International Journal of Humanities Social Science and Management (IJHSSM)
Volume 6, Issue 5, Sep. – Oct., 2026, pp: 246-255 ISSN: 3048-6874
www.ijhssm.org

Brotherhood Beyond Borders: Indian English Literature, India–Afghanistan Cultural Exchanges, Geopolitics, Trade, Conflict, and Diasporic Identity

Mehar Singh Jat
Research Scholar, Department of English
Jai Minesh Adivasi University, Kota, Rajasthan, India

Date of Submission: 06-10-2026 Date of Acceptance: 17-10-2026

Abstract
The relationship between India and Afghanistan constitutes one of South Asia's most enduring yet insufficiently explored cultural geographies. Predating the modern nation-state, Indo-Afghan connections have been fashioned through migration, commerce, literary circulation, political encounter, religious exchange, and shared historical memory. This paper examines these entanglements through Indian English literature and the wider Anglo-Indian literary imagination, situating literary representations of Afghanistan within the conceptual frameworks of postcolonialism, diaspora studies, transnationalism, cultural memory, border studies, and trauma theory. Beginning with Rabindranath Tagore's *Kabuliwala* as an influential Indian literary imagining of the Afghan migrant and extending the discussion to Rudyard Kipling's Anglo-Indian representations of the frontier, the paper considers how literary narratives complicate the geopolitical abstraction of Afghanistan. It further places Indian English literary concerns with migration, Partition, hybridity, displacement, and fractured belonging in dialogue with Indo-Afghan histories of mobility and cultural exchange.
The paper also investigates the historical significance of trade routes, Afghan migration into the Indian subcontinent, linguistic and literary circulation, and India's post-independence diplomatic and developmental engagement with Afghanistan. Particular attention is given to India's reconstruction initiatives, educational cooperation, humanitarian assistance, and contemporary engagement following the Taliban's return to power in 2021. Rather than reducing Afghanistan to conflict, terrorism, or contested statehood, the study foregrounds cultural resilience, diasporic consciousness, memory, and people-to-people relations. It argues that literature can operate as a counter-archive to state-centric geopolitical narratives by restoring the human subject to histories of war, migration, commerce, and diplomacy. "Brotherhood beyond borders" consequently emerges not as a sentimental political slogan but as a literary and ethical paradigm through which cultural proximity and political difference may be simultaneously apprehended.

Keywords: Indian English literature, Anglo-Indian literature, Afghanistan, India-Afghanistan relations, diaspora, cultural memory, migration, geopolitics, trade, conflict, postcolonialism, transnationalism

I. Introduction

The modern map is an eloquent cartographer of political sovereignty and an indifferent historian of cultural memory. Its borders are precise; human affiliations rarely are. A line drawn across a landscape may determine jurisdiction, citizenship, customs regulations and diplomatic protocol, but it cannot easily prevent languages from travelling, stories from migrating, commodities from crossing mountain passes, or memories from establishing themselves in foreign soil. The historical relationship between India and Afghanistan illustrates this contradiction with particular force. Long before contemporary diplomatic vocabularies of bilateralism, strategic partnership and regional security, the two societies were connected by commerce, migration, conquest, scholarship, religion, literature and cultural exchange.

Modern India-Afghanistan diplomatic relations were formally established in 1950, but scholars have emphasised that relations between the peoples of the two countries possess a much older history of cultural interaction. Avinash Paliwal, for instance, begins his history of the relationship not with modern diplomacy but with the cultural resonance of Tagore's *Kabuliwala*, suggesting that literature itself has participated in shaping India's imaginative understanding of Afghanistan.

This distinction between the history of states and the history of peoples is fundamental to

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the present study. Afghanistan has too often been represented through the vocabulary of strategic anxiety: the frontier, the Great Game, invasion, terrorism, insurgency, state failure, refugees and regional instability. Such categories possess undeniable explanatory value, yet they are insufficient to describe the human and cultural complexity of Afghanistan. A country cannot be reduced to the political regime that governs it, nor can a people be adequately represented by the conflicts that have scarred their history.

Literature provides another epistemology.

It enables the reader to encounter the migrant not as a demographic statistic but as an individual carrying memory; the refugee not merely as a displaced population but as a human being carrying an absent homeland; the trader not simply as an economic actor but as a cultural intermediary; and the border not merely as a line of sovereignty but as a psychological and imaginative threshold.

