



**BEYOND NATIONAL FREEDOM: COLONIALITY OF
GENDER AND DECOLONIAL FEMINIST
UNFREEDOM IN CHAUDHARY'S
*A SHIMLA AFFAIR***

Saima
2025f-phd-el-007@tuf.edu.pk

PhD Scholar, English Literature, Department of Language and Literature, The University of Faisalabad, Pakistan.

Dr. Katsiaryna Hurbik
khurbik.ENG@tuf.edu.pk

Professor/ HOD Linguistics, PhD English Linguistics (Theory of Language), Department of English Language and Literature, University of Faisalabad, Pakistan.

Abstract

This article argues that Srishti Chaudhary's *A Shimla Affair* should be read not as a conventional historical romance with a nationalist backdrop, but as a decolonial feminist narrative of gendered colonial unfreedom. The novel situates three Parsi sisters in late colonial Shimla and shows that British rule, family duty, respectability, inheritance restriction, marriageability, and domestic confinement operate not as separate pressures but as coordinated mechanisms of control. Drawing on María Lugones's account of the coloniality of gender and Françoise Vergès's decolonial critique of liberal and nationalist emancipation, the article contends that the text makes women's subjection legible through everyday structures of space, labour, mobility, and property rather than through spectacular violence alone. Royal Hotel Shimla emerges as the novel's decisive social form: it is livelihood, inheritance, labour site, refuge, and carceral enclosure at once. Nalini's language of "servility," the sisters' conditional relation to property, their prohibition from overt politics, and the novel's skepticism toward nationalist closure reveal that decolonization in the text cannot be reduced to transfer of state power. Instead, freedom appears as an unfinished struggle over women's right to move, inherit, labour on their own terms, and inhabit history as subjects rather than supports. By placing South Asian feminist historiography into sustained dialogue with decolonial feminism, the article offers a framework for reading contemporary historical fiction that reimagines anticolonial struggle from the intimate terrain of women's constrained lives.

Keywords: *Decolonial Feminism, Coloniality of Gender, Women and Nationalism.*

Corresponding Author: Dr. Katsiaryna Hurbik (Professor/ HOD Linguistics, PhD English Linguistics (Theory of Language), Department of English Language and Literature, University of Faisalabad, Pakistan)

Email: khurbik.ENG@tuf.edu.pk

1. Introduction

Women in colonial fiction are often read through inadequate binaries. They appear either as symbols of tradition and national authenticity or as newly visible agents whose entry into political history is taken as evidence of emancipation. Srishti Chaudhary's *A Shimla Affair* resists both patterns. Set in late colonial Shimla and centered on three Parsi sisters entangled in clandestine anticolonial networks, the novel does not simply ask whether women can join the nation. It asks how women are made governable through the intimate fusion of empire, duty, respectability, inheritance, labour, and restricted mobility. Its most significant political insight is that colonial domination cannot be isolated in the public sphere while patriarchy is relegated to the private one. The two operate together, each supplying the social terms through which the other is lived.

The novel announces this argument with striking conceptual precision. Nalini recalls her youthful desire to act “beyond the role of the good woman” and defines the difference between “a life of servility and a life of truth” as the difference that mattered most to her (Chaudhary, 2025, p. 8). She immediately broadens the meaning of servility by linking it to “birth” and “circumstances” that “define our boundaries and decide our fate” (Chaudhary, 2025, p. 8). This language is analytically consequential. Nalini does not identify a single oppressor or a single institution. She identifies an arrangement that turns social boundaries into destiny. If truth is “laced with freedom” (p. 8), then women are denied truth not only because they lack formal rights but because the horizons of movement, inheritance, speech, and desire have already been organized in advance. The text therefore theorizes its own world through the linked vocabularies of freedom, servility, duty, and confinement.

This study argues that *A Shimla Affair* is best read through María Lugones's concept of the coloniality of gender. For Lugones (2007), colonial modernity does not merely encounter a preexisting patriarchy and intensify it. It reorganizes social life by producing race, gender, labour, sexuality, and property as interlocking hierarchies. Gender in this account is not a universal category that colonial rule simply exploits; it is one of the historical technologies through which colonial rule is made durable. This framework is especially useful for Chaudhary's novel, because the sisters are not oppressed in one sphere as colonial subjects and in another as women. Their condition is produced through the same structure that seizes family assets, converts marriage into a legal threshold of dispossession, makes respectability the condition of survival, and translates domestic labour into civic silence. The sisters are governable because these domains reinforce one another.

