

Collateral Lives: Political Borders, Feminist Resistance, And the Cost of Identity in *Sarbjit*

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Abstract:

The Partition of India in 1947 left behind not just physical borders but also psychological scars that continue to haunt individuals and families even decades later. Omung Kumar's *Sarbjit* (2016) serves as a powerful cinematic testament to the lingering consequences of these borders, exploring themes of identity, injustice, and the relentless suffering caused by geopolitical divisions. Set against the backdrop of strained Indo-Pak relations, the film captures the story of Dalbir Kaur, whose relentless fight to free her brother from wrongful imprisonment exemplifies the intersection of personal trauma and systemic failure. Through her struggle, *Sarbjit* reflects the enduring human cost of Partition, where borders become enduring sites of pain, displacement, and fractured identities.

This paper delves into the layered narrative of the film, focusing on how the politics of borders perpetuate cycles of identity crises and injustice. By examining Dalbir's journey, the study highlights the endless trials of individuals ensnared by political hostilities and explores how their lives are reduced to collateral damage in the larger narrative of statecraft. The film not only critiques the dehumanizing aspects of systemic oppression but also underscores the transformative power of female solidarity as Dalbir allies with her family and others to confront overwhelming odds. Her resilience redefines traditional gender roles, presenting a nuanced portrayal of agency and resistance in the face of adversity.

Employing postcolonial feminist and trauma theories, this research positions *Sarbjit* as a key narrative within Partition literature that sheds light on the ongoing repercussions of Partition. It examines the emotional and systemic struggles faced by Dalbir and her family, analyzing how their journey mirrors the collective trauma of a nation divided by borders. By interrogating themes of suffering, resilience, and the shared experiences of women in oppressive systems, this paper illuminates how *Sarbjit* transforms personal tragedy into a broader critique of political injustice and the unending legacy of Partition, situating it as a vital contribution to the discourse on displacement and identity.

Keywords: Partition Trauma, Borders and Identity, Female Solidarity, Systemic Injustice, Postcolonial Feminism, Cinematic Resistance

Introduction

The 1947 Partition of India marked one of the most catastrophic events in South Asian history, an event that not only divided a nation along religious lines but also left deep scars on its people, many of whom continue to grapple with its aftermath. While the physical borders of India and Pakistan were demarcated, the psychological and emotional borders established during and after Partition remain unresolved, with enduring effects that haunt generations to this day. *Sarbjit* (2016), directed by Omung Kumar, brings this haunting legacy to the forefront through the personal story of Sarbjit Singh, a man wrongfully imprisoned

in Pakistan for 23 years. His imprisonment, the result of a tragic case of mistaken identity, becomes emblematic of the lingering trauma and injustice that stemmed from the violence and chaos of Partition, a trauma that transcends national borders and continues to affect the lives of those caught in its wake.

At the heart of Sarbjit's struggle is his sister Dalbir Kaur, whose tireless campaign to free her brother from the clutches of Pakistani authorities underscores the central role of women in confronting the long-term consequences of Partition. Dalbir's personal sacrifice and unyielding determination reflect the broader political and social struggles faced by individuals and families who are torn apart by historical events, with women often taking the lead in efforts to reclaim justice and restore dignity. This paper seeks to explore how Sarbjit reflects the continued relevance of Partition trauma, examining the intersection of politics, identity, and injustice that continues to shape the lives of people even decades after the borders were drawn. Through the lens of Dalbir's resilience, the study will also analyze the theme of female solidarity, particularly the ways in which women, in their roles as caregivers and protectors, navigate adversity and find strength in the face of systemic oppression and political injustice.

The film does more than recount a personal struggle; it also sheds light on the broader sociopolitical impact of Partition, illustrating how the division of a nation created divisions that persist to this day. Through Dalbir's character, the film underscores the transformative power of collective action, where the personal becomes political, and individual struggles intersect with larger questions of justice, identity, and belonging. By focusing on these interconnected themes, this paper aims to highlight how Sarbjit, as a piece of cinematic Partition literature, contributes to the ongoing conversation about the enduring scars of Partition, particularly as they affect women and their fight for justice and recognition.

