

Women and the refugees' condition in Azadi: A Study of gendered displacement

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Abstract:

The Partition of India in 1947 displaced approximately 15 million people, transforming settled citizens into refugees overnight. Chaman Nahal's novel Azadi offers a profound literary account of this transformation, capturing both the universal refugee condition and the specific, gendered experiences of women. This paper first examines how Azadi portrays the refugee as a figure of displacement, trauma, and loss of identity from the destruction of home to the degradation of life in camps and the bureaucratic cruelty of rehabilitation. It then turns to the particular vulnerabilities of women refugees, analyzing how women's bodies become battlegrounds for communal honor, how patriarchal structures compound their suffering, and how the novel also reveals women's quiet resistance. Through close reading of characters such as Lala Kanshi Ram, Sunanda, Prabha Rani, and Isher Kaur, this paper argues that Azadi presents the refugee experience as fundamentally layered. While all refugees lose their homes, women refugees lose their bodily autonomy, privacy, and safety in ways that male characters do not face.

Keywords: Partition, refugee condition, gendered violence, Azadi, Chaman Nahal, displacement

Introduction:

The Partition of India in 1947 remains one of the most catastrophic events in the subcontinent's history. With the end of British rule, India was divided into two separate nations: India and Pakistan. Although tensions between Hindus and Muslims had existed during the British era, Partition intensified communal hostility, leading to widespread violence and unrest. "The division resulted in one of the largest mass migrations in human history, displacing approximately 15 million people from their homes." (Talbot & Singh). The consequences were devastating. Mobs frequently attacked trains carrying refugees, turning journeys into scenes of violence and fear. Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs became both victims and perpetrators.

“Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus suffered equally as victims and can equally be blamed for carrying out murder and assault”(Khan 27). Yet Partition had a disproportionate impact on specific groups. “several hundred thousand people were estimated to have been killed, an unaccountable number raped and converted, and many million uprooted and transformed into official ‘refugees’” (Pandey2). Women’s bodies became literal battlegrounds of communal conflict, where issues of honor, identity and power were brutally fought over. Literature has played a significant role in capturing the traumatic history of Partition, offering narratives of human suffering that lie outside official historical records. Chaman Nahal’s novel *Azadi* provides a deeply human portrayal of the widespread consequences of Partition, particularly in terms of displacement and the disruption of everyday life. This paper is organized in two parts. First, it examines how *Azadi* depicts the general refugee condition: the violent uprooting from home, the psychological trauma of becoming a refugee in one’s own homeland, the harsh realities of camp life, and the bureaucratic degradation that follows even after crossing into India. Second, it turns to the gendered dimensions of the refugee experience, analyzing how women face not only the loss of home and identity but also objectification, sexual violence, lack of privacy, and the burden of patriarchal honor.

2. Review of Literature

Critical scholarship on Chaman Nahal’s *Azadi* has largely focused on displacement and the refugee condition. Shahjadi and Dr. Monika Gupta Agarwal, in their article “The Violence and Personal Trauma in Chaman Nahal’s *Azadi*” (2024), analyze the displacement of the protagonist Lala Kanshi Ram and the disintegration of personal and collective identity in the face of Partition. They explore the transformation of refugee identity, demonstrating how violence and forced displacement reshape social belonging and selfhood. Similarly, Swarna Pandi and Dr. S. Hannah Evangeline, in “Freedom at Cost: Human Suffering and the Irony of Independence in Chaman Nahal’s *Azadi*” (2026), draw attention to the novel as a story of refugee trauma, displacement, and identity disintegration. Their discussion highlights the transformation of citizens into refugees, the emotional and psychological aftermath of exile, and the trauma of becoming a refugee.

In the article “women suffering in *Azadi* by Chaman Nahal (2024) by Sonali S. Shete and Dr. Rani Sarode address women’s suffering at the time of partition in *Azadi*. They focus on women’s experience of physical violence, sexual abuse, trauma and patriarchal oppression. They use female character like Bibi Amar vati and Hussain’s wife to show women were at the mercy of communal riots.

However, existing scholarship has not sufficiently separated the general refugee condition from the gendered refugee condition. While male experiences of displacement and loss are well-documented, the specific vulnerabilities, resistance, and psychological burdens of women remain underexamined as a distinct category. This paper builds on existing

scholarship by first establishing the universal refugee experience in Azadi and then foregrounding gender as a separate, layered dimension of analysis.