This paper examines these questions through the literary and cultural relationship between India and Afghanistan, with particular emphasis on Indian English literature and the Anglo-Indian literary imagination. It does not claim that every Indian English writer directly represents Afghanistan. Such a proposition would be historically and textually untenable. Instead, the study identifies a broader literary vocabulary—migration, hybridity, displacement, cultural memory, border consciousness and transnational identity—through which Indo-Afghan relations can be productively interpreted.

The paper begins with Tagore's *Kabuliwala*, a Bengali text whose extraordinary cultural afterlife makes it indispensable to India's literary imagination of Afghanistan. It then turns to Rudyard Kipling's Anglo-Indian frontier writing, whose imperial representations require critical scrutiny precisely because they reveal how Afghanistan entered colonial India's literary and geopolitical imagination. The discussion subsequently moves towards Indian English literature's broader engagement with migration, Partition, hybridity and transnationalism, before examining historical trade, diasporic mobility and contemporary Indian engagement with Afghanistan.

The central contention is that **brotherhood beyond borders** should not be understood as an assertion of political sameness. India and Afghanistan possess distinct histories, political institutions, linguistic landscapes and social formations. Rather, the phrase describes the possibility of recognising historical and cultural connectedness without denying difference. It is a literary proposition, an ethical vocabulary and a framework for reading cultural proximity across political frontiers.

Research Objectives and Questions

The paper pursues four interconnected objectives.

First, it investigates the representation of Afghan identity, migration and cultural encounter within Indian and Anglo-Indian literary traditions.

Second, it examines how the historical circulation of people, commodities, languages and ideas between Afghanistan and the Indian subcontinent complicates modern assumptions about fixed national identities.

Third, it places contemporary India-Afghanistan relations—including development cooperation, education, humanitarian assistance and regional geopolitics—within a longer cultural history.

Finally, it explores the capacity of literature to function as a counter-archive through which displacement, memory and human solidarity can be understood beyond state-centric narratives.

The study addresses the following questions:

1. How has Indian literature contributed to India's imaginative understanding of Afghanistan?
2. How does Anglo-Indian literature represent Afghanistan within the colonial geography of the frontier?
3. In what ways do migration and trade destabilise rigid distinctions between homeland and foreign territory?
4. How can diaspora theory illuminate Indo-Afghan cultural mobility?
5. How might literary representations complicate contemporary geopolitical narratives of Afghanistan?

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology combining close textual analysis with historical and contextual research. Its theoretical framework draws upon postcolonial criticism, diaspora studies, transnationalism, cultural memory, border studies and trauma theory.

The postcolonial dimension is necessary because Afghanistan's representation in English has historically been intertwined with imperial knowledge production. The British imagination of Afghanistan developed partly through the geopolitical anxieties of British India and the nineteenth-century rivalry between the British and Russian empires. Literature consequently became entangled with strategic imagination.

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Diaspora theory provides a second conceptual foundation. The diasporic subject inhabits a complicated relationship with homeland and host society. Stuart Hall's formulation of cultural identity as a process of "becoming" rather than a static inheritance is especially useful here (225). Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space" similarly destabilises binary distinctions between self and other, home and abroad, native and foreigner.

Border theory extends this argument by distinguishing political borders from cultural borders. Political boundaries are institutional and juridical; cultural boundaries are continuously negotiated through language, memory, commerce, religion, literature and interpersonal contact.

Cultural-memory studies provide a fourth dimension. Memory enables communities to preserve relationships with places that may no longer be physically accessible. Diasporic memory therefore becomes a portable geography.

Finally, trauma theory allows the study to consider the psychological and cultural consequences of prolonged conflict without reducing Afghan identity to suffering. Trauma is important, but so are resilience, cultural continuity and reconstruction.

India and Afghanistan: A Historical Geography of Mobility

The historical relationship between India and Afghanistan cannot be comprehended solely through modern diplomatic history. The two regions were connected through extensive networks of movement long before the emergence of the contemporary nation-state.

Trade routes linked the Indian subcontinent with Central Asia through Afghanistan. Merchants transported textiles, spices, precious commodities and other goods, while ideas, languages and cultural practices moved in the opposite direction. Afghanistan functioned not merely as a political territory but as a corridor of circulation.