Literature Review

The existing body of literature on Partition largely emphasizes the immediate physical and communal violence that erupted during the 1947 division, with particular attention given to the sexual violence, abductions, and displacement of women. Scholars have explored how the violence of Partition was gendered, with women's bodies becoming battlegrounds in the postcolonial struggle for power. In these works, Partition is often depicted as an event that severed not only territorial boundaries but also deepened existing societal divisions, leaving women particularly vulnerable to exploitation. However, much of the scholarship tends to focus on the overt forms of violence, neglecting the more subtle, long-term repercussions of Partition, such as the psychological trauma, identity crises, and systemic injustices that persist beyond the immediate violence.

Sarbjit, while primarily a biographical film about an individual's struggle for justice, expands the conversation by highlighting the continued impact of Partition trauma in a contemporary context. The movie centers not only on the wrongful imprisonment of Sarbjit but also on the political complexities surrounding his case, which are rooted in the deep-seated mistrust and animosity between India and Pakistan, remnants of Partition that continue to shape relations between the two nations. Moreover, Dalbir Kaur's role as the protagonist of the narrative challenges traditional gender norms and emphasizes the importance of women's agency in the face of adversity, aligning her struggle with broader themes of female resistance that are central to Partition literature.

In a similar vein, feminist scholars have long discussed the role of women in the aftermath of Partition, often focusing on how they were doubly victimized—by the violence of the event and by the structural inequalities that followed. Works like Protiva Basu's *The Marooned* and Manik Bandyopadhyay's *The Final Solution* explore these dimensions of female victimhood, focusing on how women were

commodified through systems of exploitation such as the flesh trade and fraudulent rehabilitation schemes. These works also emphasize the psychological toll of displacement, shedding light on the ways in which women's identities were fractured and reconstructed in response to the violence and betrayal they experienced.

This research, while building on these existing studies, expands the conversation by integrating postcolonial feminist theory and trauma theory, offering a nuanced understanding of the ways in which Partition continues to haunt the people involved. By analyzing Dalbir's role in *Sarbjit*, the paper will demonstrate how women's struggles during Partition were not only defined by physical suffering but also by their efforts to navigate complex socio-political terrains, where personal pain intersected with broader political struggles for justice and identity. Additionally, this study will explore the concept of female solidarity as a transformative force, emphasizing the ways in which collective action and mutual support enable women to challenge the systemic forces that seek to silence their voices. Through these lenses, *Sarbjit* becomes an important cinematic extension of Partition literature, contributing to a deeper understanding of the enduring effects of Partition and the role of women in the ongoing fight for justice.

Methodology

This study employs a multidisciplinary approach that combines cinematic analysis, postcolonial feminist theory, and trauma theory to examine the portrayal of justice, identity, and political conflict in *Sarbjit* (2016). The research uses a close reading of the film's narrative, focusing on the character of Dalbir Kaur, and her role in challenging the enduring trauma of Partition through her tireless pursuit of justice for her brother, Sarbjit Singh. Postcolonial feminist theory is employed to explore the socio-political dynamics surrounding the representation of women in *Sarbjit*, particularly the ways in which Dalbir's character embodies the themes of resistance, resilience, and female solidarity in the face of systemic oppression and political injustice.

Additionally, trauma theory is applied to analyze the psychological impact of Partition and its ongoing legacy in shaping the political realities between India and Pakistan, as reflected in *Sarbjit*'s wrongful imprisonment. The research looks at how the film addresses the enduring trauma caused by the violent division of the subcontinent, with a particular focus on the way individual suffering intersects with broader national and historical narratives.

The study also incorporates secondary literature on Partition history, India-Pakistan relations, and postcolonial narratives to provide a socio-political context for the analysis. Historical research on the Partition's lasting impact, as well as critical reviews of the film, will enhance the understanding of how *Sarbjit* contributes to ongoing discourses about justice, gender, and the psychological aftermath of Partition. This methodology allows for an in-depth exploration of the intersections between personal, political, and historical trauma, offering a nuanced analysis of the film's contribution to the larger conversation on Partition's legacy.