Theoretical Framework

This research paper on is based on Postcolonial Feminism and Trauma Theory, as these frameworks together provide a comprehensive approach to examining both refugee condition and women's suffering during the Partition of India. Since the research focuses not only on women's victimization but also on displacement, refugee identity, and gendered trauma, these theories help analyze how Partition affects men and women differently while also exposing the broader socio-political realities of migration and loss.

Postcolonial Feminism is an important framework for this study because it examines how women in postcolonial societies experience oppression through the interconnected forces of colonial history, patriarchy, and social marginalization. The Partition of India, as a direct consequence of British colonial division, created massive displacement and refugee crises, but its impact on women was particularly severe. Women were not only uprooted from their homes like men but were also subjected to gender-specific violence such as rape, abduction, forced conversion, and social dishonor. Postcolonial Feminism helps in analyzing how women's refugee experiences in Azadi are shaped not only by displacement but also by patriarchal structures that intensify their suffering. Through female characters, Chaman Nahal portrays women as victims of both political upheaval and gender oppression. This framework therefore allows the study to examine women as gendered refugees whose displacement differs significantly from male refugee experiences because of additional social and bodily vulnerabilities.

Trauma Theory further strengthens this research by addressing the emotional and psychological consequences of Partition on refugees. Trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth explain that trauma is not limited to immediate violence but continues through memory, displacement, fear, and identity fragmentation. In Azadi, Partition creates a refugee condition marked by homelessness, loss of homeland, communal violence, fear, and psychological suffering. Characters are forced to leave behind their homes, identities, and social stability, making displacement both physical and emotional. Trauma Theory is essential for understanding the refugee condition in the novel because it explains how forced migration creates lasting psychological scars. It also helps distinguish between general refugee trauma and women's gendered trauma, as women face not only the pain of displacement but also sexual violence, social insecurity, and patriarchal burdens.

Together, Postcolonial Feminism and Trauma Theory create a multidimensional framework for this study. Postcolonial Feminism highlights the socio-political and patriarchal dimensions of women's suffering, while Trauma Theory explains the broader refugee experience of displacement, loss, and psychological fragmentation. This combination is particularly relevant because the study does not isolate women's suffering from refugee

experience; rather, it examines how women's experiences are embedded within the larger refugee crisis of Partition but shaped differently by gender. Through this framework, *Azadi* can be analyzed as a novel that portrays Partition as both a humanitarian refugee crisis and a gendered catastrophe.

Thus, the theoretical framework supports the argument that *Azadi* presents refugee condition as a shared experience of displacement and identity loss, while also revealing that women endure this displacement in uniquely gendered ways. By combining the study of refugee trauma with gender analysis, this framework enables a deeper understanding of how Chaman Nahal represents Partition not only as political division but also as a profoundly human tragedy shaped by both displacement and gendered suffering.

3. Refugee Condition : Displacement, Loss and Survival during Partition.

Hindus and Muslims lived in relative harmony in Sialkot. Arun, Kanshi Ram's son, admires Abdul Ghani's hookah-making skill, and whenever Ghani needs a small loan, he turns to Lala Kanshi Ram. This mutual respect and trust illustrate the peaceful coexistence that once defined the community. However, after the announcement of Partition, this harmony shatters. When a Muslim procession passes through the colony on the night of the announcement, Hindus close the gates of their neighborhood, fearing violence. Abdul Ghani Khan, who once borrowed money from Kanshi Ram, now shouts "Pakistan Zindabad" as he passes by. The first riot in Sialkot takes place on June 24, 1947, following the Punjab Legislative Assembly's decision to partition the province. Muslims celebrate, and in their excitement, they kill several Hindus. Daily stabbings and murders create a climate of terror—violence that is not only physical but psychological. The first large-scale destruction occurs in Mohalla Dharowal, which is looted and burned. For the first time in the novel, the phrase "refugee camp" appears. "These two words 'refugee camp' were to become a household name all over India in the next few months" (Nahal 129).

