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### ECOLOGIES OF LOSS: IDENTITY, PLACE AND ENVIRONMENT IN PARTITION LITERATURE

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**ABSTRACT**

The paper examines the psychological, social and ecological implications of this historical event. It cites how Literature has captured the deep loss, displacement and transformation that ensued. Saadat Hasan Manto's tale- "The Last Salute", turned as a cosmos of the devastation, highlighting the erosion of human values and collapse of norms. For women, the partition of India was a tormenting and harrowing experience, as they faced unexampled challenges of violence and displacement. Kishn Chander's "A Prostitute's Letter" and Amrita Pritam's "Pinjar" offered a glance into the lives of women who were marginalized and exploited during this tumultuous period. It's stressed upon the interconnectedness of environment, place and identity projecting how partition's ecological disaster mirrored the destruction of collective and individual identity. Through the examination and lens of ecology, this paper seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive approach to the event. It argues that the era's extension extended beyond the socio-political spectrum, encompassing the significant cultural transformations that continue to shape the region even today.

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**Key words:** Partition, Literature, Ecology, Identity, Displacement, Women, and Loss.

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"As he took aim to shoot and a familiar face appeared on the opposite side, he forgot for a moment why they were fighting, why he had lifted his gun and aimed." (*The Last Salute*, Sadat Hasan Manto) The construction of geopolitical boundaries deeply affected the cultural,

personal and environmental ecologies after the turbulence of Partition of India in 1947. As millions fled their homes, forests were cleaned for fuel, agricultural lands were overused to feed the displaced populations and water resources were depleted to sustain the burgeoning refugee camps. This had set a stage for the decades to come. Partition's environmental legacy is a neglected dimension which showcases the far reaching impact of the event under the system, arguing the mass movement of people leading to deforestation, soil erosion and water pollution- disrupting the balance. During the colonial era, albeit British policies had an indispensable impact on the environment, efforts were made to conserve certain forests in wildlife such as creation of national parks like Jim Corbett and Kaziranga. However, the scale and speed of population displacement followed was overwhelming for any existing conservation measures. The influx of refugees into the urban centers particularly in Punjab, Delhi and West Bengal created a housing crisis leading to unplanned and often unsustainable urban extension. This rapid expansion of cities strained infrastructure and natural resources contributed to environmental maladies.

The expansion of Delhi, once a relatively small city led to the clearing of forests, diversion of water courses and pollution of Yamuna River. Construction of dams and canals in border regions like Kashmir and Punjab during the Indo-Pakistan wars in 1960s and 70s further exacerbated the situation. It reshaped the proposition of literature captured by writers like Saadat Hasan Manto, Krishan Chander, and Amrita Pritam, whose works traversed the haunting ecologies of loss. Manto's *The Last Salute* looked into the psychological and moral devastation caused by the Partition, while Chander's *A Prostitute's Letter* examined human commodification in a fractured society. Pritam's *Pinjar* portrayed the fragmentation of both identity and community. Through the lens of ecology, one can scrutinize, as to how these stories reflected not only the physical landscape but also the severance of social and emotional ties. The narratives projected how the historical account uprooted individuals' environment and subsequently the idea of borders and boundaries in a scarred natural world. The dislocation was both external and internal characterizing displacement, violence and humanity. By integrating all these texts into this framework, the paper will reflect the resilience during and after the Partition.

### **Ecological landscape in *The Last Salute***

The mass migration and the religious violence During the partition of India in 1947 was powerfully illustrated in Saadat Hasan Manto's short story, *The Last Salute*, had caught the personal and collective trauma inflicted upon people like Subedar Rub Nawaz, the protagonist, torn between the thought of religious and national identity which mirrored the broader chaos

of the event. As they battled for the road along the KishanGanga River, the text graphically described the “*hill...densely covered with trees and vegetation on the upward slope and entirely barren on the downward,*” signifying how Partition stripped away not only human connections but also the harmony between the land and the people. Rub Nawaz’s realization that “*Without clothes a man looks like an animal*” this metaphorically raised, as to how war and displacement eroded individuals’ sense of self, reducing them to survive in a ravaged landscape.