Nile Green's study of Indo-Afghan history demonstrates the substantial migration of Afghans into India during the medieval and early modern periods. Significantly, Green argues that Afghan identity itself was shaped through the cultural environment of the Indian diaspora and through processes of adaptation and historical self-fashioning (65–115).

This insight is theoretically important. It demonstrates that identity is not always carried intact from one place to another. It can be transformed by migration.

The Afghan migrant in India consequently becomes more than an outsider. He or she becomes part of a social environment in which identity is reconstructed through encounter.

Afghanistan also served as an important conduit for literary and intellectual circulation. Scholarship on Afghan literary history notes that Afghanistan historically played a role in the transmission of literary culture between Central Asia and India. The circulation of Persian literary forms across these regions illustrates the porousness of cultural boundaries.

The relationship was therefore not merely one of military invasion and political conquest. It was also one of circulation.

This distinction is crucial because modern political narratives frequently privilege moments of conflict over longue durée histories of cultural exchange. Literature, by contrast, can preserve the slower history of interaction.

***Kabuliwala* and the Literary Humanisation of Afghanistan**

Rabindranath Tagore's *Kabuliwala* occupies a singular place in India's literary imagination of Afghanistan. Although written in Bengali rather than English, its relevance to Indian literary studies and India-Afghanistan cultural consciousness is considerable.

The story centres upon Rahamat, an Afghan fruit seller in Calcutta, and his affectionate relationship with Mini, a Bengali child. The narrative's extraordinary achievement lies in refusing to present the Afghan merely as a foreigner. Rahamat is a migrant, a father and a human being whose emotional life transcends nationality.

The story transforms geography into intimacy.

Rahamat arrives from Afghanistan as a commercial migrant. His identity is initially marked by foreignness—his dress, language and appearance distinguish him from the inhabitants of Calcutta. Yet Tagore gradually dismantles this distance by revealing the universal emotional bond between fatherhood and childhood.

The Afghan migrant becomes legible through emotion rather than geopolitics.

This is precisely where *Kabuliwala* becomes important to the concept of "brotherhood beyond borders." The story does not erase cultural difference. Rahamat remains Afghan. Mini remains Bengali. The narrative's power lies in allowing difference and intimacy to coexist.

The significance of *Kabuliwala* for India-Afghanistan relations has also been noted by political historians. Paliwal identifies Tagore's story

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as an important element in India's cultural imagination of Afghanistan.

The story therefore performs a kind of literary diplomacy long before the phrase "cultural diplomacy" acquired contemporary currency.

Rahamat does not represent the Afghan state. He represents an individual.

This distinction matters profoundly. States negotiate treaties; individuals negotiate relationships. States calculate interests; individuals experience longing. States possess borders; individuals carry memories across them.

The literary migrant thus becomes a counterpoint to the geopolitical state.

Anglo-Indian Literature and the Frontier Imagination

If Tagore humanises the Afghan migrant, Anglo-Indian literature frequently reveals how Afghanistan was imagined through the colonial frontier.

Rudyard Kipling's *The Man Who Would Be King* is especially significant. Published in 1888, the story is deeply embedded in the political and cultural geography of British India and the frontier. Its representation of Afghanistan and adjacent territories reflects the imperial fascination with mountain societies, military masculinity, sovereignty and adventure.

A contemporary postcolonial reading, however, must resist reproducing Kipling's own imperial assumptions.

The importance of the text lies partly in its contradictions. Afghanistan appears as both geographical neighbour and imagined "other"; as a space of danger and adventure; as a frontier beyond which imperial authority becomes unstable.

This instability is significant. The frontier is not merely the edge of empire. It is also the point at which imperial certainty becomes fragile.

Historical scholarship further demonstrates that Indian actors were deeply involved in British imperial encounters with Afghanistan. Walter Hakala notes that South Asians constituted a substantial proportion of British expeditionary forces during the First Anglo-Afghan War and served as cultural intermediaries in encounters involving Afghan languages and colonial officials.

This complicates the simplistic binary of "British versus Afghan." Indians themselves were embedded within the imperial encounter.

Such complexity is essential to postcolonial literary criticism.

The Anglo-Indian archive should therefore be read simultaneously as historical evidence and ideological artefact. It records encounters while also revealing the asymmetrical power structures through which those encounters were represented.

Indian English Literature and the Question of the Border

Indian English literature is particularly suitable for examining borders because the tradition itself emerged from linguistic and cultural contact.