Françoise Vergès provides the article's second theoretical anchor and her decolonial feminism critiques accounts of emancipation that celebrate visibility, competence, or inclusion while leaving untouched the racialized and gendered

organization of labour, care, and social value. Vergès is crucial to the present study because *A Shimla Affair* repeatedly presents women who are capable, intelligent, and central to the maintenance of social worlds without allowing those qualities to count as liberation. Noor preserves the hotel through sacrifice, Nalini sustains its daily operations, and Afreen contributes hidden intellectual labour to the underground movement. Yet each form of agency is shaped by structures that deny the sisters ownership, unrestricted movement, or public legitimacy. Vergès helps articulate why the novel's political force lies in exposing the difference between women's usefulness to a world and their freedom within it.

The problem this research addresses follows from that conjunction of text and theory. Approaches most readily available for reading the novel: broad postcolonial nationalism, generic feminist recovery, or a romance-across-empire frame, do not fully explain how the text organizes women's lives through coordinated systems of control. A nationalist reading may note the sisters' participation in the struggle for independence while overlooking how political action is conditioned by inheritance law, domestic labour, and community reputation. A conventional feminist reading may identify restrictions on women's movement and marriage while underplaying the specifically colonial arrangements that make those restrictions operative. A romance-centered reading may illuminate intimacy across imperial difference while missing how the hotel, the town, and the community together produce Nalini's constrained desire. The critical problem is therefore not simply that the novel is recent and understudied, but it is that the frameworks most readily available to read it remain too loose for its precise rendering of women's unfreedom.

The thesis of this article is that *A Shimla Affair* imagines freedom from the perspective of women whose lives are structured by coloniality rather than merely framed by colonial history. British rule, communal respectability, marriageability, inheritance restriction, and domestic labour function simultaneously, not as additive oppressions but as a single architecture of governance. Royal Hotel Shimla is the text's most vivid expression of that architecture. It shelters the sisters and confines them; it gives them social standing and demands their service; it is their remaining inheritance and the mechanism by which inheritance is withheld. Read through Lugones and Vergès, the novel's central political insight becomes clear: women do not become free merely by proving themselves dutiful or patriotic. Freedom requires transformation of the arrangements that bind duty to dispossession and visibility to service.

The article pursues four objectives. First, it examines how the novel represents the colonial production of gendered hierarchy through respectability, inheritance, marriage logic, and spatial restriction. Second, it analyzes the hotel as a gendered colonial space that functions both as material support and as an apparatus of discipline. Third, it shows how the novel reconceives women's political participation as clandestine, embodied, and risky

rather than symbolically nationalist. Fourth, it argues that a Lugones–Vergès framework yields a more rigorous account of the novel’s politics than broader and older critical models.

The significance of the article is both textual and disciplinary. Textually, it offers one of the first sustained scholarly analyses of a recent South Asian historical novel that places women at the center of an anticolonial narrative while remaining skeptical of nationalist closure. Disciplinarily, it contributes to literary studies by bringing South Asian feminist historiography into sustained conversation with decolonial feminism. That conversation matters because the novel itself moves between historical questions about women and nationalism and contemporary questions about labour, care, and incomplete liberation. To read it only as a period piece would be to miss its intervention into ongoing feminist debates about what counts as freedom. The remainder of the article therefore moves from the relevant scholarship to the theoretical framework, then to methodology, textual analysis, findings, and conclusion, in order to show that *A Shimla Affair* imagines decolonization not as national closure but as an unfinished struggle over women’s movement, labour, property, and historical self-definition.

2. Literature Review

Because Chaudhary’s *A Shimla Affair* is a recent novel, there is not yet a substantial body of peer-reviewed criticism devoted specifically to it. That absence matters, but it is not the sole justification for this article. The more substantial issue is conceptual. The interpretive traditions most relevant to the novel; work on women and nationalism in colonial India, feminist historiography, scholarship on intimacy under empire, and decolonial feminism, have often remained adjacent rather than integrated. The novel requires them to be read together because it stages women’s lives through the simultaneous pressure of property loss, domestic labour, communal respectability, political secrecy, and colonial surveillance. This literature review therefore maps the scholarship that makes such a reading possible and identifies the gap the present study addresses.

Scholarship on women and nationalism in South Asia remains an indispensable starting point. Chatterjee’s (1989) account of the “nationalist resolution of the women’s question” shows how anticolonial thought split social life into an outer material sphere and an inner spiritual-cultural sphere, assigning women responsibility for preserving the latter (pp. 238–245). Forbes (1996) likewise demonstrates that women’s visibility in modern India was uneven, classed, and tightly regulated rather than linearly progressive. Ray (2000) extends this discussion into literary criticism by tracing the mutual constitution of woman and nation in colonial and postcolonial narrative. These studies help explain why female characters in texts about colonial India are never merely personal. They are overburdened with representational work. Yet this scholarship tends to privilege ideology, discourse, and symbolism over the material textures that *A Shimla Affair* foregrounds. It

explains why the sisters matter symbolically, but it does not fully account for how property, service work, and confinement operate as the everyday mechanics of women's unfreedom.

