Space is that space is actively created

by social, political, and cultural activities rather than being a physical container or passive backdrop. He notes that perceived space (physical and material), conceptual space (ideological or representational), and lived space (the emotional, experiential component) are three interconnected facets of space. Particularly for female characters whose identities are tightly bound to the places they live or are expelled from, this tripartite framework helps one to understand how space in *Pinjar* is fractured not only geographically due to the drawing of national borders but also psychologically and symbolically. Doreen Massey develops on this by seeing space as multiple, dynamic, and relational. She challenges the notion of space as fixed in For Space (2005), instead stressing its production via interactions, motions, and histories. Massey also emphasises how gendered spatial interactions are and contends that access to and control over space may support power hierarchies. These observations show up in *Pinjar* as the limited mobility of women, the conversion of houses into locations of captivity, and the volatility of borders where safety and identity are always shifting. Moreover, comprehending *Pinjar*'s home settings benefits from Homi Bhabha's conception of the "unhomely" in The Location of Culture (1994). For Bhabha, the unhomely describes the moment when the intimate space of the house becomes alienated, politicised, or dangerous, a state strikingly shown in Puro's change from a loving daughter in a patriarchal household to a displaced figure stuck between two warring groups.

Trauma Studies: Postcolonial Memory and Gendered Violence

Cathy Caruth's Unclaimed Experience (1996) revolves mostly around the idea of trauma as a delayed, unassimilated experience. In her view, trauma is not understood in the moment of occurrence but rather reappears in disruptive, repetitive patterns. This approach clarifies the unresolved violence buried in the spatial representations of the movie as well as the residual consequences of Puro's kidnapping and silence. Veena Das's study on Partition trauma (Life and Words, 2007) shows how violence is incorporated into the fabric of daily life and becomes inexpressible through traditional narratives, thereby deepening this viewpoint. Often via fragmentary recollections and silences—conditions geographically recorded in *Pinjar* through ruins, boundaries, and confined spaces— Das foregrounds the everyday gradual brutality that haunts survivors long after the catastrophe. Scholars of postcolonial feminism, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, have also highlighted how women's bodies during the Partition became agents for national territory. The violence inflicted upon them was symbolic as well as personal, signifying loss and possession on community lines. Trauma, therefore, is geopolitical as well as psychological or physical, including the country and space in the process of damage.

By bringing these frameworks together, the article reads *Pinjar* as a spatial narrative of trauma, where the fragmentation of land mirrors the fragmentation of identity, and where the female body functions as a battleground upon which the Partition's anxieties, borders, and silences are inscribed.

Partition and the Gendered Production of Space in *Pinar*

Pinjar's spatial fact is produced by a profoundly gendered map in which houses, boundaries, and landscapes function as a symbolic terrain of domination, violence, and exclusion rather than only physical settings. Though it is a political demarcation event, the 1947 Partition is shown in the movie as a personal and emotional rupture, particularly for women whose bodies and movements are under control by patriarchal and communal forces. Puro's path shows how gendered violence and displacement actively create and modify space, not as if it were neutral. Puro lives in a family-safe environment at the start of the movie. Her house exudes warmth, deliberate order, and character. Although the household atmosphere is patriarchal, it provides her with a sense of belonging. But once Rashid kidnapped her, the entire concept of "home" became unstable. Her physical departure from her birthplace symbolises a metaphorical exile—not only from her family but also from the country and society that define her social identity. The way *Pinjar*'s dwellings and communities are gendered shows Lefebvre's theory that power relationships generate space. Puro returns to her family after escaping Rashid's captivity and finds rejection rather than sympathy. Her father warns her, fearing social impurity and societal shame; he advises:

"Teri jagah ab is ghar mein nahin rahi."
("There is no place for you in this house anymore.")

This sentence captures the gender violence of geographical exclusion. Originally a haven, the house

