

Post-Colonial Identity and Cultural Dislocation in *The Foreigner* : A Study of Hybridity, Cultural Mimicry and In-betweenness through Homi Bhabha's Theory

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Abstract. Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner* (1968) stands as a seminal narrative interrogating the fractured psychology of post-colonial subjectivity. The protagonist, Sindi Oberoi, embodies the condition of cultural in-betweenness that Homi K. Bhabha conceptualizes as hybridity and liminality within a post-colonial framework. Rooted in colonial historical legacies yet exposed to Western modernity, Sindi navigates existential emptiness, ethical fragmentation, and emotional detachment. This article examines Sindi's identity crisis not merely as existential alienation—as previous critics have often emphasized—but as a post-colonial condition characterized by cultural mimicry, displacement, and an oscillation between Western individualism and Indian cultural consciousness. Through close reading and theoretical grounding in Bhabha's concepts of mimicry, hybridity, and the “third space,” this study interrogates how *The Foreigner* reveals the psychological and cultural consequences of colonial encounter and post-colonial modernity. It argues that Sindi's alienation emerges from a fractured self, shaped by colonial cultural aspirations yet haunted by ancestral belonging. Thus, Joshi's text extends beyond existential philosophy to unravel the subtle violence of cultural dislocation experienced by post-colonial subjects navigating globalized identities.

Keywords : Postcolonial identity; cultural dislocation; hybridity; mimicry; in-betweenness.

The question of identity remains central to postcolonial literature, particularly in societies shaped by colonial history and cultural transition. Postcolonial subjects frequently experience displacement, fragmentation, and uncertainty as they negotiate between inherited cultural traditions and modern global influences. Such tensions often produce a condition of cultural in-betweenness in which identity is neither fixed nor stable but continuously reconstructed through interaction with multiple cultural systems.

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Arun Joshi occupies a distinctive position in Indian English literature for his exploration of psychological conflict, alienation, and the search for meaning. His debut novel, *The Foreigner* (1968), presents the story of Sindi Oberoi, a young man of Indian origin raised outside India who struggles with questions of belonging, emotional attachment, and personal responsibility. Existing criticism frequently interprets the novel through existential philosophy, emphasizing Sindi's isolation and detachment. However, the novel also reflects concerns that align closely with postcolonial discourse, particularly questions of identity formation and cultural dislocation.

Homi K. Bhabha's theoretical concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and the "third space" offer a productive framework for understanding Sindi's experience. According to Bhabha, colonial and postcolonial encounters generate hybrid identities that emerge in spaces of negotiation rather than fixed cultural categories. Such identities exist in an interstitial position where individuals cannot fully identify with either inherited traditions or adopted cultural systems. This state of ambivalence produces both conflict and possibility.

Viewed through this perspective, Sindi's emotional distance, moral uncertainty, and persistent sense of unbelonging can be interpreted as consequences of postcolonial hybridity rather than solely existential despair. His movement between cultural worlds reflects a deeper crisis of selfhood shaped by displacement and fractured cultural inheritance.

This study therefore, re-examines *The Foreigner* through Bhabha's postcolonial theory to investigate how hybridity, mimicry, and cultural negotiation shape Sindi Oberoi's identity. It argues that the novel extends beyond existential concerns and presents a broader critique of cultural dislocation in the postcolonial condition.

Aims and Objectives

This study seeks to examine the relationship between postcolonial identity formation and cultural dislocation in Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner* through the theoretical framework developed by Homi K. Bhabha. The specific objectives of the study are:

- To examine the representation of postcolonial identity crisis in Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner*.

- To analyze Sindi Oberoi's psychological fragmentation through Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and the third space.
- To explore the influence of Western modernity and Indian cultural values on the protagonist's understanding of selfhood.
- To identify the forms of cultural ambivalence and emotional displacement reflected in Sindi's choices and relationships.
- To reinterpret *The Foreigner* beyond existential readings and position it within postcolonial literary discourse.
- To investigate how cultural negotiation contributes to the reconstruction of identity in postcolonial contexts.

Literature Review

Critical engagement with Arun Joshi's fiction has largely focused on themes of alienation, existential anxiety, and the search for meaning. Early scholarship frequently interpreted Joshi's protagonists as individuals confronting emotional isolation and philosophical uncertainty in rapidly changing social environments.

R. K. Dhawan's *The Fictional World of Arun Joshi* provides one of the important critical examinations of Joshi's narrative concerns. Dhawan observes that Joshi's characters often experience inner conflict arising from their inability to establish stable relationships with society and themselves. In *The Foreigner*, this tension appears through Sindi's emotional detachment and persistent uncertainty regarding belonging.