A second body of scholarship complicates the nationalist frame by insisting that the "woman question" cannot be understood through symbolism alone. Sangari and Vaid's (1990) *Recasting Women* reorients colonial historiography by foregrounding women's differentiated social locations rather than abstract narratives of reform. Chakravarti (1990) shows how orientalist and nationalist discourse alike script women's pasts for political purposes, while Sarkar (2001) demonstrates how domesticity, religion, and communal nationalism rely on the disciplined figure of the good wife. Burton (1994) adds an imperial dimension by showing that colonial feminism often legitimized itself by producing colonized women as victims in need of rescue. This scholarship is highly relevant to Chaudhary's novel because respectability, duty, and marriageability repeatedly appear as instruments of control. Still, the field often treats ideological regulation and material regulation separately. It can tell us how women become symbols of morality, but not fully how morality is secured through inheritance agreements, spatial confinement, and feminized labour.

Feminist historiography and subaltern critique deepen the problem of representation. Mani (1998) demonstrates that in the colonial debate on sati, women were often marginal to the arguments carried out in their name. Spivak's (1988) *Can the Subaltern Speak?* remains foundational for showing how representation may itself enact epistemic violence when subaltern women are spoken for within imperial and nationalist structures. Sarkar (2008) traces the selective visibility of Muslim womanhood in late colonial Bengal, and Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley (2015) reveal the heterogeneity of women's self-writing in South Asia. These works are vital for the present article because Chaudhary's *A Shimla Affair* is explicitly concerned with returning women to historical narrative. Yet this study moves beyond a recovery model. It argues that the novel's most significant intervention lies not only in restoring women to history but in revealing how history is organized through their constrained labour, mobility, and social value. The relevant gap, then, is not merely representational absence but the lack of a critical model linking representation to colonial social organization.

A third body of work concerns intimacy and domesticity under empire. McClintock (1995) established that race, gender, sexuality, and domesticity are constitutive of imperial power rather than secondary to it. Stoler (2002, 2009) further demonstrates that empire is governed through domestic regulation, affective discipline, and anxious distinctions of belonging. Lowe's (2015) *Intimacies of Four Continents* widens the frame by showing how modern freedom has historically depended on occluded colonial and racialized forms of labour and unfreedom. These studies are especially useful for Chaudhary's *A Shimla*

Affair because the hotel is not merely a setting but a dense social form where hospitality, hidden labour, racialized leisure, and surveillance intersect. Yet in South Asian literary studies such insights have more often been applied to imperial archives or canonical postcolonial texts than to recent historical fiction centered on women's constrained relation to anticolonial politics. This absence is one of the openings the present article addresses.

The decisive conceptual intervention for this study comes from decolonial feminism. Lugones (2007, 2010) argues that colonialism imposed a modern gender system that reorganized labour, property, sexuality, and knowledge rather than merely exploiting a preexisting patriarchy. Mohanty (2003) similarly resists universal womanhood and insists on the material histories of empire and capitalism that structure gendered life. Mignolo and Walsh (2018) provide the broader vocabulary of the colonial matrix of power, while Ossame (2024) underscores the continuing entanglement of postcolonial states with colonial gendered predicaments. Vergès (2021, 2024) extends these debates by critiquing liberal and state-centered feminisms that celebrate inclusion while neglecting the racialized and gendered organization of labour, care, and social value. Together, these thinkers provide the language needed to read Chaudhary's *A Shimla Affair* not simply as a novel about oppressed women but as a text that dramatizes the historical making of women as governable subjects.

The research gap emerges at the intersection of these conversations. Scholarship on women and nationalism explains how women are burdened with the work of culture and morality. Feminist historiography shows how women are erased, restored, or spoken for. Intimacy studies demonstrate that empire operates through domestic and affective life. Decolonial feminism theorizes gender as integral to coloniality. What has not been adequately done is to place these conversations in direct relation for the close reading of a contemporary South Asian historical novel whose plot turns on inheritance loss, spatial confinement, clandestine labour, and skepticism toward nationalist completion. No existing body of criticism, taken alone, captures all of these dimensions. Nationalist historiography can explain the ideological burden placed on women, but not fully the novel's emphasis on property and service work. Feminist recovery models can explain erasure, but not the colonial organization of gendered everyday life. Decolonial feminism can name that organization, but it has rarely been applied to this literary-historical terrain in a sustained way.

This is where the present article contributes. First, it offers a sustained scholarly reading of Chaudhary's *A Shimla Affair* at a moment when criticism on the novel remains almost absent. Second, it joins South Asian feminist historiography to decolonial feminism, allowing the argument to move from representational questions about women in colonial history to structural questions about how gendered life is organized. Third, it

shifts interpretation away from the familiar language of “strong women in the freedom struggle” toward the more precise question of how women’s strength is demanded, organized, and contained by a world that depends upon their service. Fourth, it reframes the novel’s endpoint: what matters is not simply whether women enter national history, but whether decolonization alters the terms on which they move, labour, inherit, and belong.