Crossing Boundaries, Defying Injustice, Female Solidarity in *Sarbjit*

Sarbjit presents a powerful portrayal of how borders, both physical and political, inflict profound suffering on ordinary lives. Based on the true story of Sarbjit Singh, an Indian farmer who accidentally crosses into Pakistan, the film highlights the human cost of geopolitical divides. *Sarbjit*'s unintentional trespass turns into a tragic ordeal, demonstrating how militarized borders dehumanize individuals caught in their wake. The film traces the evolution of the India-Pakistan border from simple markers to a highly controlled and

militarized zone, symbolizing the deepening mistrust between nations. The border transforms into a "censoring membrane," selectively allowing movement, reinforcing division, and amplifying human suffering. Dalbir's repeated attempts to visit her brother underscore the emotional toll of such borders. Even when granted a brief reunion, the fleeting nature of their meeting reveals the rigid and unforgiving nature of these geopolitical barriers.

Dalbir's poignant line captures the tragic irony of arbitrary borders.

"Pata hai, jahan se tu paar chala gaya, wahan ab border lag gaya hai. Kash ye 3 saal pehle ho jata,"

It highlights how the sudden imposition of the border left Sarbjit vulnerable to political misunderstandings. This statement underscores the randomness of fate and the anguish of "what-ifs," pointing to the painful consequences of border decisions that often disregard individual lives.

Sarbjit's time in prison is marked by despair, homesickness, and a relentless fight against an unjust system. His wrongful conviction and eventual death reflect how borders strip individuals of agency, turning them into collateral damage in national conflicts. The film critiques how borders are not just geographical but ideological constructs, perpetuating cycles of punishment and exclusion.

Borders are not just physical spaces but psychological ones, shaping identities, cultures, and lives. In her study *Between Nations: A Study On The Representations Of India-Pakistan Border In The Select Bollywood Movie*, Fathima M.N. discusses Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of borderlands as "vague and ambiguous regions," marked by constant transition. These regions trap individuals like Sarbjit in liminal spaces of alienation. Similarly, Navtej Purewal explores how borderlands challenge dominant political narratives, revealing a complex interplay of identity, history, and resistance.

Sarbjit critiques these rigid constructs, illustrating how borders perpetuate cycles of loss while offering moments of human connection and resistance. Dalbir's activism, fueled by personal grief, aligns with feminist theories of resilience and solidarity, showing how the suffering of one can spark a collective movement for justice. At the same time, moments of compassion from Pakistani citizens demonstrate the potential for connections that transcend artificial divides.

Gramsci's idea of hegemony explains how the sanctity of borders is reinforced, positioning border transgressions as sacrilege against the state. Sarbjit challenges this ideological dominance, illustrating how borders monopolize history, truth, and justice while perpetuating exclusion and punishment. Yet, the film also portrays borders as spaces for cultural interaction, where the rigid binaries of "self" and "other" can be reimagined.

By examining Sarbjit's suffering, Sarbjit lays bare the human cost of geopolitical divisions, transforming borders from mere markers of separation into symbols of resilience, cultural dynamism, and the ongoing struggle for connection and justice. The film reminds us of the urgency of bridging divides and healing the wounds inflicted by geopolitical conflict.

Sarbjit is a poignant film that delves into the devastating impact of political boundaries on individual lives, exploring themes of politics, identity, and injustice through the real-life experience of Sarbjit Singh. Sarbjit, an Indian farmer, was mistakenly imprisoned in Pakistan after inadvertently crossing the border. Wrongly convicted of espionage and terrorism, his story underscores the tragic consequences of geopolitical conflicts, particularly between India and Pakistan, and how these tensions can obliterate individual lives. His wrongful imprisonment exemplifies the dangers of political decisions made without regard for the humanity of those caught in the crossfire.

The political context in *Sarbjit* is crucial for understanding the magnitude of the injustice Sarbjit faced. His life was upended by national security concerns, with both India and Pakistan entrenched in a cycle of

distrust. Sarbjit's wrongful conviction as a spy, despite his insistence on innocence, reflects the political manipulation of justice in the face of nationalism. His story becomes a tragic example of how political institutions and state narratives about terrorism and espionage can reduce individuals to mere pawns in the larger political struggle between nations. This manipulation of justice to serve national security interests is central to the film, highlighting the dangers of political power when human rights are sidelined. "*Khoon to na gerua hai na hara, hum to khoon ki laali se jude hain*" ("Blood is neither red nor green; we are bound by the redness of blood"),

portrays blood as a metaphor for resilience, symbolizing the shared bond of pain that transcends national borders. This "redness of blood" unites individuals in their struggles, especially in the context of Sarbjit's wrongful imprisonment, connecting personal loss to political conflict and underscoring the deep connection between identity, sacrifice, and shared suffering.