English in India began as a colonial language but was gradually transformed by Indian writers into a medium of indigenous expression. The language that once arrived with imperial authority became a language through which Indians articulated their own histories, identities and political aspirations.

This transformation creates an important analogy with migration.

Just as migrants adapt to new cultural environments without necessarily abandoning their original identities, Indian English itself has been transformed by its Indian environment.

The literary border is therefore productive rather than merely restrictive.

Indian English writers have repeatedly explored questions of home, exile, migration, Partition, memory and hybridity. Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, for example, demonstrates how political borders can rupture intimate social relations. Although the novel concerns Partition rather than Afghanistan, its representation of displacement provides a valuable comparative framework for understanding how borders transform communities.

Salman Rushdie's fiction similarly challenges the assumption that national identity is singular and geographically stable. His work frequently places memory, migration and cultural hybridity at the centre of identity formation.

Amitav Ghosh's transnational historical fiction expands this imaginative geography further by placing South Asian histories within oceanic, imperial and commercial networks.

These writers do not constitute an "Afghanistan school" of Indian English literature. Rather, they provide conceptual resources through which the Indo-Afghan relationship can be understood.

This distinction is important for scholarly credibility.

Trade as Cultural Mobility

Trade is often treated as an economic phenomenon, yet historically it has been one of the principal mechanisms through which cultures encounter one another.

A merchant crossing from Kabul towards the Indian plains carries more than merchandise. He carries language, food, dress, stories, religious practices,

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commercial customs and memories. Commerce creates social networks, and social networks create cultural familiarity.

The history of Indo-Afghan interaction consequently cannot be separated from commercial mobility.

The old trade routes connected Afghanistan with the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia. Modern geopolitics may have transformed these routes, but the cultural memory of mobility persists.

The concept of diaspora must therefore be expanded beyond forced migration. Diasporic formations may emerge from trade, education, employment, political displacement and family networks.

The merchant and the refugee may inhabit radically different historical circumstances, but both demonstrate that identity can travel.

This insight also complicates contemporary geopolitical debates over connectivity. Afghanistan's location gives it strategic importance as a bridge between South and Central Asia. Yet the metaphor of the "bridge" can itself become reductive if it treats Afghanistan merely as infrastructure between other powers.

Afghanistan is not simply a corridor. It is a society. Literature restores this distinction.

India-Afghanistan Relations after Independence

Modern diplomatic relations between India and Afghanistan were formally established in 1950. Yet the relationship has consistently drawn upon deeper historical and cultural connections. Paliwal's account stresses that modern diplomatic relations coexist with much older civilisational interaction.

India's contemporary engagement with Afghanistan expanded substantially after 2001. Development assistance included infrastructure, education, health, agriculture and community-development initiatives. India's Ministry of External Affairs identifies the Parliament Building in Kabul and the Afghan-India Friendship Dam, formerly known as the Salma Dam, among significant projects associated with India's reconstruction partnership.

India also supported High Impact Community Development Projects across Afghanistan. According to the Ministry's 2024 annual report, Indian-supported community projects covered areas including agriculture, education, labour, rural development and public health.

These initiatives possess significance beyond conventional aid statistics.

A parliament building is a material symbol of political institution-building. A dam is simultaneously an infrastructural project and an intervention in agricultural and economic life. A school or scholarship creates a human connection that can outlast the political circumstances under which it originated.

This is where development and cultural diplomacy intersect.

The relationship between India and Afghanistan therefore cannot be reduced to security considerations. Development cooperation, education, sport and humanitarian assistance have all contributed to its broader architecture.

Education, Youth, and the Production of Diasporic Identity

Education represents one of the most consequential forms of cultural exchange because students return from foreign institutions with transformed intellectual and cultural horizons.

India's educational engagement with Afghanistan has included scholarships and capacity-building programmes. The Ministry of External Affairs reported that since 2023 the Indian Council for Cultural Relations scholarship programme has provided online scholarships to Afghan students, including women, through the e-VidyaBharti platform.

Such programmes should be interpreted not merely as administrative initiatives but as forms of cultural mobility.

The Afghan student studying through an Indian institution participates in a transnational educational space. The student's identity is potentially transformed through exposure to Indian academic culture, English-language education, digital learning, professional networks and intercultural relationships. Diaspora begins, in many cases, before physical migration. It can begin in imagination.

