

# From Refugee to Business Tycoon: A Theoretical Exploration of Border Theory in *The Sialkot Saga* by Ashwin Sanghi

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## Abstract

This paper examines the theoretical dimensions of border discourse in *The Sialkot Saga* by Ashwin Sanghi, with specific emphasis on the transformation of individuals from refugees into influential business figures. The novel is set against the historical backdrop of the Partition of India. It foregrounds the complex relationship of displacement, migration, identity formation, and economic mobility. The key concepts from border theory and postcolonial studies are closely studied in order to analyze how borders operate beyond their geographical function. The paper argues that in Sanghi's narrative, borders are not merely lines of separation but dynamic, productive spaces that facilitate both trauma and transformation. Through the parallel journeys of the protagonists, the novel illustrates how refugee identities change within the frameworks of capitalist expansion and globalization. The study further engages with Edward Said's reflections on exile and Stuart Hall's concept of identity as a continuous process, to demonstrate that identity in the novel remains fluid and contingent. Ultimately, the paper contends that *The Sialkot Saga* reimagines border experiences as enabling conditions for reinvention, thereby offering a nuanced understanding of hybridity, mobility, and power in contemporary postcolonial literature.

**Keywords:** border, migration, identity, capitalism, memories, hybridity

## Introduction:

The Partition of India in 1947 remains one of the most traumatic events in South Asian history. It produced a massive displacement and redefining identities along newly drawn borders. Literature emerging from this historical event often explores themes of migration, loss, and reconstruction of identity. In this context, *The Sialkot Saga* stands out as a contemporary narrative that revisits Partition through the lens of economic transformation and personal ambition. Border theory, particularly as developed in postcolonial studies, conceptualizes borders as fluid, contested spaces rather than rigid geographical lines. These spaces generate hybrid identities and complex prejudices. Sanghi's novel reflects this theoretical framework. In the chaos of Partition, two boys, originally named Manjit and Daljit, are stripped of their biological identities and forced to cross the physical border into India who eventually become Arvind Bagadia and Arbaaz Sheikh. Their journeys from refugees to business tycoons represent a lifelong compromise with various borders: the socio-economic divide between the "coolie" and the "tycoon," the legal boundary between the underworld and the "respectable" corporate front, and the temporal border between India's ancient legacy and its globalized future. Their paths represent the shifting meanings of borders like geographical, cultural, and economic.

## Border Theory: Conceptual Framework:

Border theory emphasizes the instability and permeability of borders. Homi K. Bhabha introduces the concept of the "Third Space," where cultural meanings are negotiated and hybrid identities emerge (Bhabha 56). Borders are not simply lines dividing nations but they are lived experiences that reshape individuals' sense of belonging. Similarly, Gloria Anzaldúa describes the borderlands as a site of constant transition, where individuals experience multiple identities simultaneously (Anzaldúa 79). Edward Said further emphasizes how colonial histories shape perceptions of identity and belonging, particularly in contexts of displacement (Said 54). In postcolonial contexts, borders often emerge from colonial legacies and political divisions. The Partition of India represents how borders can violently disrupt communities and forces individuals into new socio-political realities. Refugees, in particular, occupy limited spaces where they must regain identity while navigating unfamiliar cultural and economic grounds. In *The Sialkot Saga*, the border between India and Pakistan functions as both a physical rupture and a psychological condition. It produces displacement but also creates opportunities for reinvention. Thus, Sanghi's narrative aligns with the theoretical understanding of borders as spaces of both trauma and transformation.

### **Geopolitical Separation and the Reconstruction of Identity:**

The physical crossing of the border is portrayed as a descent into a “hellish” landscape of “slaughtered bodies tangled together grotesquely”. For the protagonists, the border is a site of erasure. Manjit is “plucked from the muck” of a death train by the Bagadias and renamed Arvind to ensure he is “absorbed into their way of life”. Similarly, Daljit is rescued from a burning truck in Mumbai by Ayub Sheikh and renamed Arbaaz, an “eagle” that survived the fire. From the perspective of Border Theory, these characters inhabit a “third space” of hybridity. They are neither fully their original selves nor entirely the identities imposed upon them. Michel Foucault’s ideas about power and discourse help explain how these invisible borders operate. Foucault argues that power is not centralized but dispersed across various social structures (Foucault 93). This ambiguity is symbolized by the copper *kadas* (wristlets) they carry inscribed as “Manjit” and “Daljit” respectively. They serve as physical tokens of a suppressed past that continuously bleeds into their present. Their success in business is a direct result of their ability to navigate these shifting identities and to climb the ranks of power without the “foolish limitations” of contentment that hindered their adoptive fathers.

### **Partition and the Creation of the Refugee Identity:**

The novel begins with the traumatic events of Partition, where violence and displacement create a profound sense of loss. Refugees are forced to abandon their homes and adapt to unfamiliar environments. This experience aligns with Edward Said’s concept of exile, which he describes as a “condition of terminal loss” that nonetheless produces new perspectives (Said 173). Refugee identity in the novel is marked by liminality a state of being “in-between.” Victor Turner defines liminality as a transitional phase where individuals are no longer what they were but not yet what they will become (Turner 95). Sanghi’s characters embody this condition as they navigate the uncertainties of displacement. However, the novel also emphasizes resilience. The refugee experience becomes a foundation for future growth that reflects the dual nature of borders as both sites of trauma and potential transformation.

