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Beyond the Binary: Deconstructing the “Friend Enemy” and “Native Stranger” Archetypes in *Maximum City* and *at Home in Enemy Land*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* and Saad Shazli's *At Home in Enemy Land* challenge and complicate the binary oppositions of “friend-enemy” and “native-stranger.” Drawing on postcolonial frameworks, the study argues that both texts reveal these categories as unstable, fluid, and socially constructed. Mehta's exploration of Mumbai exposes the porous boundaries between insider and outsider within an urban landscape shaped by migration and inequality, while Shazli's narrative interrogates national and ideological divisions that define belonging in politically charged spaces. Through comparative analysis, the paper demonstrates that travel writing destabilizes fixed identities and opens up possibilities for more nuanced understandings of self and other.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, binaries, identity, travel writing, Suketu Mehta, Saad Shazli

Introduction

Binary oppositions such as “friend enemy” and “native stranger” have long functioned as organizing frameworks through which societies interpret difference and define identity. These categories simplify complex human relationships into clear, oppositional terms, making it easier to distinguish between self and other, insider and outsider. In postcolonial contexts, such binaries carry even greater weight, as they are often tied to histories of colonization, migration, and conflict. They shape national identities, influence historical narratives, and inform everyday social interactions. However, these rigid distinctions tend to overlook the fluid and overlapping nature of human experience. Contemporary travel writing increasingly challenges these fixed categories by exposing the ambiguities and contradictions that lie beneath them, suggesting that identity cannot be reduced to simple oppositions.

This challenge is clearly illustrated in *Maximum City* by Suketu Mehta and *At Home in Enemy Land* by Saad Shazli, both of which engage with spaces shaped by diversity, tension, and historical complexity. Mehta's exploration of Mumbai reveals a city where boundaries between insider and outsider are constantly shifting, shaped by migration, class, and social mobility. Similarly, Shazli's narrative examines politically charged environments where the distinction between friend and enemy is not as clear-cut as it might appear. In both texts, categories of belonging are continually negotiated through lived experience, interaction, and changing contexts. These narratives highlight how individuals move across and between identities, resisting fixed labels and embracing more fluid understandings of self and other.

By examining these works, this paper argues that contemporary travel writing plays a crucial role in deconstructing binary oppositions and offering more nuanced perspectives on identity. Rather than presenting identity as stable or predetermined, these narratives reveal it as something that emerges through interaction, experience, and interpretation. The act of travel, with its exposure to diverse cultures and perspectives, disrupts rigid classifications and opens up space for rethinking established categories. In doing so, travel writing becomes a powerful medium for exploring the complexities of belonging, demonstrating that identity is not defined by fixed boundaries but is continuously shaped and reshaped through engagement with the world.

Theoretical Context: Deconstructing Binaries

Binary oppositions have traditionally been central to structuralist thought, offering a way to organize meaning through clear distinctions such as self/other, insider/outsider, and friend/enemy. These oppositions create a sense of order and clarity, but they also simplify complex realities into fixed categories. Postcolonial theory, however, challenges this rigidity by questioning the stability and universality of such binaries. Thinkers like Homi K. Bhabha and Edward Said have emphasized that identity is not fixed but fluid, hybrid, and shaped by historical and cultural interactions. Their work highlights how rigid categories fail to account for the overlapping and negotiated nature of identity, particularly in postcolonial contexts where histories of power, migration, and cultural exchange complicate any clear division between self and other.

In travel writing, the binaries of “friend enemy” and “native stranger” are especially significant, as they often influence how travellers perceive and represent the people and places they encounter. Initially, these categories may serve as frameworks through which unfamiliar environments are understood, helping travellers make sense of difference. However, as engagement deepens through interaction, observation, and lived experience, these distinctions begin to blur. The traveller may find unexpected similarities with those initially perceived as “others,” or recognize the limitations of viewing cultures through simplistic oppositions. This process reveals that such binaries are not inherent truths but constructed perspectives that can shift depending on context and experience.

Both *Maximum City* by Suketu Mehta and *At Home in Enemy Land* by Saad Shazli actively engage with this process of constructing and deconstructing binaries. Through their narratives, they show how categories like “native” and “stranger” or “friend” and “enemy” are not fixed but constantly negotiated through interaction and perspective. Their works demonstrate that travel writing has the potential to unsettle rigid classifications by foregrounding lived experience, personal encounter, and narrative complexity. In doing so, they reveal that identity is not defined by stable oppositions but emerges through dynamic processes of engagement, interpretation, and transformation.

