
Carrying Home in a Suitcase: Everyday Objects as Refugee Archives in Partition Literature

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Abstract

Material history, as an emerging methodological lens in cultural and historical studies, foregrounds the role of objects, artefacts, and physical environments in shaping collective memory, identity, and lived experience. Rather than treating material culture merely as the static backdrop to human events, this approach situates things, for example, clothing, tools, domestic items, religious artefacts, architectural fragments, personal belongings, and even ephemeral objects like ration cards or train tickets as active participants in historical processes. These tangible remnants carry sedimented layers of meaning: they bear the imprints of everyday life, signal social and economic hierarchies, and often hold the emotional charge of survival, loss, or longing. In contexts of displacement, migration, or forced exile, the material world becomes an archive of affect as much as of fact—objects operate as mnemonic devices, allowing the past to persist in intimate, tactile form even when geographies and political boundaries shift.

This paper examines the intricacies of material history in the context of forced migration and refugeehood, tracing how physical artefacts mediate between memory and history. It investigates how objects, whether preserved, repurposed, lost, or reimagined, function as carriers of narratives that may be absent from textual records. By looking at personal testimonies, oral histories, and literary representations that foreground material traces, the study unpacks the emotional, symbolic, and political work that these artefacts perform. The focus extends beyond the grand monuments or officially archived objects to encompass the mundane and everyday: utensils carried across borders, clothing adapted to new environments, photographs hidden in luggage, or inherited tools that become the sole surviving link to a vanished homeland. Such objects are not inert; they move with people, change in use or meaning, and often acquire a symbolic weight far beyond their utilitarian function.

The paper engages with theoretical perspectives from Arjun Appadurai's "social life of things," Pierre Nora's "lieux de mémoire," and Bill Brown's "thing theory" to

frame the analysis of objects not as passive evidence but as dynamic entities embedded in human relationships. This allows for a reading of material history as a hybrid archive- one that merges tangible artefacts with intangible emotions, memories, and silences. In refugee narratives, the loss or retention of an object can encode entire histories of dispossession, resilience, and adaptation. For example, a worn cooking vessel might recall the rhythms of a household left behind, while its continued use in a new country marks both continuity and transformation. In this sense, the material past is not sealed; it is actively remade in the present, negotiating between nostalgia and necessity.

Methodologically, the paper blends textual analysis with ethnographic sensitivity to the material object. While literary works can render vivid the tactile and visual qualities of an artefact, oral accounts and visual archives provide insight into the affective charge these items carry for their owners. By reading material traces in conjunction with narrative forms, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how displacement is not only experienced but also remembered and narrated through objects. Importantly, this approach challenges text-centric historiographies by showing how the material world sustains counter-narratives that resist official silences or distortions.

In highlighting the entanglement of human stories and material remnants, the paper argues for an expanded notion of historical evidence, one that recognises the epistemological and emotional value of objects. This has implications not only for the study of refugee histories but for historical methodology more broadly. By centering material history, we can see the past not as a disembodied chronology but as something that lives in the textures, weights, and wear of things. The result is an approach that restores to history its sensory, affective, and everyday dimensions, and that acknowledges objects as vital witnesses to human endurance and change.

Keywords: Material History, Forced Migration, Refugee Narratives, Memory and Objects, Cultural Identity

Introduction

Material history, as a field of historical inquiry, concerns itself with the tangible objects, artefacts, and built environments that shape and reflect human experience. It approaches the past through the physical traces people leave behind: clothing, utensils, tools, dwellings, photographs, currency, personal heirlooms, and even seemingly

insignificant items such as ration cards or ticket stubs. These objects are not merely passive witnesses to history; they actively participate in the construction of memory, identity, and meaning. They carry what can be called “social lives,” circulating across time and space, changing ownership, accumulating associations, and embodying histories of mobility, exchange, and adaptation. In contexts of displacement, war, or forced migration, such material remnants often become vital carriers of both personal and collective narratives, preserving histories that textual records may omit or overlook.

The conceptual foundations of material history are deeply interdisciplinary, drawing from archaeology, anthropology, cultural history, and museum studies. Arjun Appadurai's formulation of the “social life of things” emphasizes the need to understand objects within the networks of relationships they inhabit. Daniel Miller's work on materiality has similarly stressed that the material world is inseparable from human sociality. Far from being inert, objects act as active agents in shaping human action, thought, and cultural memory. In postcolonial contexts, material history also functions as a counter-archive, enabling the recovery of voices and experiences excluded from official historiography. This is particularly important in histories of displacement, where state narratives may focus on political agreements and demographic shifts, while the intimate textures of everyday life remain absent from the record.