The literature reviewed here therefore does more than provide background. It clarifies why this article is necessary. Existing work makes it possible to see parts of what the novel is doing, but it does not yet provide a fully adequate account of its governing structure. This study reduces that gap by arguing that the coloniality of gender is the novel’s central logic and that a Lugones–Vergès framework is uniquely suited to show how British rule, community morality, marriage, property, and domestic labour form one coordinated regime. The gap, then, is not merely chronological; it is theoretical. The contribution of this article is to provide the conceptual vocabulary with which that regime can be read.

3. Theoretical Framework

This article adopts a decolonial feminist framework centered on the coloniality of gender in order to read Chaudhary’s *A Shimla Affair* as a narrative of gendered colonial governance rather than as a conventional nationalist romance. The framework is built through two primary anchors: María Lugones and Françoise Vergès. Lugones provides the structural account of how colonial modernity produces gendered hierarchy. Vergès supplies the critical language for understanding why women’s endurance, competence, and visibility cannot be mistaken for freedom when the organization of labour, care, and social legitimacy remains intact. Read together, these thinkers make visible the novel’s central political insight: women’s subjection in late colonial Shimla is generated through the simultaneous operation of empire, respectability, inheritance restriction, marriageability, domestic labour, and civic prohibition.

Lugones is indispensable because she rejects the assumption that patriarchy is a timeless structure that colonialism merely intensifies. In her account, colonialism imposes a modern gender system that reorganizes labour, property, sexuality, and social value (Lugones, 2007, p. 187). This move matters enormously for Chaudhary’s novel. If the sisters are read only as women constrained by “patriarchy,” the specificity of their condition is flattened. The text instead shows them to be formed within a colonial arrangement that seizes family assets, makes respectability a condition of survival, converts marriage into a threshold of dispossession, and turns domestic labour into civic silence. Gender here is not one axis among others; it is the form through which colonial power becomes ordinary. The “good woman,” which Nalini explicitly rejects, is therefore understood in this article as a disciplinary script rather than a merely moral identity.

This framing clarifies why Royal Hotel Shimla is analytically indispensable. The hotel is not just a residence, business, or symbol of faded gentility. It is the novel's most concentrated social technology. It secures the sisters' livelihood while constraining their movement, regulates their labour while preserving their respectability, and keeps them socially visible while withholding full ownership. In Lugones's terms, the hotel is where gender, labour, and property are materially organized. The sisters do not simply inhabit it; they are produced within its arrangements. Nalini's sense that she is "chained to our inheritance" and trapped "within the four walls of this hotel" (Chaudhary, 2025, p. 13) reveals that inheritance in the novel is not emancipatory possession but managed dependency.

Vergès extends this reading by helping distinguish between women's functional importance and women's freedom. A decolonial feminism, for Vergès (2021), cannot be satisfied with narratives of empowerment that leave intact the racialized and gendered organization of service, care, and labour. This perspective is crucial because *A Shimla Affair* repeatedly presents women who are capable, resourceful, and central to the maintenance of social worlds. Noor negotiates survival, Nalini manages hospitality, and Afreen performs clandestine informational work for the resistance. Yet the novel refuses to equate capability with emancipation. The sisters remain bound to structures that determine where they may go, what they may inherit, and whether they may appear openly in political life. Vergès enables the article to show why that distinction matters. Women's competence can be appropriated by both colonial and nationalist orders; the decisive question is whether the distribution of labour, property, and authority has changed.

The Vergèsian perspective is especially important for reading the novel's skepticism toward nationalist closure. The text does not imagine decolonization as the automatic end of gendered subordination. Its ending is marked by relief, grief, and unresolved questioning rather than triumphant completion. The article therefore treats the novel as more decolonial than nationalist at its deepest level. It values anticolonial struggle, but it also exposes the possibility that transfer of state power may leave intact the structures that continue to make women serve, sacrifice, and wait. In that sense, Vergès helps the analysis move beyond the vocabulary of "participation" and "representation" toward the more demanding question of what kind of social transformation would be required for women to inhabit freedom fully.

Operationally, this framework yields five propositions that guide the analysis. First, womanhood in the novel is read as a colonial production rather than a universal category. Second, domestic-commercial space is treated as a site where governance, labour extraction, and respectability are fused. Third, marriage, inheritance, and community morality are analyzed as legal-social mechanisms through which colonial and patriarchal power sustain one another. Fourth, women's resistance is interpreted as clandestine,

embodied, and structurally risky rather than simply emancipatory. Fifth, freedom is understood not as nationalist arrival but as an unfinished decolonial struggle over mobility, labour, property, speech, and historical belonging.