### **Migration as a Site of Transformation:**

In *The Sialkot Saga*, the catastrophic migration of the 1947 Partition serves as the primary engine for radical character transformation. The “train arriving in Amritsar leaking blood” signifies a brutal geopolitical rupture that left over fifteen million people homeless, forcing survivors to completely reconstruct their identities in a new land. This process is most visible in the protagonists, Manjit and Daljit, who are plucked from the “muck” of the borderlands and stripped of their biological histories. Their migration allows them to transcend “foolish limitations” and ascend to the Forbes list of richest Indians. It is prove that displacement can function as a site where new, powerful destinies are forged out of historical chaos as Homi Bhabha argues that migration creates hybrid identities that challenge fixed notions of culture (Bhabha 112). Avtar Brah’s concept of “diaspora space” is particularly relevant here. Brah describes it as a site where different histories and identities intersect (Brah 181). In the novel, urban centres like Kolkata and Mumbai function as diaspora spaces where characters negotiate their identities and aspirations.

### **Capitalism and the Reconfiguration of Identity:**

One of the most significant aspects of the novel is its exploration of capitalism as a force that reshapes identity. As India undergoes economic transformation, characters engage with new forms of power and opportunity. David Harvey argues that capitalism involves processes of “creative destruction,” where old structures are dismantled to make way for new ones (Harvey 3). This concept is reflected in the characters’ journeys, as they move from traditional livelihoods to modern business enterprises. Arvind’s rise in the corporate world and Arbaaz’s ventures into both legitimate and illegitimate domains illustrate the fluid boundaries of capitalism. Their success is accompanied by ethical dilemmas that highlight the moral ambiguity of economic advancement. From a border theory perspective, this transformation represents the crossing of economic borders. The characters’ identities evolve as they navigate new systems of power and wealth.

### **Hybridity and Identity Formation:**

In *The Sialkot Saga*, hybridity is the fundamental engine of character development. It begins with geopolitical rupture of the 1947 Partition. Homi K. Bhabha’s definition of hybridity as the creation of new cultural forms through the interaction of different traditions is epitomized by the protagonists, Manjit and Daljit, who are forcibly “plucked from the muck” of the Partition and stripped of their biological histories. This hybridity extends to their moral and economic identities, which are never fixed but constantly in a state of “production,” aligning with Stuart Hall’s perspective that identity is a process. For survival and success, both men adopt flexible moral codes. Arvind operates on the premise that “behind every great fortune there is a crime,” while Arbaaz lives by the underworld motto, “If you do not get caught, you deserve to keep it!” Stuart Hall emphasizes that identity is a “production” that is never complete but always in process (Hall 222). This perspective aligns with Sanghi’s portrayal of characters who continuously redefine themselves in response to changing conditions.

### **Memory and the Persistence of the Past:**

In *The Sialkot Saga*, memory serves as the fundamental link between the trauma of the 1947 Partition and the protagonists’ subsequent ascent to power, illustrating how the past continuously dictates present actions. This aligns with Paul Ricoeur’s assertion that “memory is essential for identity formation” (Ricoeur 84), a concept the novel explores through the “primal wound” of the “train arriving in Amritsar leaking blood”. Although the survivors, Manjit and Daljit, were renamed Arvind and Arbaaz to ensure they were “absorbed into their way of life,” their original identities remained physically anchored through the copper *kadas* they carried. The persistence of the past is reinforced by the narrative’s interwoven structure. It connects modern corporate rivalry to an ancient legacy starting in

250 BCE with Emperor Ashoka and the “Nine Unknowns”. This historical continuity suggests that the characters are not merely individuals but links in a “chain of succession” meant to preserve the Rasayana secret. The memory of their origins is eventually activated by the inscription “Puran da Khoo,” referring to the curative well near Sialkot that serves as the final bridge between their displaced childhoods and their adult lives. This persistence of memory highlights the enduring impact of borders. It suggests that while individuals may cross physical boundaries, the psychological effects of displacement remain.

#### **Ethics and the Ambiguity of Success:**

In *The Sialkot Saga*, success is portrayed as a morally ambiguous achievement. Success is achieved through a series of ethically compromised decisions that reflect the cynical realities of capitalist systems. Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of “liquid modernity” is useful here. Bauman argues that contemporary society is characterized by uncertainty and moral ambiguity (Bauman 10). This “liquid modernity” is most evident in Arvind Bagadia’s professional philosophy. He views contentment as a hindrance and explicitly states that “a businessman with a clear conscience is an oxymoron”. His trajectory is fuelled by the conviction that “behind every great fortune there is a crime,” a belief he validates through elaborate schemes like the “Qurbani Hotels” scam, which was designed such that “someone had to be sacrificed” for his financial gain. Arbaaz Sheikh similarly navigates a world of moral uncertainty, operating under the predatory motto: “If you do not get caught, you deserve to keep it!”. His rise from a dockland coolie to a powerful Member of Parliament illustrates a fluid reconfiguration of identity where the border between criminal enterprise and legitimate “dhanda” is rendered irrelevant.

From a border theory perspective, this ambiguity ensures that identity remains unstable. While both men ascend to the Forbes list of richest Indians, their material success fails to resolve deep-seated internal conflicts or psychological trauma rooted in the Partition.

#### **Conclusion:**

*The Sialkot Saga* offers a keen exploration of border theory through its depiction of migration, identity, and economic transformation., the novel illustrates how borders function as dynamic spaces of negotiation and change by emphasizing the journey from refugee to business tycoon. Drawing on the theories of Homi K. Bhabha, Gloria Anzaldúa, and others, it can be concluded that borders are not merely physical divisions but complex processes that shape human experience. Sanghi’s narrative highlights both the possibilities and limitations of transformation. The novel offers the valuable insights into the nature of identity in a globalized world.

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#### **Conflicts of interest**

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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