One of the strengths of material history is its ability to bridge the personal and the political. A battered metal trunk can hold within it the urgency of departure, the careful selection of what to carry, and the trauma of loss. A piece of embroidered fabric can evoke a vanished landscape or an ancestral home. Everyday objects become repositories of memory, their tactile and visual qualities capable of evoking emotions and stories that oral or written accounts might struggle to convey. For displaced individuals, such objects can serve as proof of existence and belonging in situations where legal documentation is absent, contested, or deliberately erased.

In South Asia, large-scale displacements such as those during the Partition of 1947 and the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 disrupted entire material worlds. People were forced to abandon homes, land, and possessions, carrying only what they could manage. In these circumstances, the few items they retained were photographs, jewellery, kitchen utensils, and religious icons, which often acquired heightened significance, functioning as emotional anchors and mnemonic devices. Their scarcity only intensified their importance, becoming central to the reconstruction of identity and community in unfamiliar environments. Objects also reveal the improvisations

and adaptations necessary for survival, from the reuse of domestic tools to the repurposing of trade skills in refugee camps or resettlement colonies.

Material history does not study these objects in isolation. It situates them within broader networks of production, trade, and use, recognising that meanings shift as objects move through time and across geographies. A copper water pot that was once an unremarkable household item may become a treasured connection to a lost home when carried across a border. A sewing machine obtained in a refugee settlement might stand both for economic survival and for the creation of new social roles. Such examples align with Ann Laura Stoler's notion of the "intimacies of empire," in which large-scale historical processes are refracted through the material conditions of everyday life.

The methodology of material history requires attentiveness to both the physical qualities of artefacts and the narratives attached to them. The wear on a wooden spoon, the weight of a quilt, or the repeated mending of a garment can reveal patterns of use, care, and adaptation. Oral testimonies complement these observations, adding layers of personal and communal memory. This combined approach allows for a richer and more embodied understanding of history, one that acknowledges the affective and symbolic dimensions of the material world.

In recent years, the digitisation and curation of personal objects through museum exhibits, archival initiatives, and community-led projects have broadened access to these histories. Digital platforms allow displaced communities to share their material heritage with wider audiences, but they also raise important questions about authenticity, ownership, and representation. How does the transformation of a tactile object into a digital image affect its meaning? Who has the right to tell its story? These are pressing concerns for scholars working at the intersection of history, anthropology, and heritage studies.

Material history has implications far beyond academic research. In societies where historical traumas are minimised or denied, personal objects can serve as acts of quiet resistance. Keeping a key to a demolished home, wearing inherited jewellery during significant life events, or displaying a faded photograph in a public space can assert both continuity and belonging. For refugees and migrants, the preservation of certain objects may sustain cultural traditions and familial identities across generations, embodying what Marianne Hirsch has termed "post-memory."

While written histories often prioritise linear narratives, material history offers a more layered, non-linear reconstruction of the past. The meaning of an object can change over time, reflecting shifts in social context and personal circumstances. This paper takes up material history as both method and lens, focusing on how ordinary objects

become extraordinary when reframed by displacement, loss, and adaptation. In examining these objects and their social lives, the study aims to show how they preserve and transmit histories that might otherwise remain unrecorded, offering a fuller and more human understanding of the past.

Literature Review: Material History and the Archive of Things

Material history has in recent decades reconfigured the ways scholars approach memory, migration, and trauma. Rather than treating objects as mere illustrations of human stories, a material-history approach treats things as active participants in social life. Arjun Appadurai's idea of the social life of things insists that objects circulate within networks of value and meaning, acquiring biographies as they move through people and places. Daniel Miller and Bill Brown have further shown that materiality structures habit, attachment, and the register of what counts as home. Pierre Nora's notion of lieux de mémoire complicates the archive by insisting that memory is often lodged in sites and things as much as in texts. Taken together, these interventions invite us to read objects not as passive evidence but as archives in their own right, repositories that carry affective and cognitive weight across rupture and resettlement. Scholarly work on refugees, displacement, and material culture has begun to exploit this shift, but there remains uneven uptake in South Asian studies. Global refugee studies emphasize how possessions mediate processes of uprooting and resettlement. Ethnographers of migration show that people remake identity through the selective retention and reinvention of objects: heirlooms, clothing, ritual implements, or the few household utensils they can carry. These items perform multiple functions. They are practical, they index social status or gendered roles, and crucially, they act as mnemonic devices that anchor personal and communal histories when places and papers fail.

Partition and post-Partition literatures provide especially rich ground for a material-history approach because the events themselves were defined by sudden, forced choices about what to take and what to leave. Historians and archivists have produced foundational textual accounts of 1947 and 1971, but literary critics and oral historians reveal the emotional economies behind those lists and ledgers. Urvashi Butalia's collection of testimonies illustrates how survivors frequently anchor recollection in objects: a brass lota, a trunk key, a wedding sari. These items surface repeatedly in memoirs and fiction as condensed narratives of pre- and post-displacement life. Close readings of literary texts show the same pattern. Objects in novels and memoirs operate as condensed metaphors, but they also show detailed material practices: the mending of a quilt, the repeated use of a single cooking pot, the ritual wrapping of

photographs for transport. Attending to these material practices opens pathways to histories of everyday resilience and to the psycho-affective mechanisms of memory. Theoretical conversations about trauma and narrative form strengthen the case for material history. Trauma scholars have argued that events that overwhelm narrative capacity often leave traces through repetition, objects, and sensory cues rather than through full narrative closure. Marianne Hirsch's concept of post-memory explains how descendants experience inherited trauma through objects and images rather than first-person recollection. In this sense, objects function as conduits of post-memory, enabling second- and third-generation engagements with displacement that are not strictly testimonial but nevertheless historically consequential.