Lala Kanshi Ram is initially unaware of the term refugee camp. When Arun explains it, he is shocked, questioning how he could become a refugee in his own homeland. "I was born around here, this is my home—how can I be refugee in my own home?" (130). This moment captures the core absurdity of the refugee condition: one becomes a refugee not by leaving one's nation but by being declared alien within it. As communal violence intensifies, Kanshi Ram is forced to abandon his home, land, and social world everything that had shaped his identity for generations. Before leaving, he emotionally touches the walls, soil, and air of Sialkot, revealing his profound attachment to his homeland. "The pinch was he should have to give up this land, this earth, this air" (132). His migration is not a voluntary journey but a violent uprooting that transforms him from a respected citizen into a refugee. Life in the refugee camp is marked by physical hardship, poverty and loss of dignity. Heavy monsoon rains flood the camp, turning it into a site of discomfort and disorder. Tents leak, and families struggle to protect their belongings. The camp is overcrowded and unhygienic.

Families from Fort Street are squeezed into four tiny army tents, where even Kanshi Ram accommodates his household helpers, Padmini and Chandini, along with their families. The camp reduces settled citizens to people fighting for basic survival. Home is no longer private or secure; refugees are forced into shared, compressed spaces. Birth, death, illness, and survival continue in the camp, reflecting how trauma becomes normalized due to constant exposure to violence and loss. A harsh routine develops: ration lines, communal latrines, shared suffering. Displacement becomes an everyday reality rather than a temporary emergency. The deaths of Madhu and Rajiv, who are killed aboard a train, symbolize the brutal vulnerability of refugees. Migration becomes a death trap. When Arun and SurajPrakash disguise themselves as Muslims to search for the dead bodies, they witness mass cremations and corpses lying everywhere. Refugee death means not only loss of life but loss of dignity and ritual closure.

The first convoy of refugees leaves for India. Refugees must choose between dangerous trains and foot convoys, showing that escape itself becomes life-threatening. As they leave, they repeatedly stop and look back at Sialkot—its houses, temples, mosques, church spires, and factories. The narrator notes that refugees are not only leaving buildings but losing a pluralistic civilization. The repeated act of naming these landmarks reveals a desperate attempt to preserve memory before exile erases it. At Narowal camp, refugees face another horror. The camp is violently attacked by organized Muslim mobs, allegedly supported by Pakistani military elements. Electric lines are cut, women are abducted, and thousands are killed. Narowal becomes a graveyard of dreams.

The Illusion of Safety After crossing into India, refugees imagine safety, but their arrival quickly destroys this illusion. Instead of relief, they encounter overcrowded camps, food shortages, and social rejection. Refugees are treated as burdens rather than welcomed citizens. Local populations resent newcomers due to resource pressure. Kanshi Ram's family approaches relatives for support, but distant kin refuse shelter. Nahal demonstrates how displacement fractures the Indian social fabric. Refugees become socially homeless before they are geographically resettled. In Delhi, refugees face another form of brutality: bureaucratic degradation. Lala Kanshi Ram, once a respected grain merchant from Sialkot, now stands before an arrogant rehabilitation officer and must justify why he has come to Delhi. When he requests a small house and shop in exchange for the property he lost in Pakistan, the officer laughs. Kanshi Ram breaks down under the unbearable weight of homelessness, the loss of his daughter Madhu, and the destruction of his former life. The Kingsway Camp finally offers physical shelter but only in the form of cramped barracks—survival, not restoration. The novel thus concludes that the refugee's plight is not merely one of migration but of prolonged dispossession, social rejection, economic ruin, bureaucratic degradation, and the painful struggle to rebuild identity in a nation that is politically free yet morally unprepared for its refugees.

4. Women as Refugees Gendered Suffering Vulnerability and Resilience:

Gendered Vulnerability and Resistance Having established the general refugee condition, this section turns to the specific, layered experiences of women refugees in Azadi. While male refugees like Kanshi Ram lose home, status, and land, women refugees lose these and face objectification, sexual violence, lack of bodily privacy, and the burden of patriarchal honor.

4.1. Preserving Home in Displacement:

Prabha Rani While men focus on the loss of land and public identity, women experience displacement through domestic and emotional labor. As the family prepares to flee Sialkot, Prabha Rani packs perfumes, jewelry, and household objects. This seemingly small act reveals how women preserve cultural memory through material objects. Migration strips not only men's economic worlds but also women's emotional worlds. The objects Prabha Rani carries are not luxuries, they are anchors to a lost life.

Mukanda's Mother Mukanda's mother refuses to leave without her imprisoned son, demonstrating maternal resilience through silent endurance and unwavering commitment to family survival. Unlike male characters who express grief through public breakdown or anger, she resists through sacrifice and protection. Her character reveals how women resisted communal chaos not through direct confrontation but through the preservation of family and identity.