O. P. Bhatnagar's discussion of *The Foreigner* highlights the novel's engagement with East–West encounters and emphasises the cultural and psychological dimensions of Sindi's crisis. Rather than presenting alienation merely as an abstract philosophical condition, Bhatnagar suggests that Sindi's experiences emerge through conflicting value systems and fractured cultural orientation.

More recent interpretations have shifted attention toward identity and displacement. Studies addressing *The Foreigner* increasingly recognize that Sindi's inability to form stable attachments reflects broader concerns of cultural mobility, modernity, and postcolonial uncertainty. Such readings expand earlier existential interpretations by situating the protagonist within larger historical and cultural processes.

At the theoretical level, Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial framework offers a useful perspective for understanding these tensions. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha argues that identities formed in colonial and postcolonial contexts emerge through negotiation and difference rather than fixed cultural origins. His concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and the third space explain how subjects occupy unstable positions between cultures and continuously reconstruct meaning.

Although studies on Arun Joshi have explored alienation and identity, limited attention has been given to applying Bhabha's framework directly to *The Foreigner*. This study addresses that gap by examining Sindi Oberoi's fragmented identity as a postcolonial condition shaped by cultural displacement and negotiation rather than solely existential isolation.

Post-Colonial Hybridity and the Condition of Betweenness

One of the central concerns of postcolonial theory is the instability of identity produced through cultural contact and historical displacement. Homi K. Bhabha explains this condition through the concept of hybridity, arguing that postcolonial subjects do not exist within pure cultural categories but develop identities through negotiation between multiple cultural influences. Such identities emerge within what Bhabha describes as the "third space," an interstitial zone where meanings remain fluid and continuously reconstructed.

This theoretical framework provides an effective lens for understanding the identity crisis experienced by Sindi Oberoi in Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner*. Sindi's life is marked by cultural mobility and emotional disconnection. Although born into Indian heritage, his upbringing outside India creates distance from traditional social and cultural structures. At the same time, his exposure to Western environments does not result in complete assimilation. Consequently, he occupies a liminal position where he cannot fully identify with either cultural world.

Throughout the novel, Sindi repeatedly expresses a sense of rootlessness and uncertainty regarding his place in society. His inability to establish stable emotional relationships reflects not simply individual detachment but a broader condition of cultural fragmentation. He neither embraces collective responsibility associated with Indian cultural traditions nor achieves the confidence and self-definition associated with Western individualism.

Bhabha's concept of hybridity suggests that such identity conflict should not be understood as cultural failure but as evidence of an unstable process of self-formation. Hybrid identity exists in a state of continuous negotiation, producing uncertainty while simultaneously creating possibilities for new forms of belonging. Sindi's movements across locations and relationships symbolise this process of negotiation and reveal the psychological consequences of existing between competing systems of value.

The condition of betweenness also influences Sindi's ethical decisions. His reluctance to commit emotionally and his tendency toward withdrawal demonstrate an attempt to avoid fixed cultural obligations. Yet this avoidance ultimately intensifies his isolation. Rather than achieving freedom, Sindi experiences confusion and emotional emptiness.

Through Sindi's character, Joshi presents postcolonial identity as a condition shaped by displacement, negotiation, and cultural ambiguity. The novel suggests that identity cannot be reduced to inherited origins or external adaptation; instead, it develops through engagement with multiple cultural realities. In this sense, *The Foreigner* becomes not only a narrative of personal crisis but also an exploration of the broader postcolonial experience of living in between worlds.

Cultural Mimicry: The Illusion of Western Freedom

Among Homi K. Bhabha's major contributions to postcolonial theory is the concept of mimicry, which explains how colonial and postcolonial subjects adopt elements of dominant cultures while remaining positioned outside complete acceptance or belonging. Mimicry does not create full transformation; instead, it produces identities that are similar yet incomplete, generating ambivalence and internal conflict.

This concept becomes particularly relevant in understanding Sindi Oberoi's behaviour in *The Foreigner*. Sindi appears to adopt values associated with Western modernity, including individual freedom, emotional independence, and detachment from traditional social expectations. His decisions often reflect an attempt to construct a self that is free from obligation and unaffected by emotional dependence.

However, Sindi's pursuit of freedom gradually reveals itself as unstable. Rather than producing confidence or fulfillment, his emotional

distance leads to isolation and uncertainty. His relationships repeatedly demonstrate his inability to maintain meaningful connections. This pattern suggests that his adoption of Western individualistic values remains incomplete and unresolved.