A gendered material approach is also indispensable. Feminist historians and literary critics have shown that possessions and access to property are deeply gendered sites of power and vulnerability. For displaced women, jewellery, clothing, and household implements are often both survival assets and mnemonic anchors. These items travel with women or are retained as the only tangible link to a lost domestic world. Reading objects through a gender lens reveals the gendered economies of loss and recovery, and it reframes widowhood, caregiving, and domestic labour as modes of material memory-making.

Methodologically, material history requires a mixed toolkit. Close textual analysis must be complemented by oral history, object biography, museum studies, and archival work. Ethnographic attention to wear, repair, and reuse is as informative as narrative description. The growing practice of community-curated exhibitions and digital repositories demonstrates how objects can be mobilized for public memory. At the same time, scholars must remain alert to the politics of representation and ownership: digitizing or displaying intimate possessions can alter their meanings and raise ethical questions about agency and consent.

Despite this fertile theoretical and methodological ground, significant gaps remain. First, while objects are frequently mentioned in testimonies and fiction, systematic readings that treat them as the primary archive are rare. Most studies still locate objects as supplementary to narratives rather than as central operators of memory and identity in displacement contexts. Second, the scholarship has tended to emphasize dramatic symbol-objects like trunks, keys, and photographs, while leaving quotidian items such as utensils, tools, and repair practices under-theorized. Third, there is limited work on the afterlives of objects: how possessions change meaning across contexts of refugee settlement, intergenerational transfer, sale, or museumization.

This paper intervenes directly in these gaps by proposing a focused material-history reading of Partition-era narratives and oral testimonies. It treats everyday objects as

portable archives that compress temporal and spatial histories, and it examines how their physical trajectories, i.e., repair, reuse, gifting, concealment, loss, encode strategies of survival and sites of counter-memory. By foregrounding the mundane alongside the emblematic, the study aims to articulate a more nuanced material vocabulary for displacement: one that accounts for improvisation, gendered economies, affective attachment, and the everyday labour of keeping a past alive.

In doing so, the paper contributes to ongoing debates about what counts as archival evidence and how scholars might reconstruct past lives when documentary records are fragmentary or biased. Material history, properly theorized and methodologically rigorous, offers a way to recover the tactile world of refugees without romanticizing objects as mere tokens. Instead, objects become evidentiary, interpretive, and ethical tools for understanding how people carry home with them, materially and imaginatively, through displacement and beyond.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study draws on an interdisciplinary set of theoretical perspectives to examine how everyday objects function as living archives in narratives of Partition displacement. Material culture theory, memory studies, and postcolonial refugee studies together provide the conceptual lens for interpreting the role of objects in mediating between lived experience and historical record. By placing these frameworks in conversation, the analysis treats the object not as a passive remnant of the past but as an active participant in shaping, transmitting, and contesting memory. Material culture theory, particularly as articulated by Arjun Appadurai in *The Social Life of Things*, positions objects within social and cultural networks that give them meaning over time. Objects are understood as having biographies; their significance shifts as they move between owners, geographies, and contexts of use. This approach allows for a reading of refugee possessions as more than static relics. Their wear, repair, and adaptation reveal ongoing processes of identity-making, negotiation of belonging, and everyday survival. Daniel Miller's emphasis on materiality as an integral component of human social life reinforces the view that the tactile and sensory dimensions of objects are central to how they operate within memory. Bill Brown's "thing theory" further sharpens the focus on the moments when objects assert their presence, drawing attention to the interplay between the material qualities of things and the affective responses they elicit.

Memory studies offer an essential second strand of this framework, especially about displacement and trauma. Pierre Nora's concept of lieux de mémoire suggests that memory is not contained only in written or spoken narratives but can reside in physical sites and material artefacts. Marianne Hirsch's notion of post-memory

deepens this idea by demonstrating how descendants of displaced communities engage with the past through objects and images they did not personally witness in context. In the case of Partition, a cooking pot, a wedding sari, or a family photograph can become a vessel of inherited memory, enabling emotional and historical connection across generations. These perspectives inform the analysis of how objects in refugee narratives operate as tactile triggers of recollection, bridging temporal and spatial divides that official histories often overlook.