A student who learns through another country's educational system may develop an identity that is neither exclusively domestic nor completely foreign. The resulting cultural subject becomes transnational.

Literature is particularly capable of capturing this transition because it records interiority—the private uncertainty, aspiration, nostalgia and negotiation that institutional reports cannot fully represent.

Conflict, and the Problem of Representation of Taliban

The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 dramatically altered the regional and international context in which Afghanistan is discussed.

Yet any literary analysis of contemporary Afghanistan must resist the temptation to allow the Taliban to become synonymous with Afghanistan itself.

A regime is not a people.

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Political authority is not cultural identity.
Government is not society.
The distinction is fundamental.
India's official post-2021 approach has combined continued engagement with humanitarian assistance, education, diplomatic participation and a technical presence in Kabul. The Ministry of External Affairs reports that India's approach has remained informed by historical ties and relevant United Nations Security Council frameworks, while humanitarian shipments and educational assistance have continued.
India has reported the provision of substantial humanitarian assistance, including wheat, medicines and medical supplies, while continuing educational initiatives for Afghan students.
These developments demonstrate the complexity of contemporary diplomacy: states may maintain channels of engagement without collapsing cultural or political distinctions.
Literature can illuminate this complexity by focusing on individuals.
A refugee does not experience "statehood" as an abstract constitutional category. The refugee experiences the consequences of political transformation through disrupted livelihood, family separation, education, mobility and memory.
Literature therefore translates geopolitics into human experience.

Trauma, Memory, and Displacement

Afghanistan's modern history has been marked by prolonged conflict, political upheaval and displacement. Such experiences produce what may be described as cultures of memory.
Trauma is not merely an individual psychological condition. It can become socially transmitted through stories, photographs, rituals, commemorations and family narratives.
The diasporic community frequently becomes the custodian of memories that are difficult to preserve within the homeland itself.
This makes literature a form of cultural survival.
The displaced person may lose a house but preserve its architecture through memory. A refugee may lose a landscape but reconstruct it through narrative. A migrant may leave behind a language but transmit fragments of it to children born elsewhere.
The literary text thus becomes an archive of absence.
Such an archive is particularly important in the context of Afghanistan because international representations often privilege military and political events. Literary narratives can preserve the everyday: the marketplace, the family, the school, the journey, the meal, the remembered street.
These apparently minor details constitute the texture of civilisation.

Diasporic Identity and the Third Space

The concept of diaspora becomes especially productive when combined with Bhabha's notion of the "Third Space."
The Third Space is not simply a geographical location between two countries. It is a cultural condition in which identity is negotiated through encounter.
The Afghan migrant in India occupies such a space.
He or she is shaped by Afghan cultural memory but also by Indian experience. The migrant's identity therefore cannot be reduced to either origin or destination.
This is visible in *Kabuliwala*, where Rahamat's relationship with Mini creates an emotional space beyond national difference. His identity as an Afghan migrant remains significant, yet the narrative reveals a deeper human correspondence between fathers and daughters.
The story thus anticipates a central principle of diaspora studies: difference does not preclude intimacy.
The same principle can be extended to broader Indo-Afghan relations.
India and Afghanistan are not identical cultures. Their differences are substantial and historically meaningful. Yet difference does not negate connection.
Indeed, cultural relationship becomes intellectually interesting precisely because it involves difference.

Women, Culture, and the Politics of Belonging

Any discussion of conflict and diaspora must also attend to gender.
Women frequently experience displacement and political instability through specific forms of vulnerability. Restrictions on education, employment and mobility can profoundly alter women's relationship with public space.
At the same time, women are crucial agents of cultural continuity.
Language, food, family stories, rituals and oral traditions are often transmitted through domestic and community networks in which women play central roles.
A diasporic understanding of Afghan culture must therefore avoid representing Afghan women exclusively as victims.
Their cultural agency is equally significant.

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Literature can make this agency visible by allowing women's voices, memories and aspirations to enter the archive.

A genuine conception of "brotherhood beyond borders" must consequently become more capacious than masculine fraternity. Cultural solidarity is meaningful only when it recognises the differentiated experiences of women, children, refugees and other vulnerable groups.

Language, Translation, and Cultural Encounter

Language constitutes another major site of Indo-Afghan interaction.

Afghanistan's multilingual cultural history and India's own extraordinary linguistic diversity make translation central to cross-cultural understanding.