The refugee camp strips women of personal safety and dignity in ways that men do not experience. As the narration explicitly states, "There was no privacy in those tents, the flaps were open, one could see everything inside".(228-29). For women, this lack of privacy means that their bodies are never fully their own. They cannot change clothes, nurse children or attend to basic needs without being seen. The camp which is supposed to be a space of protection, becomes a space of exposure.

The most powerful example of gendered refugee vulnerability is the objectification of Sunanda by Captain Rahmat-ullah-Khan. The captain refers to her beauty "She is such a beauty."(224). He cannot stop staring at her even during official camp inspections.

He invites Arun to his bungalow under the pretext of friendship and assistance with safe convoy movement, but his real purpose is access to Sunanda. Arun and his family are powerless refugees, dependent on authorities for survival. The captain exploits this desperation. This unequal power dynamic is central to the refugee condition in the novel, but it affects women uniquely. Even inside a camp meant for protection, refugee women remain unsafe. The camp is not a secure humanitarian space. Sunanda's individuality, suffering, and refugee status are entirely ignored, only her beauty matters to the captain. Her body becomes an object of desire rather than a subject of suffering. One night she confronts Arun about the captain and declares, "Tell him I'll kill him if he ever tries to touch me" (230). This moment presents both women's vulnerability during displacement and their courage. Her response

challenges the stereotype of women as passive victims. Even in the midst of violence, Azadi shows women's strength and agency. When the camp is attacked and Arun discovers Sunanda being sexually assaulted by the captain, he kills the captain. But Sunanda's earlier declaration of resistance frames the scene not as simple victimhood but as a refusal to submit. Isher Kaur's pregnancy intensifies refugee trauma, as women must fear not only for themselves but also for their unborn children. Yet even amid violence, her dreams of childbirth and family symbolize hope and cultural continuation. However, Isher Kaur also bears the consequences of male religious decisions. Her husband, Niranjana Singh, burns himself alive rather than cutting his hair to save himself. His death instantly transforms Isher Kaur's condition, exposing how women are often left to carry grief, memory, and future responsibility alone. She becomes a single mother and a widow not because of her own choices but because of her husband's patriarchal interpretation of honour. Not all refugee suffering is physical. Nur, Arun's lover, writes to him expressing sorrow without dramatic promises. Nur's pain represents another form of displacement, emotional exile. She loses not a home but future intimacy and possibility. Women experience Partition not only through physical violence but also through the destruction of relationships, dreams and emotional bonds.

At Narowal camp, refugees witness a naked parade of abducted Hindu and Sikh women by Muslim mobs. Women are stripped, shaved, beaten and publicly humiliated. "There were forty women, marching two abreast. Their ages varied from sixteen to thirty"(296) Their individuality is erased, they become symbols of conquered community honour. Male spectators respond with obscenity, sexual aggression and collective sadism. This scene reveals the worst dimension of the gendered refugee condition: women's bodies become sites of political revenge. A woman refugee is not just a homeless person, she is a body that can be used to humiliate an entire community.

Chaman Nahal's Azadi offers a powerful literary account of the Partition's refugee experience, revealing that displacement, trauma, and loss of identity are not uniform. The first half of this paper established the general refugee condition in the novel: the violent uprooting from Sialkot, the psychological shock of becoming a refugee in one's own homeland, the harsh degradation of camp life, the death traps of refugee trains, and the cruel irony of finding only bureaucratic humiliation and social rejection upon arrival in independent India. The second half then demonstrated how women experience an additional, layered vulnerability. While male characters like Lala Kanshi Ram suffer the loss of land, status, and home, women refugees lose their bodily privacy, face objectification and sexual violence, become symbols of communal honour and bear the emotional and physical consequences of patriarchal decisions. Yet Azadi also refuses to reduce women to mere victims. Through Sunanda's defiant words, Isher Kaur's survival, Mukanda's mother's resilience and Prabha Rani's preservation of domestic memory, the novel portrays women as agents who resist, endure, and preserve life amid chaos. The refugee journey in Azadi is

endless transit from Sialkot to Narowal to Delhi but the wounds of Partition persist long after physical borders are crossed. For all refugees, the nation remains a place of prolonged dispossession. For women refugees, it remains a place where their bodies are never fully safe, even inside camps, even after rehabilitation. Azadi remains an essential text for understanding not only the history of Partition but also the ongoing, gendered struggles of displacement that continue to shape south Asian identities today.

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