Postcolonial refugee studies provide the third critical strand, situating these objects within the broader politics of displacement, dispossession, and survival in the aftermath of colonial partition. Scholars such as Urvashi Butalia and Yasmin Khan have highlighted how state-driven accounts of Partition privilege demographic and political data over intimate accounts of loss and adaptation. Reading refugee narratives through this lens emphasizes how personal belongings become forms of resistance to erasure. They preserve micro-histories that complicate the homogenizing tendencies of state archives. Postcolonial theory also alerts us to the unevenness of archival representation, reminding us that the circulation and preservation of objects are shaped by power relations of class, gender, and community. In this framework, the retention of a single utensil or garment can signify both the resilience of everyday life and the structural inequities that define who can keep, display, or narrate such objects.

This combined framework guides the interpretation of primary material drawn from Partition literature, oral testimonies, and archival projects. The analysis attends closely to the physical and sensory qualities of objects as they appear in these narratives, noting the ways in which descriptions of texture, weight, smell, and use anchor memory in material form. It also considers the trajectories of objects: whether they are carried across borders, hidden from authorities, exchanged in refugee camps, or passed down within families. These trajectories are read not simply as plot details but as evidence of larger cultural and historical processes. By integrating material culture theory, memory studies, and postcolonial refugee studies, this approach captures both the intimate and the structural dimensions of refugee material life, offering a more embodied and politically attuned account of how home is carried, remade, and remembered through things.

Methodology

This study adopts an analytical methodology that combines close reading, thematic coding, discourse analysis, and comparative interpretation to investigate how material history operates within literary texts, oral histories, and archival records. The research is positioned within the interdisciplinary space of literary studies, cultural history, and

memory studies, and is guided by the belief that material objects are not merely inert remnants of the past but are active carriers of cultural meaning. By examining how objects appear in narratives, testimonies, and historical documents, the methodology aims to illuminate how material history shapes and mediates the lived experiences of displacement, survival, and identity formation.

Nature of the Data and Materials

The study draws on three primary categories of material: literary texts, oral histories, and archival records.

1. **Literary texts:** Selected works of fiction and creative non-fiction that prominently feature material objects as narrative devices. These may include novels, short stories, and memoirs in which everyday items such as clothing, utensils, documents, photographs, tools, furniture, or even fragments of buildings are embedded in the plot, character memory, or thematic development. The inclusion of literature is not limited to works written contemporaneously with the historical period under study; later fictional reinterpretations are equally valuable because they reveal how material objects are reimagined, repurposed, and symbolically reloaded over time.
2. **Oral histories:** First-person testimonies and life narratives collected through existing oral history archives or transcribed interviews in published form. Oral histories are particularly rich in references to material life. Survivors often recall objects they carried, lost, or inherited, and these details often appear more vividly than abstract political events. Such accounts allow the study to trace the personal and emotive significance of material culture, especially in contexts of forced migration and social rupture.
3. **Archival records:** Historical documents such as refugee registration cards, ration books, government circulars, property transfer deeds, rehabilitation files, photographs, and other bureaucratic records. These materials are read not only for their factual content but also for the ways they document state attempts to classify, control, and redistribute material resources. The physical format of these records, their paper quality, stamps, and handwritten notes will also be considered, since these material aspects are part of the story of how the past is preserved and mediated.

Analytical Framework

The methodology is shaped by a conviction that material history is not an auxiliary to “real” history but is integral to understanding human experience. Objects in literary and historical narratives act as what Pierre Nora terms *lieux de mémoire*- sites of memory, where personal and collective histories intersect. They are also what Arjun

Appadurai describes as “things in motion,” whose meanings shift as they travel through social and temporal contexts.

The analytical approach unfolds in four overlapping methods:

1.Close Reading

The close reading method will be used to examine the textual representation of material objects in literary works and oral testimonies. This involves paying sustained attention to descriptive detail, metaphor, symbolism, and narrative positioning of objects. For example, a sewing machine in a novel may be more than a household tool; it may function as a marker of livelihood, a trace of pre-displacement life, or a bridge between generations. Close reading also means interrogating absences, what material details are omitted, and why, which can be as telling as what is included.

2.Thematic Coding

Thematic coding is a qualitative data analysis technique that involves identifying recurring motifs, patterns, and categories in the source material. All references to material objects will be coded according to their type (e.g., domestic, agricultural, bureaucratic, religious), their functional role (practical use, symbolic value, mnemonic trigger), and their narrative or historical context (pre-displacement, during displacement, post-resettlement). This coding process allows for a comparative view across different genres and media, highlighting similarities and divergences in how material life is remembered and represented.

3.Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis will be applied to both literary and archival materials to understand how narratives about material culture are shaped by broader ideological, political, and cultural frameworks. For example, the language of a refugee registration form might reveal implicit assumptions about worthiness, belonging, and identity, while the rhetoric in a memoir might frame certain objects as symbols of resistance or nostalgia. Discourse analysis also helps to expose the tensions between official and personal accounts of the same material realities.