Translation is never merely the mechanical replacement of one word with another. It is an encounter between epistemologies.

When Afghan stories enter Indian English discourse, they undergo linguistic as well as cultural translation. Conversely, Indian cultural forms have historically travelled into Afghan literary and intellectual spaces.

Research on Afghan literary history notes the importance of Afghanistan as a conduit in the transmission of literary culture between Central Asia and India.

The history of Persian literary culture is particularly instructive. Literary styles circulated across geographical boundaries, demonstrating that cultural production frequently disregarded the political divisions that later became central to national historiography.

Indian English literature inherits this broader history of translation.

Its very existence demonstrates that languages can be appropriated, transformed and reterritorialised.

Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power

The concept of soft power provides another useful framework for understanding India's engagement with Afghanistan, although it should be approached critically.

Scholarship on India-Afghanistan relations has examined India's cultural and developmental engagement through the concept of soft power, particularly after the 2011 Strategic Partnership Agreement.

The agreement established a framework for cooperation in economic, social, political and cultural spheres.

Yet cultural diplomacy should not be reduced to influence-seeking.

Culture can create relationships that are valuable even when they produce no immediate strategic dividend.

A scholarship can change an individual's life.

A literary translation can alter perceptions.

A cricket match can create familiarity.

A film can humanise another culture.

A humanitarian shipment can express solidarity during crisis.

India's continuing engagement through education, humanitarian assistance and sport demonstrates the variety of instruments through which people-to-people relationships can be maintained. The Ministry of External Affairs reported, for example, that the Afghan Cricket Board and the BCCI reached an arrangement enabling Afghanistan to use Indian stadiums as home grounds.

Such exchanges may appear peripheral to geopolitics, but they constitute the everyday infrastructure of cultural familiarity.

Literature as Counter-Archive

Perhaps the most important contribution of literature to Indo-Afghan studies is its capacity to function as a counter-archive.

Official archives preserve treaties, agreements, policy documents, aid commitments and diplomatic correspondence.

Literature preserves affect.

It preserves longing.

It preserves embarrassment, loneliness, friendship, grief and hope.

This does not mean that literature should replace historical scholarship. Fiction is not a substitute for archival evidence. Rather, literary texts provide another category of knowledge: experiential and imaginative knowledge.

Tagore's *Kabuliwala* does not provide a statistical account of Afghan migration into nineteenth-century Calcutta. It provides something statistics cannot: an emotional representation of the migrant.

Kipling's fiction does not constitute an objective history of Afghanistan. It reveals how imperial culture imagined the frontier.

Indian English literature's representations of Partition and migration do not constitute diplomatic histories. They reveal the affective consequences of political borders.

Literature therefore complements rather than replaces history.

Geopolitics and the Ethics of Representation

Afghanistan occupies a strategic location at the intersection of South and Central Asia. Its political instability has consequences for neighbouring states,

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regional connectivity and international security. Contemporary scholarship continues to examine India-Afghanistan relations through the competing pressures of regional cooperation and global geopolitics.

India's relationship with Afghanistan has also been shaped by its broader regional security concerns, including relations with Pakistan, China and Central Asian states.

Yet the literary scholar must ask a different question:

What happens to the human subject when geography becomes geopolitics?

The Afghan refugee can disappear behind the phrase "refugee crisis."

The migrant can disappear behind "cross-border movement."

The trader can disappear behind "regional connectivity."

The student can disappear behind "human-capital development."

Literature reverses this process of abstraction.

It puts the person back into the geopolitical sentence.

That is perhaps literature's most important political—though not necessarily partisan—function.

Brotherhood Beyond Borders: Toward a Transnational Ethics

The concept of brotherhood proposed by this paper is neither romantic nor triumphalist.

India and Afghanistan have experienced periods of political disagreement, asymmetrical power and historical conflict. Their relationship cannot be reduced to a narrative of uninterrupted friendship.

Yet historical conflict does not invalidate cultural relationship.

Indeed, cultural relationship becomes more meaningful when it survives historical rupture.

"Brotherhood beyond borders" therefore refers to a transnational ethics grounded in recognition rather than assimilation.

It means acknowledging:

- that political borders are historically constructed;
- that cultural memories frequently predate those borders;
- that migration transforms rather than merely transfers identity;
- that trade creates cultural as well as economic networks;
- that literature humanises political abstraction;
- that conflict does not exhaust cultural identity;
- and that difference need not eliminate fraternity.