Methodologically, the article uses qualitative close reading informed by decolonial feminist theory. It does not treat Chaudhary's *A Shimla Affair* as a transparent historical document, nor does it attempt archival verification of its events. Instead, it reads the novel as a literary text that narrativizes the coloniality of gender through plot, characterization, spatial design, and recurring conceptual vocabulary. The analysis proceeds through textual clusters rather than plot summary. Passages on duty and servility, hotel labour, inheritance restriction, racialized mobility, clandestine politics, and the ending's uneasy afterlife are examined as sites where the novel's social logic becomes most explicit.

4. Analysis and Discussion

The analysis begins with a central claim: *A Shimla Affair* imagines women's unfreedom as a product of coordinated colonial and gendered controls rather than as a set of separate pressures that occasionally intersect. The novel is therefore not best read as a historical romance decorated with nationalist intrigue. Its real achievement lies in showing how the colonial state, family duty, communal respectability, inheritance law, and domestic labour produce one another in the ordinary rhythms of women's lives. This is why Nalini's opening reflections are so important. She does not define her problem in the first instance as British rule alone. She defines it as the demand to remain within "the role of the good woman" and as the threat of "a life of servility" rather than "a life of truth" (Chaudhary, 2025, p. 8). She intensifies the point by linking servility to "birth" and "circumstances" that "define our boundaries and decide our fate" (p. 8). These lines reveal that the novel's fundamental conflict is between women's desire for self-determined life and a social arrangement that turns boundaries into destiny.

The opening becomes even sharper when Nalini recalls her father's injunction, "Do your duty, and you will be free" (Chaudhary, 2025, p. 8). The sentence sounds generous, yet the novel steadily exposes its coercive underside. Freedom appears not as a right but as a reward endlessly deferred until correct feminine performance has been recognized. This moment reveals how moral language converts structural inequality into aspiration.

Nalini's subsequent belief that "three women could have the power to change history" (Chaudhary, 2025, p. 9) matters because it stages a counter-imagination within a world that denies women the conditions for historical agency. The passage therefore does more than characterize a rebellious heroine. It establishes the novel's critique of the social script that makes dutiful femininity appear natural, ethical, and inevitable. In Lugones's terms, the "good woman" is not merely cultural identity; it is a colonial-modern disciplinary form.

That disciplinary form is materialized most clearly through inheritance and domestic space. Nalini's description of Royal Hotel Shimla is one of the novel's most

revealing moments. “The hotel was our lifeline,” she says, but in the same breath she confesses that her life had “come to a standstill within the four walls of this hotel” and that she felt “chained to our inheritance” (Chaudhary, 2025, p. 13). The cluster is analytically dense. “Lifeline” names dependence, “standstill” names arrested futurity, and “chained” names the conversion of inheritance into confinement. The hotel is therefore not simply property or sentimental home. It is an institution that preserves the sisters by fixing them into service. Here the novel’s politics become unmistakably material: women’s relation to property is structured not by secure ownership but by custodianship without autonomy. They labour for the hotel, maintain its reputation, and embody its continuity, yet their attachment to it is restrictive rather than enabling.

The text makes that arrangement explicit when Nalini explains that the sisters were allowed to retain the hotel only if “all three of us stay confined to the boundaries of the hotel and the town that contained it” until marriage; after marriage, “we wouldn’t be allowed to inherit the hotel anyway” (Chaudhary, 2025, pp. 27–28). If all three marry, the hotel will revert to the government (Chaudhary, 2025, p. 28). This passage condenses colonial governance, family strategy, and community morality into a single compact. The sisters may remain only by accepting visibility under watch and eventual dispossession through marriage. Marriage is not simply a personal horizon; it is a legal-social mechanism for transferring women away from inheritance. Respectability is not merely moral evaluation; it is the condition under which this arrangement remains tolerable. Colonial administration is not external to family life; it is the force that makes spatial confinement formal and enforceable. In Lugones’s terms, the scene demonstrates precisely how coloniality organizes property through gender.

The hotel’s daily operations reinforce the argument. Nalini describes herself as perpetually “on call to bring them their towels, show them to the ballroom, make sure the tea arrived and ensure that every room had hot water for their baths. I also kept the fires burning” (Chaudhary, 2025, p. 13). The sentence records the feminized reproductive labour that makes colonial comfort possible. The guests’ leisure depends on hidden acts of maintenance; the sisters’ social survival depends on performing those acts seamlessly. Vergès is especially helpful here because she insists that decolonial feminism must ask whose labour sustains the world while remaining unrecognized as authority. Chaudhary’s *A Shimla Affair* poses exactly that question through the hotel. The sisters are indispensable to the functioning of elite sociability, yet their usefulness secures neither ownership nor freedom. Their competence is appropriated by the very order that limits them.