became hostile. Puro is unhomed by her own family rather than by the country. Her father's comments capture a more general cultural logic whereby feminine purity is linked with geographical belonging. A woman's violation becomes her exile, both actual and metaphorical, her banishment from space. A major Partition theme, the border also serves as a volatile spatial force in the film. Borders become both physical obstacles and symbolic pain thresholds when settlements split and people start to leave. The ground is now a place of anxiety and uncertainty rather than a cause of consistency. For women like Puro, breaking these boundaries violates rather than releases. Men, nations, and ideas define her movements. Furthermore, the change of Puro's new residence—Rashid's house—showcases how space's social encoding transforms it from not intrinsically oppressive to such. Originally a location of imprisonment, Rashid's house gradually transforms into a place where Puro can redefine her identity, although she does this with lingering doubt. Puro's autonomy stays constrained, even as Rashid develops loving and protective behaviours. Emphasising the weight of past violence that space can bear, the film never lets her fully reclaim her home; instead, it depicts how trauma persists in the walls and silences of her new surroundings. The village settings, which were once communal and natural, have become increasingly divided along community lines. Coexisting Hindu and Muslim families have now transformed into aggressors and refugees. This fragmentation of daily space underscores Massey's conception of space as relational and dynamic, a result of social interactions that may be either violent or benign. Partition dismantles these relational spaces in *Pinjar*, turning homes into battlefields and neighbours into strangers. Rashid informs Puro in a later episode when he faces regret over his acts:

Main toh sirf ek zariya tha. Yeh sab mitti ne karwaya hai"
("I served solely as a means. This ground produced all this.")

This line of reasoning places land as a trauma actor, implying that spatial violence is not accidental but rather ingrained in the very ground of the Partition. Rashid's statements also show how location participates actively in forming traumatic experience rather than only serving as a passive backdrop for historical violence. Pinar, therefore, presents Partition not just in scenes of communal strife or migration but also in the creation of gendered spaces—houses that refuse, boundaries that split, and landscapes that wind. Puro's path shows how trauma finds expression in society's spatial arrangement, thereby branding women's bodies with the weight of history.

The Female Body as Contested Territory

Pinjar's main devices include the idea of the female body as territory—a space onto which national, community, and patriarchal rights are sharply etched. Puro's kidnapping and the subsequent erasure of her identity reflect a more general historical pattern wherein women's bodies were regarded as places of conquest during partition—abducted, traded, molested, and finally politicised. The movie shows how the pain of the Partition functions not only on a geopolitical but also on a personal geographic level via the female body. From the time Rashid abducts Puro, her body serves as a metaphorical battlefield for both more general social retribution and personal vengeance. Her conversion from Puro to Hamida is a forced metamorphosis of identity governed by spatial movement and bodily control, not only a name change. The trauma here is twofold: the brutality of the act itself and the seizure of her agency, strengthened by the denial of her return to her native place since her body is regarded as contaminated. Puro's appeal to her family to accept her back strengthens this concept when her mother, helplessly teary-eyed, says:

Hamare bas mein kuch nahin hai, beti.
("It is no longer in our control, daughter.")

This statement's helplessness exposes how patriarchal and community rules of honour controlled women's bodies during the Partition, not by personal decision. Once a woman exceeded geographical or sexual boundaries, whether on demand or under duress, she was judged irrevocably damaged. Puro is thus changed from subject to object, from daughter to dishonour; her body becomes useless in the moral terrain of the family and society. When we consider how Puro's kidnapping is justified by Rashid's uncle as reparations for previous transgressions, turning her into a pawn in a multi-generational conflict, the metaphor of territory is especially arresting. Her body becomes the collateral of past injustice, underscoring the repeated cycle of exploiting women to settle scores, secure honour, or represent humiliation. This analogy reflects how Partition itself was carried

out—through divides that seldom considered the human cost, especially that of women. The lines of Puro's identity change as she progressively adapts to her new world in Rashid's house, but the anguish of her original relocation never goes away. Even when she starts to wander the village or engage in social activities, she is never really free. Her agency is limited by the environments that formerly kept her captive, and her physical mobility is still under observation. Rashid's connection with Puro is defined by the fundamental brutality of his first deed, even as he starts to show regret and affection. The places that are accessible to her and those that are not influence her decisions; her bodily liberty never fully recovers. Puro expresses herself and says in one pivotal moment:

"Tumne meri zindagi barbaad ki hai, Rashid."
("You have destroyed my life, Rashid.")

This moment is a reclaiming of voice and story, not only a charge. Declaring her life "destroyed", Puro expresses a trauma resulting from both systematic geographical and social displacement she has experienced as well as from physical abuse. Her physiological integrity, social identity, and feeling of belonging, all profoundly connected to the places she formerly called home, are among the damages she describes. *Pinjar* uses Puro to highlight how spatially encoded gendered violence during the Partition is. The feminine form draws on the limits separating home from exile, community from the enemy, and protection from danger. Abduction changes her ontology, what she is permitted to be, where she is allowed to go, and who she is allowed to become, not simply her place. Though usually seen as an act of agency, Puro's ultimate choice to stay with Rashid instead of going back to her family is clouded by this spatial trauma. It shows a sad negotiation with a world in which every location that is accessible bears traces of violence, and her decision is less about healing than about the impossibility of return.