Blurring the “Native Stranger” Divide in *Maximum City*

In *Maximum City*, Suketu Mehta positions himself in a complex space between familiarity and distance, navigating Mumbai as both a native and a stranger. Having spent years abroad, his return to the city is marked by a renewed curiosity, but also by a sense of detachment that alters his perception. He is at once connected to the city through memory, language, and cultural belonging, yet distanced by time and experience. This dual perspective allows him to observe Mumbai with both intimacy and critical distance, blurring the boundary between insider and outsider. His narrative voice reflects this tension, as he moves between identification and observation, revealing how identity is shaped by movement and displacement.

This shifting position becomes especially evident in Mehta’s interactions with a wide range of communities across the city. From Bollywood personalities to individuals within the underworld, from migrants to long-time residents, his encounters highlight the diversity and layered complexity of urban life. Each interaction challenges simplistic categorizations, showing that belonging in a city like Mumbai cannot be reduced to fixed labels. Instead, identity is constantly negotiated through social, economic, and cultural relationships. Mehta’s narrative captures this multiplicity, presenting the city as a space where different worlds intersect and overlap, often in unexpected ways.

As a result, Mumbai itself emerges as a city that resists clear definition or categorization. Its constant movement, diversity, and transformation make it difficult to determine who truly belongs and who does not. The traditional binary of “native” and “stranger” breaks down in such a context, as individuals occupy multiple and shifting positions within the urban landscape. Mehta’s portrayal highlights the fluid nature of identity in a globalized city, where belonging is not fixed but continually redefined through experience and interaction. In this way, *Maximum City* illustrates how urban spaces challenge rigid distinctions and reflect the evolving nature of identity in contemporary society.

Interrogating the “Friend–Enemy” Binary in *At Home in Enemy Land*

At Home in Enemy Land by Saad Shazli directly engages with the idea of the “enemy,” especially within contexts shaped by national borders, political tensions, and historical conflict. The narrative explores how individuals move through spaces where identities are often defined in oppositional terms: friend versus enemy, insider versus outsider. In such environments, these categories are not merely abstract but carry real emotional and social weight, influencing how people perceive one another. Shazli’s journey brings him into contact with regions where these divisions are deeply embedded, allowing him to examine how individuals negotiate identity within politically charged landscapes. The travel narrative thus becomes a means of interrogating how such binaries operate in everyday life.

However, Shazli complicates this seemingly rigid binary by drawing attention to shared cultural histories, linguistic connections, and everyday human interactions that transcend political boundaries. Through personal encounters, conversations, and lived experiences, the narrative reveals moments of empathy and understanding that disrupt the clear distinction between friend and enemy. Individuals who might be categorized as “others” within a political framework often appear familiar and relatable at a human level. These interactions blur the boundaries imposed by national and ideological divisions, suggesting that identity is far more complex than such binaries allow. By foregrounding these connections, Shazli challenges the assumption that difference necessarily leads to opposition.

In doing so, the narrative exposes the “enemy” as a constructed figure, shaped largely by political discourse, historical narratives, and institutional frameworks rather than by direct human experience. Shazli’s focus on personal encounters dismantles the rigidity of this binary, showing how it can be redefined or even dissolved through interaction and understanding. The travelogue reveals that categories like “enemy” are not inherent or fixed but are produced and maintained through specific contexts. By shifting attention from abstract categories to lived relationships, the text offers a more nuanced and humane perspective on identity and belonging, demonstrating how travel writing can challenge and deconstruct deeply ingrained oppositional frameworks.

Hybrid Identities and Liminal Spaces

Both texts place strong emphasis on liminal spaces: those in-between zones where fixed categories begin to loosen and identities become open to negotiation. These are spaces where individuals are neither fully inside nor outside a particular cultural, social, or political framework. Instead, they

exist in a state of transition, where meanings are unstable and constantly shifting. Such spaces are especially important in postcolonial contexts, as they challenge rigid classifications and allow for more fluid understandings of identity. In travel writing, liminality becomes a key condition of experience, as the traveller moves through unfamiliar environments and occupies a position that is inherently transitional and uncertain.

In *Maximum City*, Suketu Mehta presents Mumbai as a quintessential liminal space where multiple identities intersect and overlap. The city is shaped by migration, economic disparity, and cultural diversity, making it impossible to define belonging in fixed terms. Individuals move between roles and identities, often occupying contradictory positions at the same time. Similarly, in *At Home in Enemy Land*, Saad Shazli explores border regions and contested territories as liminal spaces where national and ideological boundaries are constantly negotiated. These environments disrupt traditional binaries such as “native stranger” and “friend enemy,” revealing the instability of such distinctions in lived experience.