The architecture of the hotel further confirms its colonial genealogy. When Nalini guides Charles through the property, she points out “the servant’s passage” (Chaudhary, 2025, p. 21), a small phrase that reveals a politics of circulation. Some bodies move through the public rooms; others are routed through hidden corridors. She also explains

that the original owner feared “the natives would gather and turn against him” and therefore “built the bunkers” (Chaudhary, 2025, p. 21). The building is thus an archive of imperial paranoia. It is not merely located in colonial space; it is built from colonial fear. The sisters inherit not only a hotel but a regime of movement and service in which they are implicated and constrained. This moment challenges the critical assumption that setting is secondary to politics. In Chaudhary’s novel, architecture stores racial hierarchy.

The analysis of space extends beyond the hotel walls. Nalini repeatedly experiences movement as permission, scrutiny, and exclusion. Before one of her meetings with Charles, she notes that Noor has “never really allowed me to go out ... with a man” (Chaudhary, 2025, p. 24). The line matters not because it depicts ordinary protectiveness but because family control is itself exercised under colonial pressure. Noor’s supervision manages precarity; it does not stand outside it. Nalini’s later realization that “most ordinary Indians are not allowed to be in this part of the Mall” (Chaudhary, 2025, p. 29) turns a seemingly romantic outing into a lesson in racialized geography. Empire is felt here as access: who may enter, sit, stroll, or be seen. The sentence is especially revealing because Nalini places herself among “ordinary Indians” even while she is temporarily proximate to colonial privilege. Proximity does not undo classification.

This instability is condensed in one of the novel’s strongest lines: Nalini becomes “acutely conscious of how he was a man—an Englishman—and I, his opposite” (Chaudhary, 2025, p. 20). The sentence compresses race, gender, empire, and desire into one relation. Charles is not only male; he is the embodiment of English authority. Nalini is not merely female; she is produced as his opposite, marked by asymmetry at the level of both race and gender. Stoler’s work on colonial intimacy helps clarify why such scenes matter. Empire reproduces itself through classifications of desirability, propriety, and embodied access as much as through law. The text does not sentimentalize this relation. Charles may be gentle, but the world that allows his mobility and authority remains unequally distributed. Nalini’s feeling is therefore not simple romantic attraction; it is attraction mediated by structure.

Even Nalini’s dreams of elsewhere register the politics of blocked movement. At one point she imagines, “If only I could be Dorothy and the hotel could take me far away with the wind” (Chaudhary, 2025, p. 32). The line may seem whimsical, but it is one of the novel’s most exact formulations of constrained futurity. The desire to be carried away is not mere escapism; it is the fantasy form of a political lack. Nalini cannot yet name a concrete route to freedom, so longing is expressed through cinema. The hotel again appears as both attachment and prison, the thing that sustains her and the thing that fixes her in place. Mobility in the novel therefore exceeds physical travel. It names a broader capacity to imagine an uncontained future.

If the hotel answers the question of how the novel organizes women's relation to property and space, the political plot answers how it reconceives resistance. Chaudhary's *A Shimla Affair* does not simply insert women into an already meaningful nationalist script. It begins by showing how women are prevented from politics through the very structures that keep them respectable and housed. Begum Jaan's prison speech is foundational here. She tells Nalini that "to go to jail for one's freedom is a pleasure like no other" (Chaudhary, 2025, p. 16). The force of the statement lies in its reversal of political logic: prison, ordinarily the sign of defeat, becomes a site of self-authorization. Yet Begum Jaan is not naïve. She also warns that "there will come a time when we will not be able to choose any more" (Chaudhary, 2025, p. 16) and insists that "you have to pay a lot to be free" (Chaudhary, 2025, p. 16). These lines reveal that freedom in the novel is not celebratory abstraction. It is a costly response to necessity. Begum Jaan's politics arise because the available terms of endurance have become untenable. This is where the text exceeds liberal empowerment narratives. Women do not become political because the world grants them room; they become political because the world leaves them no ethical alternative to risk.

Afreen's involvement with the Shimla Circle intensifies the point. When Nalini discovers the secret, she protests that "we can't be involved in political resistance, it's the condition on which we were allowed to stay at the hotel. They will take it away from us" (Chaudhary, 2025, p. 40). The line is devastating because it shows that exclusion from politics has been built into the terms of survival. To remain housed, the sisters must remain civically absent. The property arrangement is therefore itself a political prohibition. Azad's reply, "Nobody is allowed ... Yet, we do it, putting our lives at risk" (Chaudhary, 2025, p. 40) acknowledges illegality without romanticizing it. Politics begins here from prohibition, not from permission.