Memory, Silence, and Spatial Haunting

Trauma in *Pinjar* is not only expressed via overt violence or physical relocation but also through the spatially encoded, in daily life, lingering haunting of memory and stillness. The places Puro lives in—houses, fields, thresholds, have the residue of violence and act as locations where trauma is both remembered and suppressed. This part looks at how *Pinjar* employs silence and haunting space to show trauma that transcends language yet continues via spatial memory, drawing on Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma as an unclaimed experience and Veena Das's idea of normal life as the location of embedded violence. In Unclaimed Experience (1996), Caruth contends that trauma is marked by its belatedness and opposition to straightforward narrative. A traumatic experience makes indirect, fractured returns via pictures, gestures, or silences. Puro, who for much of the movie is quiet and depressed, eloquently captures the moment by continually being framed against thresholds, shattered walls, and vacant courtyards that suggest her inner brokenness. Her quiet is the register of wordless anguish resonating over the spatial mise-en-scène of the movie, not passivity. When Rashid asks Puro why she won't talk or forgive him, she responds in a quiet, nearly inaudible voice:

"Main to kab Ka mar chuki hoon."
("I died long ago.")

The core of Caruth's theory, that trauma is a living death that recurs throughout time rather than being a past event, is crystallised in this conversation. Puro's words expose that her trauma went beyond the moment of kidnapping; it still shapes her life and makes her present dead, her identity broken. Her body keeps going, but her sense of self breaks—a classic sign of post-traumatic haunting. Veena Das's 2007 book Life and Words presents a different perspective, implying that trauma during the Partition did not vanish once the violence stopped but rather permeated the everyday, ingrained in daily activities, silences, and locations. According to Das, trauma was passed on through spatial memory, gestures, and household rituals; women typically absorbed the abuse into their lives without verbal expression. This concept comes up often in *Pinjar* as Puro wanders areas that previously held significance but now speak to loss: her childhood house, the riverfront, and the border road. These are haunting places where memory is linked to emotional geography rather than speech. Later on, Puro discreetly and with resolve helps another kidnapped girl (Lajo) get home over the border. Her act of compassion becomes her means of reinscribing meaning into space, turning the same paths leading to her exile into avenues of activity. Still, the act is silent, Puro does not recover her history or talk of her suffering. Rather, action expresses her pain, mirroring Das's belief that trauma often manifests itself beyond official history or written records. *Pinjar* emphasises this haunting with

a cinematic space. Empty threshold shots, quiet walks, and confined courtyards graphically convey what Puro cannot speak. These places become receptacles of memory, that is, "phantom spaces", where the past haunts rather than being either completely present or absent. They reflect Caruth's observation that, although trauma is not understood at first, it returns in either a spatial or temporal recurrence. *Pinjar* thus illustrates how trauma survives in quiet and space. Puro's subdued demeanour, silent refusals, and places she walks through all point to a sadness that transcends words but lingers in situ. The land, the fences, and the boundaries all speak for her.

Cinematic Techniques and the Spatial Representation of Trauma

Pinjar communicates trauma not only through plot and dialogue but also through its cinematic form, using framing, mise-en-scène, sound, and spatial arrangement to visualize psychological rupture. These techniques work in tandem with the film's narrative to spatialize trauma, giving physical form to the emotional fragmentation experienced by the protagonist.

Framing and Mise-en-Scène: Isolating the Traumatized Body

One of *Pinjar*'s most effective techniques is Puro's recurrent framing inside limited, liminal spaces—doorways, window bars, and little alleyways. This graphic theme captures her psychological disintegration and imprisonment. Henri Lefebvre's idea of lived space holds that these visual frames reinforce the broken subjectivity of the protagonist by marking not only physical but also emotional and symbolic barriers. For example, Puro is sometimes filmed via a lattice or partially open doorway, split from the whole spatial frame, once she is kidnapped and imprisoned in Rashid's house. Reflecting the national and personal divide she has experienced, this method generates a visual division inside the screen itself. These pictures highlight her lack of agency and isolation, therefore accentuating trauma as something ingrained in the environments she lives in. Puro stands motionless at the entrance of Rashid's house in one such moment as life goes on outside. Rashid wonders:

"Kya tum yahaan apne aap ko ghar samajh sakti ho, Puro?"