Bhabha argues that mimicry creates a condition in which the subject becomes “almost the same but not quite.” Sindi’s experience reflects this dynamic. Although he attempts to distance himself from inherited cultural values, he does not achieve complete identification with Western modes of living. His actions indicate outward adaptation but inner instability.

This tension becomes especially visible in his relationship with June. When confronted with emotional expectations and responsibility, Sindi retreats instead of forming deeper attachment. His withdrawal reflects not freedom but discomfort with commitment and uncertainty regarding identity. Emotional independence becomes a protective mechanism rather than a meaningful philosophy of life.

Joshi’s portrayal of Sindi therefore questions the assumption that Western modernity automatically leads to liberation. The novel suggests that when cultural adaptation occurs without emotional and ethical grounding, it may intensify alienation rather than resolve it.

Through the framework of mimicry, *The Foreigner* reveals how postcolonial subjects may experience the illusion of cultural freedom while remaining caught between inherited values and adopted identities. Sindi’s struggle demonstrates that imitation alone cannot provide belonging; identity must emerge through deeper processes of negotiation and self-understanding.

Spiritual Displacement and Loss of Indigenous Anchoring

Beyond cultural negotiation and mimicry, *The Foreigner* also explores the consequences of spiritual and ethical displacement. Sindi Oberoi’s crisis is not limited to questions of nationality or social belonging; it extends to the absence of a stable value system through which he can interpret his experiences and define his purpose. His condition reflects a broader postcolonial anxiety in which cultural mobility produces emotional and moral uncertainty.

Postcolonial theory frequently emphasizes that colonial

modernity disrupted inherited systems of identity and weakened traditional forms of social and cultural continuity. Homi K. Bhabha's understanding of hybrid subjectivity suggests that individuals positioned between cultures often experience uncertainty regarding authority, belonging, and meaning. This uncertainty becomes visible in Sindi's inability to rely on any established ethical framework.

Throughout the novel, Sindi repeatedly demonstrates emotional detachment and resistance toward commitment. However, this detachment cannot be understood simply as personal choice. His uncertainty reflects a deeper absence of cultural anchoring. Having grown up away from stable communal traditions, he struggles to develop lasting values or emotional accountability.

Unlike classical existential protagonists who consciously reject social structures, Sindi appears disconnected from collective systems before fully experiencing them. His sense of freedom gradually reveals itself as instability. Without meaningful cultural grounding, personal autonomy becomes difficult to sustain and often transforms into confusion and withdrawal.

Joshi contrasts this condition with values traditionally associated with Indian cultural consciousness, including interconnectedness, responsibility, continuity, and ethical engagement with others. The novel does not idealize tradition or advocate a return to cultural purity; rather, it suggests that complete separation from meaningful social and ethical frameworks leaves individuals vulnerable to emotional fragmentation.

Sindi's growing awareness of the limitations of detachment marks an important turning point in the narrative. As he confronts guilt, loneliness, and responsibility, he begins to recognise that identity cannot be sustained solely through isolation or individual freedom. This realisation initiates movement toward a more reflective understanding of selfhood.

Through Sindi's spiritual displacement, *The Foreigner* demonstrates that postcolonial identity involves more than movement across geographical spaces. It also involves the search for ethical and emotional grounding in a world where inherited certainties have become unstable. Joshi thereby presents identity as an ongoing process of reconstruction shaped by memory, responsibility and cultural negotiation.

The Third Space: Ethics, Redemption, and Return

While Homi K. Bhabha's theory recognises the tensions and instability produced by hybridity, it also proposes the possibility of transformation through what he terms the "third space." The third space is not a physical location but a conceptual space where identity is continuously negotiated beyond fixed binaries such as East and West, tradition and modernity, or self and other. Within this space, new forms of meaning and subjectivity become possible.

In *The Foreigner*, Sindi Oberoi's journey gradually moves toward such a process of negotiation. Throughout much of the narrative, he attempts to maintain emotional distance and avoid obligations that might restrict his sense of personal freedom. However, this strategy increasingly produces dissatisfaction, guilt, and inner emptiness rather than liberation.

The turning point in Sindi's development emerges through his confrontation with responsibility and the consequences of emotional withdrawal. His experiences force him to reconsider the assumptions that have shaped his identity. Instead of continuing to reject attachment and social engagement, he begins to acknowledge the importance of human connection and ethical accountability.

This transformation can be interpreted through Bhabha's concept of the third space. Sindi does not abandon one culture in favor of another, nor does he return to an idealized version of cultural origins. Rather, he begins to construct an identity that accepts complexity and recognizes that belonging may emerge through negotiation rather than certainty.