Sarbjit's case also raises critical questions about identity, particularly the vulnerability and malleability of personal identity when subjected to national and political agendas. As a simple farmer, Sarbjit's identity was subsumed by political narratives that framed him as a terrorist and spy. This shift from individual to symbol of the enemy reveals the profound injustice in how borders and national interests strip people of their humanity. The film highlights how borders—both literal and ideological—can erase the complex and nuanced identities of individuals, reducing them to stereotypes that serve political discourse. Sarbjit's identity as a family man, a farmer, and an innocent victim of geopolitical conflict is overshadowed by the political identities imposed on him by the state.

Injustice is the core of *Sarbjit*, as it not only highlights the wrongful imprisonment of an innocent man but also underscores systemic failures in both countries' judicial systems. Despite his desperate pleas for justice and the efforts of his family to seek his release, Sarbjit remains imprisoned for years, subjected to inhumane treatment and ultimately dying under mysterious circumstances in prison. The film poignantly portrays the emotional anguish of his family, particularly his sister Dalbir Kaur, who relentlessly campaigns for his release. The inability of both India and Pakistan to rectify the miscarriage of justice represents the powerlessness of individuals against the overwhelming forces of politics and nationalism. The sarcastic remark by Muslim lawyer Awais Shekh critiques a legal system driven more by national animosity than justice-

"Kya farq padta hai ki tumhara muakkil gunhegar hai ya begunah, oo ji unhe Hindustani hone ki saza to milni chahiye na ji?"

His words reveal how political bias and prejudice influence legal outcomes, with Sarbjit's Indian identity being the sole justification for his suffering, regardless of his innocence. This sarcasm underscores the absurdity of a system that prioritizes nationalism over fairness, where an individual's innocence becomes irrelevant in the pursuit of ideological goals.

In *Birth of Nations: Representing the Partition of India in Bapsi Sidhwa's Cracking India* by Pin-chia Feng, the themes of politics, identity, and injustice appear similarly in *Midnight's Children* and *Cracking India*, though in different contexts. In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie explores the impact of the Partition of India, where national borders and identities were violently imposed, causing immense human suffering. The arbitrary division of the subcontinent and the confusion of identity it engendered are reflected in the lives of the novel's characters, especially through the swapped identities of Saleem and Shiva, which symbolize the disruption of both personal and national identities. In *Cracking India*, Bapsi Sidhwa similarly delves into the traumatic consequences of Partition, particularly focusing on the emotional toll it took on women and children. Sidhwa's narrative, told from the perspective of a young girl, underscores

how national divisions shape individual destinies, often leading to devastating injustices. Both works, like *Sarbjit*, expose the tragic impact of political borders on personal identity and the injustices that arise when human lives are subjected to the manipulations of state power.

Sarbjit serves as a powerful reminder of the human cost of political conflicts and the devastating effect of borders on individual lives. Through the lens of Sarbjit's wrongful imprisonment, the film critiques how national security concerns and political power can lead to profound personal suffering, making it a poignant commentary on the intersections of politics, identity, and injustice.

In *Sarbjit*, Dalbir Kaur's relentless fight to free her brother from unjust imprisonment offers a poignant exploration of how women navigate adversity through resilience and collective solidarity. Her struggle, though deeply personal, transcends individual grief to expose systemic failures, igniting a movement that rallies others to her cause. Dalbir's alliances with her family, particularly Sarbjit's wife and daughters, highlight the empowering role of empathy, shared action, and a collective sense of responsibility. This dynamic aligns closely with bell hooks' concept of "communion," where shared pain serves as a foundation for collective healing and empowerment among women.

Dalbir's efforts extend beyond familial bonds, showcasing the broader implications of female solidarity. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's emphasis on global female solidarity resonates strongly with Dalbir's advocacy. Her work, initially focused on Sarbjit, evolves into a larger fight for human rights, reflecting the intersection of personal loss and political activism. Mohanty's observation—

"Superficially similar situations...have radically different, historically specific explanations, and cannot be treated as identical"—

highlights how Dalbir's struggle is shaped by her unique position as a sister caught between personal grief and systemic injustice. This intersection creates a compelling narrative of resilience that inspires women across geographical and ideological boundaries.