("Could you offer this some thought, Puro?")

Your house her stillness in response, and her place at the edge of internal and outside space captures the anguish of displacement. The mise-en-scène, even in a place that is now "hers", leaves her mentally disoriented.

Colour Palette and Lighting: Evoking Emotional Landscapes

The film also reflects the emotional texture of trauma by using subdued colours and gentle, diffused lighting. Golden tones envelop pre-abduction scenes—warm, pastoral, and ideal. But the palette shifts to greys, browns, and light greens following Puro's capture, therefore inducing emotional numbness and sorrow. This aesthetic change fits Cathy Caruth's conception of trauma as a rupture in time and perspective wherein the sensory world becomes dull, distorted, or invisible. Especially night sights intensify this impact. Puro is usually seen seated by candlelight or in semi-dark rooms—places that imply quiet, half-truths, and incompleteness. These sequences underscore the atmospheric registration of stress through light, colour, and tone, rather than its internal sensation.

Sound and Silence: The Echo of the Unspoken

Still another important tool is sound. Ambient stillness, broken only by the odd flute, wind, or distant crying, enhances the protagonist's mental isolation. Trauma typically endures, according to Veena Das, not in what is uttered but rather in what is unspoken and socially buried. *Pinjar*'s soundtrack mirrors this idea: musical interludes are sad, and critical sections lack conversation, so silence alone might communicate. When Puro, having adopted Hamida as her new identity, looks at herself in the mirror, it is very moving. There is merely a delicate rustling sound and ambient silence—no conversation. Captivated between recognition and estrangement, the camera stays on her face. This scene graphically captures Caruth's idea of the "unassimilated experience": trauma is there, obvious in her eyes, but unchangeable with words.

Space as Witness

At last, *Pinjar* sees buildings and earth as quiet trauma witnesses. Monuments to the violence that has gone through them include burnt fields, destroyed homes, and border posts. The lengthy views of overgrown courtyards and deserted towns arouse communal memory and help place personal sorrow within a larger historical wound. In a later moment,

the camera glides slowly over a devastated countryside with smouldering homes in the background. Puro helps Lajo flee across the border. Puro adds: "Sab kuch chhoot gaya... sab kuch jal gaya." ("Everything burnt... everyone is lost"). Said against the backdrop of ruin, this statement links the emotional and geographical damage of the Partition. The ground itself turns into a traumatising subject that reflects Lefebvre's theory that historical violence shapes space.

III. CONCLUSION

Pinjar presents a profoundly emotive picture of the 1947 Partition, not through outstanding historical spectacle but rather by the corporeal and physically grounded experience of one woman's trauma. By showing Partition as a fundamentally gendered and geographically violent event where homes are no more secure, boundaries are inscribed on bodies, and memory haunts the terrain, the film subverts the traditional myths of nationhood. Viewing the movie via the prism of spatial trauma helps us to grasp how trauma is not just psychological but physically ingrained in space, through thresholds, ruins, imprisonment, and exile. This essay has shown how *Pinjar* converts trauma into spatial meanings by using theoretical models from Cathy Caruth, Henri Lefebvre, Veena Das, and Doreen Massey. In particular, the female body emerges as a contested space marked by past trauma and a lack of spatial belonging. From abduction to hesitant absorption and eventually to an unclear act of autonomy, Puro's path represents the fractured subjectivity of the post-Partition woman. Her silence, her isolation from her birthplace, and her negotiating of new geographies show not resolution but a continuous struggle with trauma. The end of the film does not mend these ruptures; rather, they stay suspended in space, much like the uncertain nationhood of a split continent. Furthermore, the way the movie uses colour, music, mise en scène, and framing to create narrative tools helps us better grasp the spatial aspects of trauma. The emotional conflict of the protagonist and the cultural memory of the Partition are reflected in the continual visual interaction between open and closed areas, light and darkness, stillness and sound. The ground is an active archive of violence, memory, and gendered exclusion, not a passive background. *Pinjar* argues that the past is not buried—rather, it is embedded into the places we walk through, live in, and are refused access to, showing how the agony of Partition lingers in the architecture of daily life. Trauma here is not just personal but also communal, not only psychological but also geographical, not only historical but also always present. *Pinjar* ultimately asks viewers to examine how gender and place interact following national violence. The movie exhorts us to read trauma in the geographies of silence, in the thresholds that cannot be passed, and in the bodies bearing the scars of history, not merely in visible wounds or vocal testimony.

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