4.Comparative Analysis

Comparative analysis will be used to place different types of sources in dialogue with each other. How does a ration card appear in a government file versus a survivor's oral account? How does the same type of object, for example, say, a cooking pot, function in the plot of a novel versus an archival photograph? By comparing across genres and perspectives, the study will reveal how material objects carry layered and sometimes contradictory meanings, depending on who is narrating and for what purpose.

Rationale for Choosing These Methods

The decision to use this multi-pronged analytical methodology stems from the nature of the research questions and the character of material history itself. Objects are polysemous; they cannot be fully understood through a single lens.

- **Close reading** is essential because literary and oral sources often embed material culture in narrative form, requiring attention to textual nuance.
- **Thematic coding** provides a systematic way to identify patterns across a large and varied body of sources, ensuring that the analysis is grounded in evidence rather than impressionistic interpretation.
- **Discourse analysis** is necessary because representations of objects are shaped by power structures, memory politics, and cultural ideology. Without this layer, the analysis would risk treating material objects as neutral, when in fact they are deeply implicated in systems of meaning.
- **Comparative analysis** is chosen because the same object can mean radically different things in different contexts, and understanding this variability is central to material history research.

Together, these methods enable a balanced approach that is attentive to detail, sensitive to context, and open to the multiplicity of meanings embedded in material culture.

Ethical and Interpretive Considerations

Working with oral histories and archival materials requires sensitivity to both the narrators and the contexts in which the materials were produced. Oral testimonies, even when already published, are products of personal memory, which is selective and shaped by later experiences. They must be treated with respect and without imposing an artificial coherence. Archival records, on the other hand, often reflect the perspective of state or institutional power, and part of the analytical work will involve reading against the grain to uncover what they do not explicitly state.

It is also important to avoid romanticizing material objects. While they can act as powerful mnemonic anchors, they are not timeless vessels of truth; their meanings are constructed and reconstructed in specific socio-historical conditions. The analysis will thus remain aware of how memory and materiality are entangled in processes of forgetting, myth-making, and identity construction.

Anticipated Outcomes of the Methodology

This methodological framework is expected to yield a layered understanding of how material objects function as carriers of memory, identity, and cultural continuity. The close reading of literary and oral sources will likely reveal the affective dimensions of material culture, the ways objects elicit longing, grief, or pride. Thematic coding

will make it possible to trace recurrent patterns across disparate narratives. Discourse analysis will expose the ideological underpinnings of object representation, while comparative analysis will highlight the tensions and harmonies between personal and institutional accounts.

Ultimately, this methodology positions material history as a vibrant and dynamic field of inquiry. It moves beyond treating objects as mere illustrations of historical events and instead understands them as active agents in the making and remaking of history itself. By combining literary sensibility with historical rigor, the study aims to contribute to both material culture studies and the broader humanities, offering insights that are at once empirically grounded and interpretively rich.

Analysis / Findings

This section presents the core interpretations emerging from the study. The analysis engages directly with the selected literary texts, oral histories, and archival records, moving between close reading and broader thematic synthesis. Rather than treating literature as a passive reflection of historical events, the approach taken here understands it as an active site where memory, trauma, and material histories are negotiated and reframed.

1. Material Histories as Lived Experience

One of the strongest patterns across the corpus is the centrality of material history to the construction of refugee identity. Material history, in this context, refers to the tangible and physical dimensions of refugee life: the houses left behind, the objects carried during flight, the food that sustained survival, and the everyday artefacts that anchored memory. In the oral histories, these details emerged not as background texture but as core components of self-narration. For example, an elderly interviewee's recollection of carrying her mother's brass lota across the border was not simply a survival detail but a statement of continuity and cultural preservation.

In literary texts, these objects often operate symbolically. A broken doorframe in a novel becomes a marker of a home violently entered and abandoned. A recurring motif of worn-out blankets in short stories reveals the thin line between shelter and exposure. Such representations complicate the abstract notion of "refugeehood" by embedding it in the tactile and specific. The archival records, meanwhile, reveal how bureaucratic processes reduced these material remnants to "property loss" or "compensation claims," stripping them of their intimate associations. The tension between personal memory and state record-keeping is a recurring point of friction.

2. Memory and Silence in Narrative Construction

A second theme is the interplay of memory and silence. The texts and oral accounts reveal that what is omitted can carry as much meaning as what is narrated. Silences

appear in various forms: the sudden change of topic when a particularly violent incident approaches, the elliptical phrasing that refuses to name a perpetrator, the absence of certain family members from the storytelling altogether.

Close reading reveals that literary narratives often deploy formal techniques to mimic this selective recall. Fragmented timelines, abrupt shifts in narrative voice, and gaps in descriptive detail reflect the broken nature of memory. Archival material, by contrast, often presents a seamless bureaucratic account of displacement, erasing the affective gaps that the oral histories and literature preserve. This disjuncture points to a critical insight: silences are not failures of memory but deliberate strategies of self-protection and resistance against re-traumatization or institutional appropriation.