The significance of Sindi's return to India lies not in geographical relocation alone but in a shift in consciousness. India becomes a symbolic space of reflection where Sindi reconsiders his understanding of selfhood and responsibility. His movement toward social engagement suggests an effort to reconnect with values that emphasize ethical participation and meaningful relationships.

Importantly, Joshi does not portray redemption as complete resolution. Sindi's transformation remains open-ended and reflective of the broader postcolonial condition in which identity continues to evolve. The novel avoids presenting cultural identity as fixed or pure and instead emphasizes ongoing negotiation.

Through this movement toward responsibility and self-recognition, *The Foreigner* demonstrates that hybridity need not result only in fragmentation. The third space can also become a productive site for rebuilding identity and developing new forms of belonging. Joshi ultimately suggests that personal meaning emerges not through cultural certainty but through ethical engagement and acceptance of complexity.

Sindi as a Post-Colonial Everyman

Although *The Foreigner* centres on the experiences of Sindi Oberoi as an individual character, his identity crisis extends beyond personal struggle and reflects larger postcolonial concerns. Sindi may be understood as a representative figure whose experiences symbolize the condition of individuals negotiating multiple cultural worlds in the aftermath of colonial and global transformations.

Postcolonial literature frequently presents characters who experience uncertainty regarding belonging, identity, and value systems. Such characters exist within spaces shaped by migration, mobility, cultural transition, and inherited historical tensions. Sindi's experiences align with this broader literary tradition because his struggles emerge not only from personal choices but also from conditions of cultural displacement.

Throughout the novel, Sindi attempts to position himself outside conventional social and emotional structures. He values independence, questions inherited norms, and seeks to avoid obligations that appear restrictive. Yet this desire for autonomy repeatedly results in emotional isolation and ethical uncertainty. His inability to commit fully to any cultural identity reveals the limitations of absolute individualism.

At the same time, Sindi cannot be understood as entirely disconnected from Indian cultural consciousness. His later reflections suggest a continuing search for values that extend beyond personal freedom and material modernity. This tension demonstrates the complex position occupied by many postcolonial subjects who neither reject tradition completely nor accept modernity without conflict.

The contrast between competing value systems becomes visible in several dimensions of Sindi's experience:

- Western Modernity — Individual autonomy, personal choice, emotional independence, rational self-definition.

- Indian Cultural Orientation — Social responsibility, interconnectedness, ethical obligation, and continuity of relationships.

Sindi's identity develops through engagement with both perspectives rather than complete acceptance of either. His struggle demonstrates that postcolonial identity cannot be reduced to cultural synthesis or simple coexistence. Instead, it involves continuous negotiation between competing expectations and modes of understanding.

By presenting Sindi in this manner, Joshi transforms him into a broader postcolonial figure whose experiences resonate beyond the specific context of the novel. Sindi becomes a symbolic representation of individuals confronting fragmented identities in increasingly interconnected societies.

Thus, *The Foreigner* portrays identity not as a stable destination but as an evolving process shaped by movement, reflection, and ethical choice. Through Sindi's journey, the novel articulates the continuing challenges of belonging in the postcolonial world.

Conclusion

Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner* offers a significant exploration of identity, alienation, and cultural uncertainty within the postcolonial context. Although the novel has frequently been interpreted through existential perspectives, a reading informed by Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory reveals additional dimensions of meaning related to hybridity, mimicry, and cultural negotiation.

Sindi Oberoi's experiences demonstrate the psychological consequences of inhabiting multiple cultural worlds without complete belonging to any of them. His emotional detachment, uncertainty, and search for meaning emerge not simply from philosophical isolation but from a fragmented process of identity formation shaped by displacement and competing value systems.

Through the concepts of hybridity and mimicry, the novel illustrates how postcolonial subjects often struggle to reconcile inherited cultural traditions with modern forms of selfhood. Sindi's attempt to adopt emotional independence and individual freedom does not provide

stability; instead, it intensifies his sense of isolation and reveals the limitations of identity based solely on imitation or detachment.

At the same time, the novel suggests that identity remains open to reconstruction. Interpreted through Bhabha's concept of the third space, Sindi's movement toward responsibility and ethical engagement reflects the possibility of developing meaning beyond rigid cultural categories. His journey indicates that belonging is not achieved through cultural purity but through negotiation, reflection, and human connection.

Ultimately, *The Foreigner* emerges as more than a narrative of individual alienation. It becomes a broader commentary on the condition of postcolonial subjectivity and the continuing struggle to create meaningful identities in a culturally interconnected world. Joshi's portrayal of Sindi therefore remains relevant to contemporary discussions of identity, displacement, and belonging.

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