With millions crossing borders in both directions between India and newly created Pakistan. The violent upheaval devastated the ecological balance as vast stretches of land were either abandoned or repurposed to accommodate the refugees. Agriculture which formed the backbone for many communities had collapsed in regions where the populations were majorly displaced and conflict endangered. The political boundaries imposing emotional and environmental ostracisation was apparent when Nawaz reflected on his forced separation from what had once been his homeland, the disconnection was sharp. “*He had been given a gun and ...ordered- Go fight for this land, we still haven't set up your home, acquired a taste for its water or gotten used to the feel of its air.*” The physicality of the land- its air, water and soil became a foreign entity here. The trees that once offered sustenance and shade now acted as cover for the soldiers while open land exposed them to the enemy fire. “*Naturally the enemy couldn't be seen at night, but it also couldn't be spotted in daylight because of the cover of thick vegetation.*” Manto wrote, portraying how the natural environment became a shield and a threat, amidst the war.

The violence inflicted on the land paralleled the violence experienced by the people. In the story, when Rub Nawaz struggled to construe “why” he must fight those he once called friends, the environment around him felt equally alienated. The familiar landscape, the lush of the past became an open hostile field where “*the needles on the pines were so damp that the boots of the soldiers lost all traction on this slippery ground*”, this could be seen as a reference for the perilous conditions of life post-Partition where both the surroundings and the relationships were fraught with uncertainty and jeopardy. The essence of irrevocable loss marked the futility of the war, “*At such times he had to remind himself repeatedly that he was no longer fighting for the wages, a parcel of land or medals but for his country.*” The very land that people fought over became a symbol of destruction that once nurtured life, a ground of despair and death.

### **Loss of Identity and Place**

In “*A Letter From a Prostitute*”, Krishn Chander projected the harrowing tale of Bela and Batool, two girls who became victims of the communal violence that swept through Indian

society during 1947. Bela, a Hindu girl from Rawalpindi and Batool, a Muslim girl from Jalandhar are brought by the narrator, a prostitute living on the margins of society. Albeit their religious differences, both the girls shared a common fate of being- displaced, dehumanized and commodified in the wake of brutalities of Partition. This embodied the tragic life and immense ecological and emotional loss experienced by millions, serving as a microcosm for those who were uprooted from their homes, losing not only their physical places but also their identities along the way.

The geographical boundaries being redrawn was more about the human loss of lives, communities and personal histories that were deeply connected to the vicinities. The villages, cities and rivers that once held meaning were tarnished with bloodshed and hatred. Bela's hometown of Rawalpindi, once a middle class Hindu community was reduced to ashes as she witnessed her parents' gruesome murders. The severing of her mother's breasts, a symbol of nurture and life-giving was juxtaposed against religious cries marking an erasure of a peaceful coexistence that once walked her world. The text noted " *A cruel darkness had inked their souls with blackness*" depicting the psychological degradation. Bela and Batool, children of homes nestled in familiar and safe environments, now found themselves confined in a brothel on Farris Road, a space that represented decay. The prostitute lamented- "*Bela was no more than twelve years old when she studied in the fourth grade.... If Bela had been at home she would now be moving up to the fifth grade. Today this tender little bud has been subjected to an early autumn.*" The allegorical reference of a "*tender bud*" "*facing*" "*early autumn*" emphasizes how the violence of partition had prematurely destroyed the innocence. It evoked a sense of landscape where regeneration was cut short, just as people were torn from their roots.

As Batool had grown amidst the dystopian urban scape, her perception of self was deeply interlaced with her lost place in the ecological system. Symbolizing the environmental consequences of Partition, the text mentioned the fertile lands of *Khem Karan* which were rich with spirituality and centuries of heritage but were reduced to a mere wasteland of inhumanity. Chandar alluded "*Batool is so beautiful that her skin flushes if you even touch her ...today this loveliness lies in disarray in my piles of filth.*" This reiterated not only the depreciation of human beings but also the history of perished surroundings that followed when people were forcibly removed. When Chandar set forth how Batool's father's small farming village was annihilated, we see the wider environmental cost the event endured. The migration of Agricultural Communities from their lands left an absolute chasm in the system that once balanced nature and human life. The absence of these farmers who cultivated and sustained their environment for generations meant that the land, too, lost its identity. The letter, ultimately

is more than individuals suffering as it recounted the loss of identity and place as inseparable beings from the environmental devastation. The homes that both the girls once knew with strong familial ties were irrevocably altered by the external forces. This depreciation marked the unspoken consequence of national trauma. Loss woven as physical and moral disruption of the places they inhabited, be it filthy crime-ridden streets of Farris Road or blood-soaked streets of Rawalpindi, all mirrored the desolation.