Dalbir's journey is fraught with systemic and emotional challenges. Her repeated encounters with bureaucratic indifference and societal apathy underscore her unwavering determination. She tirelessly travels across states, facing rejection after rejection, to ensure Sarbjit's name is recognized and his plight acknowledged. Her interactions with ministers and officials, coupled with the personal sacrifices she makes along the way, illustrate the immense emotional labor involved in her fight. Despite these obstacles, Dalbir's efforts culminate in a poignant moment when Sarbjit proclaims,

"Tu mainu Sarbjit bana tha, mera naam Sarbjit puri duniya mein ghum raha hai... Azad."

This statement encapsulates her triumph in turning his story into a global symbol of resistance and justice, even as she endures immense personal losses.

The film also delves into how women's shared experiences of suffering transform into collective strength. Initially depicted as passive, Sarbjit's wife and daughters gradually become pillars of moral and emotional support for Dalbir. This evolving dynamic reflects feminist scholar Judith Butler's concept of performativity, where Dalbir redefines her identity within a patriarchal society. Transforming from a grieving sister to a resolute activist, she challenges societal expectations and demonstrates how collective female strength can resist oppression. Through her actions, Dalbir reclaims agency, inspiring others to confront systemic barriers with courage and determination.

This theme of female solidarity finds resonance in other narratives of resilience, such as Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*. As analyzed by Jessica Rawson and Hira Bose in *Resilience of Woman in Amrita Pritam's Pinjar*, the protagonist Puro forms bonds with other women, such as Lajo, to navigate the violence and displacement of Partition. Even in the face of betrayal and societal violence, these women find ways to

protect and support one another, challenging the patriarchal systems that seek to control them. Similarly, Dalbir's actions resist victimhood. Her personal tragedy becomes a vehicle for broader justice, demonstrating the transformative power of female solidarity. Both narratives illustrate how women forge bonds that transcend individual suffering, using their collective strength to challenge and resist systemic oppression.

Dalbir's advocacy also aligns with Mohanty's critique of colonial and patriarchal narratives that marginalize women. By turning her grief into action, Dalbir not only amplifies Sarbjit's plight but also draws attention to the larger human costs of strained political relations. Her activism serves as a reminder of the importance of community and shared responsibility, especially in the face of injustice.

Moreover, Dalbir's transformation mirrors the resistance and resilience found in feminist literature. Her ability to navigate systemic hurdles while forging connections with other women reflects the feminist ideals of agency and empowerment. Dalbir's story is not just about seeking justice for her brother; it is a testament to how women redefine their roles in oppressive systems, turning personal tragedies into powerful tools for change.

Dalbir Kaur's journey in *Sarbjit* exemplifies how resilience, emotional labor, and collective female strength can challenge systemic injustices. Her relentless pursuit of justice amplifies not only her brother's plight but also the sacrifices required to combat deeply rooted oppression. Through her struggle, Dalbir demonstrates that female solidarity is transformative, turning shared pain into collective power. *Sarbjit* ultimately serves as a powerful narrative of how women, united in the face of adversity, can reshape societal structures and inspire meaningful change.

Conclusion

Sarbjit offers a poignant reflection on the human cost of political borders, identity struggles, and the power of female solidarity in the face of adversity. Through Sarbjit Singh's tragic story, the film reveals the dehumanizing effects of arbitrary geopolitical divides, illustrating how borders serve as barriers not only to physical movement but also to human connection and justice. The emotional and psychological toll on individuals caught between these divides underscores the profound injustice embedded in national conflicts. Dalbir Kaur's tireless activism, fueled by personal grief, transforms into a powerful narrative of female resilience and solidarity. Her journey highlights the transformative power of collective action in challenging systemic oppression, making *Sarbjit* not only a story of one man's suffering but also a universal call for empathy, justice, and the reclamation of agency. Through her unwavering fight, Dalbir redefines both her role and identity, turning pain into empowerment and reminding us that the struggle for justice is both personal and collective, transcending borders and nations.

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