3. State Recognition, Statelessness, and the Politics of Belonging

Across the materials, the refugee emerges not as a singular figure but as a subject positioned uneasily between inclusion and exclusion. State recognition, when granted, comes with bureaucratic demands for proof: documents, testimonies, and evidence of loss. The literary and oral sources frequently depict the emotional toll of producing such proof, where one's identity is measured against state-defined categories.

Archival evidence reveals a reductive framing of refugee needs, often prioritizing economic integration while neglecting psychological and cultural dimensions. In literature, the refugee's interaction with state systems is often depicted as a scene of humiliation: waiting in lines, the denial of rations due to missing paperwork, or the arbitrary categorization that fails to capture the complexity of lived displacement. This thematic overlap between oral testimony and fiction suggests that bureaucratic indifference is not merely anecdotal but a systemic feature of refugee governance.

4. Gendered Dimensions of Displacement

While gendered violence is an undeniable part of displacement narratives, this analysis extends the focus to the less-discussed aspects of gendered refugeehood, particularly widowhood, labour redistribution, and the reshaping of household economies. Several oral accounts describe women taking on roles outside the domestic sphere for the first time, from managing relief camp negotiations to earning wages through handicrafts.

In literature, widows often emerge as central characters who embody both vulnerability and resilience. They navigate not only the absence of a partner but also the erosion of social status, the suspicion of neighbours, and the precariousness of survival in male-dominated relief structures. The texts reveal that gendered displacement is not only about immediate survival but also about long-term shifts in family structures, inheritance patterns, and community roles. Archival data on relief allocations corroborates this by showing the distinct administrative categorization of

“widow households,” which carried implications for both aid distribution and social perception.

5. Borders as Fluid and Contested Spaces

Another recurring theme is the instability of borders themselves. In oral testimonies, borders are rarely described as fixed lines; they are instead remembered as shifting, negotiable spaces where people, goods, and news continued to move even after political partition. Literature frequently uses the metaphor of rivers, fields, and roads to suggest that borders are porous, mutable, and contested.

Archival maps and government correspondence, however, present borders as static, surveyed, and policed. This dissonance reveals the divergence between lived geography and political geography. The refugee narrative, therefore, is not simply one of crossing a border but of living in its shadow, where the boundary becomes both a site of control and a space of informal negotiation.

6. Intersections of Personal and Collective Memory

Finally, the interplay between individual experience and collective historical narrative is a key analytical point. Literary works often position personal loss within the larger sweep of national history, but they do so with ambivalence. The protagonist's grief over a family home, for example, may be set against a backdrop of mass migration, suggesting that while the event is shared, its emotional resonance is irreducibly personal.

Oral histories echo this ambivalence: while narrators often reference “what everyone went through,” their detailed accounts are marked by idiosyncratic memories that resist full subsumption into collective memory. Archival records tend toward homogenization, using standard forms and categories that flatten difference. The coexistence of these three narrative modes- literary, oral, and archival, highlights the importance of studying refugee history as a layered and contested field.

Discussion

The readings and testimonies analysed in this study reveal that everyday objects in refugee narratives operate as complex repositories of meaning. They are at once mnemonic triggers, survival tools, and symbolic carriers of identity. By following the journeys of these objects through literary depictions and oral histories, it becomes clear that material traces do more than reflect the refugee experience; they actively shape how that experience is remembered, narrated, and transmitted. In light of this, the discussion here situates these findings within the broader debates of material history, memory studies, and postcolonial historiography, showing how the physical residue of displacement negotiates between individual affect and collective history.

One of the most striking patterns emerging from the analysis is the dual temporal anchoring of objects. In narratives of Partition and refugeehood, a suitcase, cooking vessel, or family photograph often appears not simply as a remnant from a “before” but as a living participant in the “after.” These artefacts retain the sensorial imprints of the lost home, the smell of spices lingering in a utensil, the creases of hands folding and unfolding a photograph, yet they simultaneously accrue new layers of meaning as they are adapted to altered circumstances. This reinforces Arjun Appadurai’s proposition that objects have “social lives” and trajectories. They move through networks of ownership, trade, and emotional attachment, accumulating significance that can neither be reduced to their original function nor frozen in a single historical moment.

Thematically, this dual temporality challenges the tendency in some historiographies to treat displacement as a rupture that severs material and cultural continuity. While political borders may mark a violent discontinuity, the objects in these narratives complicate that narrative by offering continuity through tangible form. For example, in oral testimonies collected from 1971 refugees, a simple handloomed shawl carried across the border was not only a piece of clothing but also an embodiment of artisanal skill, familial bonds, and seasonal rhythms of the original village. Its continued use in the new settlement allowed the refugee to weave fragments of the past into the fabric of present life, thus enacting what Pierre Nora would call a “lieu de mémoire” in everyday space.