Such an approach avoids both romantic nationalism and geopolitical reductionism.

It does not claim that India and Afghanistan are one culture.

It argues instead that they have participated in interconnected cultural histories.

II. Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that Indo-Afghan relations possess at least five interconnected dimensions.

The first is **historical**: migration, trade and political interaction have connected the two regions for centuries.

The second is **literary**: Tagore's *Kabuliwala* and Anglo-Indian frontier literature demonstrate how Afghanistan entered Indian and colonial literary consciousness.

The third is **diasporic**: migration produces identities that transcend territorial nationalism.

The fourth is **geopolitical**: Afghanistan remains strategically significant within South and Central Asian politics.

The fifth is **humanitarian and cultural**: education, development assistance, sport and cultural exchange sustain people-to-people relationships even amid political uncertainty.

These dimensions should not be studied independently.

The literary geography of India and Afghanistan resembles a palimpsest. Contemporary geopolitics occupies the visible surface, but beneath it lie older layers of migration, commerce, literary circulation and cultural memory.

This palimpsestic model provides a more nuanced alternative to narratives that begin and end with the Taliban, terrorism or strategic competition.

III. Conclusion

The history of India and Afghanistan demonstrates that borders are politically consequential but culturally porous. They regulate movement, define sovereignty and structure diplomacy, yet they cannot fully contain the memories, languages, commodities, stories and identities that have crossed them for centuries.

Indian literature has participated significantly in making Afghanistan intelligible to

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Indian readers. Tagore's *Kabuliwala* is perhaps the most compelling example of this literary humanisation: the Afghan migrant is not presented as a geopolitical threat but as a father, a trader and a human being separated from his own child. The story transforms distance into recognition.

Anglo-Indian literature provides a different, more complicated archive. Kipling's frontier imagination reveals the imperial fascination with Afghanistan while simultaneously exposing the ideological structures through which the frontier was represented. A postcolonial reading therefore requires neither rejection nor uncritical celebration, but contextual interrogation.

Indian English literature subsequently provides a broader vocabulary of migration, hybridity, displacement, Partition and transnational belonging. Writers such as Khushwant Singh, Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh are not to be misrepresented as specialist Afghanistan writers; rather, their literary explorations of borders and cultural displacement provide theoretical and comparative resources for understanding Indo-Afghan relations.

The historical record reinforces the literary argument. Afghanistan and India have been connected through trade, migration, literature and cultural circulation. Scholarship demonstrates extensive Afghan migration into India and the role of the Indian environment in shaping Afghan identities. Contemporary scholarship likewise emphasises the historical and cultural foundations of Indo-Afghan relations.

Modern India has supplemented these historical connections with development cooperation, educational programmes, humanitarian assistance and diplomatic engagement. India's official records document infrastructure projects, community-development initiatives, educational cooperation, humanitarian assistance and continuing engagement after 2021.

Yet the ultimate argument of this paper is literary rather than diplomatic.

Literature matters because it resists abstraction.

It reminds us that the migrant is not merely a migrant.

The refugee is not merely a refugee.

The trader is not merely an economic actor.

The student is not merely a beneficiary.

The Afghan is not merely a geopolitical category.

Each is a human subject carrying memories, aspirations and identities that exceed the political vocabulary imposed upon them.

"Brotherhood Beyond Borders" therefore emerges as a useful interpretive paradigm precisely because it does not require sameness. It recognises difference while insisting upon historical connection. It acknowledges political conflict without allowing conflict to become the totality of cultural representation. It reads borders not merely as barriers but as sites of encounter.

The most enduring relationship between peoples is not necessarily the one proclaimed by governments. It may be the one preserved by stories.

A treaty can expire.

A government can fall.

A geopolitical alignment can change.

A border can harden.

But a story can travel.

The Kabuliwallah can walk into the Bengali imagination; the Afghan trader can become part of India's urban memory; the migrant can transform foreignness into familiarity; the student can carry a new intellectual geography home; and literature can preserve what politics repeatedly attempts to compartmentalise.

The future of Indo-Afghan understanding may consequently depend not only upon diplomacy, security and economic connectivity but also upon the imaginative ability to see one another beyond the vocabulary of strategic necessity.

In that sense, the most persuasive border-crossing may be literary.

And the most enduring bridge may be the human imagination.

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