Nalini then articulates the everyday form of that prohibition with particular bitterness: "We couldn't walk down the Lower Bazaar and participate in the women's strikes and Satyagraha. We couldn't pass around the Indian flag or go around singing Vande Mataram. We were only allowed to grit our teeth and serve tea to the British" (Chaudhary, 2025, p. 40). This passage is central because it condenses colonial domesticity, nationalist exclusion, and feminized service into one image. The sisters are not apolitical by choice. They are politically immobilized by an arrangement that assigns to them the labour of hospitality rather than the visibility of protest. The novel thereby challenges the familiar binary between female passivity and heroic activism. Women's labour for empire is compelled even when their loyalties are anticolonial. Service itself becomes a coerced political position.

Afreen's description of her clandestine work widens the meaning of resistance. "What I am doing is helping the cause," she explains. "I answer letters, read and analyse the newspapers, and collate and present the information to Guruji" (Chaudhary, 2025, p.

41). This sentence names a form of political labour often omitted from nationalist heroics. Afreen's work is administrative, interpretive, and infrastructural. She is not merely carrying messages; she is processing information. The novel thus refuses the idea that women contribute naturally through support rather than strategy. At the same time, the work remains hidden and precarious because it must pass beneath thresholds of visibility still reserved for men. Her additional claim that she wants "to follow our father's footsteps" (Chaudhary, 2025, p. 41) reveals both the power and the limit of inherited politics. Female agency enters history through filial language, yet the need for such language indicates that women's political subjectivity is still mediated by recognizable moral scripts.

The political plot therefore leads to a larger claim about the novel's relation to nationalism. Chaudhary's *A Shimla Affair* values anticolonial struggle, but it refuses to equate national liberation with women's freedom. Noor agrees to support the Shimla Circle not because she has embraced abstract nationalism, but because it appears "the only way we can save the hotel." Even collective struggle is filtered through the immediate problem of dispossession. The novel's horizon remains grounded in material life. This matters because it prevents nationalist ideology from absorbing women's experiences into an untroubled story of patriotic sacrifice. The sisters are fighting for a country, but they are also fighting for a home, for mobility, and for the right not to be reduced to service.

The ending strengthens this decolonial argument. Independence brings relief and recognition of sacrifice, but it does not erase loss or resolve the deeper question of what freedom can mean for women whose lives have been structured by duty and dispossession. The narrative returns not to triumphal closure but to memory, storytelling, and unresolved afterlife. This is where Vergès becomes indispensable. Her critique of state-centered feminism helps name the gap between transfer of power and transformation of social life. The novel does not deny the importance of national freedom. It insists, however, that freedom worthy of the name must include alteration of the arrangements that keep women serving, waiting, and inheriting only conditionally.

Taken together, these textual clusters answer the first three research questions developed in the introduction. First, the novel depicts the coloniality of gender through the coordinated workings of duty, respectability, inheritance, mobility, and racialized access. Second, Royal Hotel Shimla functions as both material support and instrument of confinement because it binds women to labour, visibility, and dependency while withholding full ownership and unrestricted movement. Third, women's participation in the freedom struggle is represented not as symbolic inclusion in nationalism but as clandestine, risky, and embodied resistance emerging from within structures designed to silence them. The everyday worlds of tea service, room management, marriage negotiation, letters, and hidden passages are not ancillary to political history. They are among the principal sites where colonial power is lived and contested.

This reading produces a broader disciplinary intervention. South Asian historical fiction is often discussed through authenticity, memory, romance, or national allegory. Chaudhary's *A Shimla Affair* requires a different emphasis. Its most incisive anticolonial work occurs not in loud declarations of patriotism but in the exposure of the social infrastructures that make women's labour indispensable and their freedom conditional. The novel redistributes critical attention to the hotel corridor, the inheritance agreement, the prohibition on protest, and the hidden labour of reading letters. Those sites form the system that Lugones calls coloniality and that Vergès teaches us to interrogate beyond the language of resilience or empowerment. The novel matters because it renders that system narratively visible.

Noor's position deserves separate attention because the novel uses her to show how women may become both subjects and managers of discipline without thereby becoming free. Noor is the sister who keeps the family structure intact, negotiates with relatives, preserves the hotel, and polices the conduct of Nalini and Afreen. Read superficially, she might appear as the conservative foil to her younger sisters' restlessness. The text, however, complicates that opposition at every turn. Noor's authority is born from dispossession rather than from secure power. She enforces restrictions because she has already learned the price of instability. Her insistence on propriety, caution, and marriage is not simply ideological conservatism; it is a survival strategy formed under colonial precarity. This is why the novel refuses to vilify her. Noor embodies the painful truth that women may be forced to reproduce the very order that injures them because the alternatives are made materially catastrophic. The hotel survives because she accepts its logic, yet that same logic costs her emotional life, her own futurity, and her relation to her sisters. Through Noor, the text shows that discipline is often transmitted not from male authority alone but through women charged with holding families together under conditions they did not choose. Her character therefore complicates any easy binary between female agency and female oppression. She is powerful within the household precisely because she has been denied power beyond it. In decolonial feminist terms, Noor reveals how coloniality distributes responsibility downward, compelling women to administer scarcity, risk, and respectability for the sake of collective survival.