### **Ecofeminist Consciousness**

We observe ecofeminism as humanism. The physical landscape of Punjab, where Pinjar was set, bore the scars. The land was carved up, boundaries were redrawn and entire areas were perturbed. Rivers, forests and villages that once had been in harmony spaces for both Hindus and Muslims speaking fractured in broken. In Pinjar, Amrita Pritam narrated the devastating consequences of partition through the lives of its central characters, Puro a Hindu woman abducted by Rashid, a Muslim man and how her life transformed amid the tumult. The storyline brought out intersectionality of gender ecology and loss where the novelist draws a parallel between violence inflicted on women's bodies and the simultaneous exploitation of the land immersed in ecofeminist thought. Puro's transformation into Hamida, the "*empty husks, the pods, and the peas*". These became symbols of an ecosystem rendered barren by human conflict. The natural elements like peas and slugs are essential to illustrate the inner rumination. The environment is linked to her body just as she feels contaminated and unclean; the environment is shown to be contaminated in hostile space no longer nurturing. Ecofeminism sees women's bodies in nature as connected entities oppressed by the same patriarchal forces. Fields, trees and wells captured the relationship between people and nature as we witness Puro standing near the well gazing at the road to Rattoval representing her yearning for her lost identity and the disruption. She is transplanted like a tree torn from its roots into a new and foreign environment. The heaps of ashes in the courtyard where Puro stood projected the scorched earth of Partition, where boundaries were enforced through violence.

Amrita Pritam powerfully described the conflict, "*This boy... this boy's father... all mankind...men who gnaw a woman's body like a dog gnawing the bone.*" This graphic imagery of consumption and violation paralleled the exploitation of the land where nature like women's bodies was stripped of its value and treated as a resource to be divided and consumed by the patriarchal and colonial forces. Puro's memories of her childhood, her family and her original identity, as a girl depicted an idealized past just as the pre partitioned era, remembered as a harmonious undivided spectrum. However both are irrevocably

changed and a sense of loss was felt as she wondered: *“Why did they let her swallow palmful of cumin seeds and turn the blood in her veins to milk in her breasts?”* In this school of thought, it was accepted that the land based on motherhood or femininity gave protection to all because it had immense affection for all in its heart. In Puro’s Sakkarli village, also lived a madwoman. When the other women came to know that the madwoman was pregnant, they got very sad to see her condition and said *“What sort of a man could have done this to her? They clenched their teeth in anger that he must be a savage beast to put a “madwoman” in this condition.”* The author described Puro's state of mind as, *“She's neither young nor attractive; she's just a lump of flesh without mind to go with it a living skeleton... a lunatic skeleton... a skeleton pick to its bones by kites and vultures... the Eagles ate it by scratching it too...Puro used to get tired thinking about it.”* here, the misery was mirrored. Puro found her brother's wife and without caring for her own life, said to herself, *“Whether one is a Hindu girl or a Muslim one, whoever reaches her destination she carries along my soul also”*, The qualities of humanity, love, nonviolence and fraternity were innate in her character.

## **Conclusion**

The characters’ struggles to find meaning and belonging amidst the disarray and mayhem held an instrumental value to the power of human interdependence. The narratives of Sadat Hassan Manto, Krishn Chander and Amrita Pritam treaded the emotive ecologies of loss. Through this lens these stories revealed how the historical account uprooted individuals through their environments and subsequently the idea of borders and boundaries in a scarred natural world. The dislocation was a call to attention As we saw the commodification of human bodies, especially women in degradation and displacement of people from their homes and lands worsening their relationship with nature just as their identities. The shifting boundaries and “wastelands” alienated one's sense of place. This section is often overshadowed by the political and social implications but these texts reveal that the environmental cost was equally annihilating. Deforestation, soil erosion, water depletion and exploitation of natural resources left upheaval in memory, identity and belonging. In contemporary India, it's crucial to recognise that everything extends and the inhabitants still suffer. The proportions of history bound the stories of nature, displacement and women in a shared chronicle of tenacity and perseverance, presenting them as inseparable entities interconnected in the physical space of life and community supporting a splintered humanitarian society.

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