These liminal spaces create the conditions for the emergence of hybrid identities that resist simple categorization. Individuals navigating these environments draw from multiple cultural, social, and political influences, forming identities that are layered and dynamic rather than fixed. This hybridity reflects the complexities of postcolonial subjectivity, where belonging is shaped by overlapping affiliations and shifting perspectives. Both texts demonstrate that identity in such contexts is not a stable essence but an ongoing process of negotiation, shaped by movement, interaction, and the fluid nature of space itself.

Narrative Voice and Perspective

The deconstruction of binaries in both texts is closely tied to narrative voice and perspective, particularly through the use of first-person narration that foregrounds subjectivity and lived experience. Rather than presenting an objective or authoritative account, both writers position themselves within the narrative, acknowledging that their understanding of place and people is shaped by personal background, context, and interpretation. This emphasis on subjectivity allows the texts to question rigid categories such as “native stranger” and “friend enemy,” showing that these distinctions are not universal truths but are filtered through individual perception. The first-person voice thus becomes a critical tool, enabling the traveller to reflect on their own role in constructing meaning and representation.

In *Maximum City*, Suketu Mehta’s narrative voice moves fluidly between observation and participation, reflecting his dual position as both insider and outsider within Mumbai. This shifting perspective allows him to engage with the city from multiple angles, challenging any singular or fixed interpretation of belonging. Similarly, in *At Home in Enemy Land*, Saad Shazli adopts a narrative voice shaped by political and cultural awareness, critically examining the notion of the “enemy” through personal encounters and reflection. By openly acknowledging their positionality, both authors reveal the limitations of fixed categories and highlight the role of the traveller in shaping representation. Their narrative strategies demonstrate that understanding is always mediated, and that travel writing, far from being neutral, is an interpretive act that can challenge and reconfigure established binaries.

Reimagining Belonging and Otherness

By deconstructing binaries, both texts open up more flexible and nuanced ways of understanding belonging and otherness, moving beyond rigid categories that define identity in fixed terms. In these narratives, belonging is no longer tied to a single place, culture, or identity but emerges as a dynamic and relational process shaped through interaction and experience. In *Maximum City*, Suketu Mehta shows how belonging in a city like Mumbai is constantly negotiated, influenced by migration, class, and shifting social connections. Similarly, in *At Home in Enemy Land*, Saad Shazli presents belonging as something that can extend across political and national boundaries, formed through shared experiences and human connections rather than predetermined categories. In both cases, belonging becomes fluid, evolving with context rather than remaining stable or fixed.

At the same time, the concept of the “other” is fundamentally redefined within these texts. Instead of being treated as a distant, unfamiliar, or oppositional category, the “other” is revealed as something constructed through perspective, discourse, and context. Through personal encounters and narrative reflection, both authors show how individuals initially perceived as “others” can appear familiar, relatable, and interconnected. This shift challenges the assumption that difference necessarily implies separation or opposition. By exposing the instability of such distinctions, the narratives highlight how identities overlap and intersect, making it difficult to sustain clear boundaries between self and other.

This reimagining of belonging and otherness opens up possibilities for more inclusive and empathetic ways of understanding human relationships. By moving beyond fixed binaries, the texts encourage readers to recognize the complexity of identity and the interconnectedness of different cultural and social worlds. Travel writing, in this sense, becomes a space for questioning assumptions and expanding perspectives, allowing for a more open and dialogic approach to difference. Ultimately, these narratives demonstrate that belonging and otherness are not opposing states but interconnected processes, shaped through ongoing interaction, interpretation, and shared experience.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that *Maximum City* by Suketu Mehta and *At Home in Enemy Land* by Saad Shazli effectively challenge the binary oppositions of “friend enemy” and “native stranger,” revealing how such categories fail to capture the complexity of lived experience in postcolonial contexts. Through their nuanced and reflective narratives, both authors expose the limitations of rigid classifications and show that identity cannot be confined within fixed boundaries. The analysis highlights that travel writing serves as a powerful medium for deconstructing these binaries, as it places

individuals in situations where they encounter diverse perspectives, question assumptions, and negotiate meaning through interaction. By moving beyond simplistic distinctions, these texts offer a more flexible and inclusive understanding of self and other, where identities are seen as fluid, relational, and context-dependent. Ultimately, the study underscores that identity is not a stable or predetermined construct but is continuously shaped through processes of engagement, negotiation, and reflection, reinforcing the transformative potential of travel writing as a critical and interpretive literary form.

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