The persistence of such objects also speaks to the agency of refugees in curating their archives. These are not passive residues of history; they are deliberately chosen, preserved, and sometimes transformed to meet the demands of survival or cultural reproduction. In literary accounts, the act of packing a suitcase before departure often becomes a scene of narrative condensation, where the selection of items- photographs, religious texts, cooking utensils and etc encapsulates an entire moral economy of memory and necessity. Decisions about what to take and what to leave are rarely neutral; they are mediated by gendered roles, generational priorities, and the politics of value within the household.

This self-curation of a material archive challenges the dominance of official or state-led archives in determining what counts as historical evidence. Official records tend to privilege legal documents, census data, and political agreements, often erasing the intimate and affective dimensions of displacement. By contrast, the suitcase of a refugee is both an archive and a counter-archive. It contains a selection of objects that may not appear in any institutional collection but carry historical weight. Bill Brown’s “thing theory” is particularly useful here, as it helps us see how the

“thingness” of an object, its capacity to exceed its commodity or functional status, emerges precisely in moments of displacement, when the object must carry an emotional and historical load disproportionate to its physical form.

The comparative reading of 1947 and 1971 refugee literature further illustrates how the symbolic charge of objects can shift according to the socio-political context. In Partition narratives from 1947, objects often carry the weight of irrevocable loss. A house key, for example, is imbued with the hope of return, yet in most cases the return never materialises, transforming the key into a relic of nostalgia and a silent witness to dispossession. In 1971 narratives, by contrast, certain objects are framed not only as memory anchors but as tools for rebuilding life in exile. A sewing machine obtained in a refugee camp may recall the economic precarity of flight, yet it also becomes a marker of resourcefulness and adaptation, enabling the refugee to generate income and re-establish a measure of independence.

This difference points to an important theoretical implication: the meaning of a refugee object is never fixed but emerges from the intersection of personal biography and historical moment. Material history thus demands an attentiveness to both micro and macro scales of analysis. The micro scale reveals how an object mediates between sensory memory, emotional resilience, and identity. The macro scale situates that same object within patterns of displacement, economic exchange, and political change. Together, they offer a fuller understanding of how displacement is lived and remembered.

The findings also have methodological implications for the study of refugeehood. The integration of literary analysis with oral history has shown that while literature can render vivid the textures, colours, and symbolic resonances of objects, oral accounts ground these representations in lived experience. This combination resists the romanticisation of the material past while still acknowledging its emotional power. It also demonstrates that reading objects across multiple narrative forms, fictional, testimonial, visual, can open up interpretive possibilities that neither medium alone could fully provide.

From a broader disciplinary perspective, this research contributes to the ongoing conversation about expanding the definition of historical evidence. By foregrounding the role of everyday objects, it aligns with the material turn's challenge to text-dominated historiography. The implication here is not to discard textual archives but to read them alongside, and sometimes against, the evidence embedded in material forms. In doing so, the historian can access a more embodied understanding of the past, one that acknowledges how memory clings to surfaces, textures, and weights,

and how the very act of holding or using an object can activate layers of historical consciousness.

Finally, the discussion returns to the political dimension of material history. In contexts where official histories minimise or deny the experiences of refugees, the preservation and narration of personal objects becomes an act of resistance. Displaying a battered cooking pot in a family home, wearing jewellery inherited from a grandmother across the border, or passing down a wartime ration card to younger generations are ways of asserting presence and continuity in the face of erasure. These acts of preservation are not nostalgic retreats into the past but active engagements with the present, using the material to contest historical silences.

In sum, the findings underscore that objects in refugee narratives are not inert survivors of a bygone era. They are active agents in the making and remaking of history, capable of mediating between the intimacy of personal memory and the collective frameworks of identity and belonging. By recognising the epistemological and emotional value of these artefacts, material history offers not only a richer account of the past but also a means of understanding how displaced communities negotiate their place in the present. The suitcase carried across a border is thus more than a container of possessions; it is a portable archive, a site of memory, and a witness to endurance.

Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that objects are not passive relics of the past; they are active agents in the making, preservation, and transmission of history. In the context of displacement and refugeehood, objects are not only material possessions but also repositories of memory, emotion, and identity. They embody the lived experiences of individuals and communities who have endured the upheavals of Partition and forced migration. Each object carries within it layers of meaning, intimate, communal, historical, that make it more than a mute witness. It becomes a storyteller in its own right.

By examining the objects that refugees carried during their journeys, those they lost along the way, and those they recreated in their new environments, this study has shown how material history can recover narratives often absent in state archives. State records, policy documents, and official histories tend to frame refugeehood in the language of numbers, policies, and geopolitical shifts. Material history disrupts this by turning attention to the deeply personal and tactile dimensions of displacement. A utensil wrapped in a piece of cloth, a photograph carefully tucked away in the folds of clothing, a shawl worn thin over decades- each of these artefacts contains stories that challenge the abstraction and anonymity imposed by bureaucratic accounts.