5. Findings

The analysis yields five principal findings. First, Chaudhary's *A Shimla Affair* is best understood as a novel of gendered colonial unfreedom rather than as a historical romance supplemented by political intrigue. The text represents women's subjection through a coordinated arrangement of empire, familial duty, communal respectability, marriageability, inheritance restriction, and spatial surveillance. Nalini's opposition between "servility" and "truth" therefore names a structural condition rather than a merely personal frustration.

Second, Royal Hotel Shimla emerges as the novel's decisive social form. It is livelihood, inheritance, workplace, refuge, and apparatus of discipline at once. The sisters' dependence on the hotel secures survival while limiting movement, ownership, and futurity. The novel's politics are inseparable from this spatial design.

Third, respectability functions as governance. The sisters must preserve a "semblance of respectability" in order to remain socially tolerable, yet that same respectability binds them to silence and service. The "good woman" is not a benign cultural type but the form through which coercion is moralized.

Fourth, women's participation in the freedom struggle is depicted as clandestine, embodied, and risky rather than simply celebratory. Afreen's information work, Begum Jaan's prison politics, and Nalini's constrained access to power show that resistance emerges from within structures designed to immobilize women.

Fifth, the novel refuses to romanticize nationalism. It distinguishes between national independence and decolonial freedom. Transfer of power matters, but it does not automatically transform the arrangements of labour, property, and value that continue to shape women's lives. This is why the Lugones–Vergès framework proves especially productive: Lugones explains how colonialism organizes gendered hierarchy, and Vergès clarifies why liberation must be measured against the transformation of everyday life rather than against state sovereignty alone.

A final implication follows from these findings. The novel's contribution is not exhausted by its account of colonial India; it also intervenes in how contemporary criticism understands women's historical fiction. By centering maintenance work, property insecurity, and hidden political labour, the text refuses the expectation that female-centered anticolonial narrative must choose between domestic realism and political significance. It demonstrates that the domestic is political not by metaphor but by social organization. This insight matters for literary criticism because it encourages a shift away from reading women's historical agency only where it becomes publicly visible. Chaudhary's *A Shimla Affair* shows that history is also made where women calculate risk, negotiate reputations, preserve homes, and convert service into covert action. That broader methodological lesson extends beyond this novel and suggests a richer way of reading the gendered textures of colonial and postcolonial fiction.

6. Conclusion

This study argues that Chaudhary's *A Shimla Affair* should be read through decolonial feminism as a narrative of the colonality of gender. Its central achievement lies in showing that women's unfreedom in late colonial India is produced not by isolated patriarchal customs or by empire in abstraction, but by the intimate coordination of duty, respectability, labour, inheritance, marriage, and spatial control. Nalini's rejection of the "good woman," the sisters' conditional relation to the hotel, the racialized organization of

movement through Shimla, and the clandestine forms of resistance that become available to Afreen and Begum Jaan all demonstrate that domestic life and political history are inseparable.

The article's broader contribution is twofold. It offers one of the first sustained academic readings of a recent South Asian historical novel that places women at the center of anticolonial narrative while refusing nationalist triumphalism. It also demonstrates that a Lugones–Vergès framework provides a more precise account of the text than broader postcolonial or conventional feminist approaches. Through Lugones, the article has shown that gender in the novel is a colonial organization of property, labour, and social value. Through Vergès, it has shown that women's competence, endurance, and patriotic usefulness cannot be mistaken for freedom when the underlying order of service and dispossession remains in place.

What Chaudhary's *A Shimla Affair* finally contributes to literary scholarship is a reorientation of where anticolonial politics is located. History in this novel is not made only in speeches, riots, or conspiratorial plots. It is also made in kitchens, corridors, guest rooms, letters, agreements, and everyday acts of waiting and refusal. By bringing those sites into the center of its narrative, the text expands the imaginative terrain of South Asian historical fiction and invites criticism to treat domesticity, intimacy, and feminized labour as primary archives of colonial modernity. Its final implication is demanding and unfinished: decolonization remains incomplete wherever women are still bound to service, sacrifice, and conditional belonging.

The article therefore also clarifies why decolonial feminism is methodologically stronger than a generic intersectional vocabulary in this case. The novel does not merely present overlapping oppressions; it presents a historical order in which the meaning of gender itself has been organized through colonial rule, property, and labour. That specificity allows the reading to explain why movement, marriage, inheritance, and domestic service do not simply accumulate as burdens but work together as one regime. The contribution is thus not only interpretive but conceptual: it models how recent South Asian fiction can be read through coloniality without losing sight of intimacy, affect, or formal narrative detail. At the level of scene.

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