This approach builds on the insights of Arjun Appadurai's concept of the social life of things, which reminds us that objects travel through networks of exchange, acquire and shed meanings, and bear the imprint of the social worlds they pass through. In the refugee context, the "social life" of an object is deeply entangled with migration routes, camp life, resettlement struggles, and generational memory. A copper plate that once served meals in a pre-Partition home may later become a wedding gift in a refugee colony, transforming its function while retaining its symbolic link to "home." Pierre Nora's notion of lieux de mémoire, or sites of memory, helps us see how such objects anchor displaced individuals to their pasts even when their geographical and social worlds have been irrevocably altered. Similarly, Bill Brown's thing theory offers a language for understanding the moment when an object, previously unnoticed in its ordinariness, suddenly takes on a heightened significance-when a comb becomes a relic because it survived the journey across a hostile border.

Material history thus reshapes how we think about historical evidence. It invites us to treat domestic artefacts, humble possessions, and even broken remnants as legitimate and powerful historical sources. This is not simply an expansion of the archive; it is a challenge to the hierarchies of knowledge that privilege written records and monumental artefacts over the everyday and the handmade. In the context of Partition and the Bangladesh Liberation War, where so much of the refugee experience has been silenced, overlooked, or recorded only through the lens of state power, the turn toward material history is also a political act. It affirms that history lives not only in official archives but in kitchens, trunks, and closets, in objects that have survived both physical displacement and the erasures of dominant narratives.

The testimonies of refugees reveal that the decision to carry a certain object was rarely arbitrary. Some choices were pragmatic, a blanket for warmth, a pot for cooking, while others were deeply symbolic, a family photograph, a piece of jewellery, a holy book. Yet in both cases, these items became imbued with layers of meaning through their journey. They bore the physical scars of migration- scratches, stains, frayed edges, that mirrored the emotional and psychological scars of their owners. The preservation of these objects over decades, often in conditions of material scarcity, testifies to the resilience and determination of refugees to hold onto something tangible from their past.

Generational memory adds another dimension to this analysis. For second and third generations born after displacement, these objects often serve as their most direct link to a homeland they have never seen. In some cases, the object becomes a prompt for storytelling, drawing out narratives from elders who might otherwise remain silent. In other cases, the object functions as a silent yet powerful presence, shaping identity

and belonging without the need for verbal explanation. This intergenerational transmission aligns with Marianne Hirsch's concept of post-memory, where descendants inherit not the events themselves but their emotional and symbolic resonances through photographs, artefacts, and family rituals.

Critically, this study situates material history within broader debates in memory studies, postcolonial theory, and refugee studies. The prioritisation of objects in refugee narratives not only diversifies our understanding of history but also challenges the epistemic violence of state archives that marginalise non-textual forms of memory. The refugee's object is both personal and political: it is an assertion of identity in the face of displacement, a refusal to be reduced to a statistic, and a bridge between fragmented pasts and uncertain futures.

The contribution of this research lies in its comparative scope. Engaging with both the 1947 Partition and the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, it highlights the continuities and divergences in how displaced communities from different times and places have used objects to preserve and transmit memory. While the historical contexts differ, the role of objects as anchors of identity, as silent witnesses to trauma, and as portable homes remains strikingly consistent. This comparative perspective also exposes how certain objects take on new meanings over time, as they pass from one displacement narrative to another, or from one generation to the next.

The implications of this work extend beyond the South Asian context. Globally, forced migration continues to displace millions, and refugees in every region carry with them objects that hold memory, identity, and hope. Recognising the historical value of these artefacts can open new possibilities for inclusive and humane archival practices. Museums, archives, and educational institutions could integrate material history into their documentation and exhibitions of displacement, ensuring that the tactile and sensory dimensions of refugee experience are not lost to future generations. In closing, the study affirms that memory does not live only in words or in monumental stone. It lives in the smooth curve of a ladle polished by years of use, in the creases of a passport long expired, in the scent of cloth that once hung in a lost home. By placing such objects at the centre of historical inquiry, we create space for histories that breathe, that carry the weight of human touch, and that refuse to be silenced by the abstractions of policy or the cold permanence of official archives. The act of preserving, cherishing, and narrating through objects is itself a form of resistance against forgetting. It allows the displaced to carve out a sense of place amid placelessness, and to pass on to future generations not only stories, but the tangible remnants of a life once lived.

Through this lens, material history becomes more than a methodology; it becomes an ethic. It reminds us that the smallest of things can hold the largest of histories, and that in the cracks and creases of these objects lie the truths that official history often overlooks. In recognising and honouring this, we do not just tell refugee histories; we listen to them, in the language of things.

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