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The Architecture of Alienation: A Comparative Study of the “Internal” and “External” Other in Noor Zaheer’s *At Home in Enemy Land* and V. S. Naipaul’s *An Area of Darkness*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the construction of the “internal” and “external” other in Noor Zaheer’s *At Home in Enemy Land* and V. S. Naipaul’s *An Area of Darkness*. Drawing on postcolonial frameworks, it explores how alienation is produced through encounters with cultural, national, and historical difference. While Zaheer’s narrative foregrounds the internalization of otherness shaped by Partition and shared histories across India and Pakistan, Naipaul’s work presents the external other through a critical and often estranged engagement with India. The study argues that alienation in both texts functions as an “architecture” a structured yet evolving condition shaped by memory, identity, and spatial experience. Through comparative analysis, the paper highlights how travel writing reveals the complexity of self–other relations in postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: Alienation, otherness, postcolonial identity, travel writing, Noor Zaheer, V. S. Naipaul

Introduction

The concept of the “other” serves as a foundational pillar in postcolonial studies, where identity is frequently constructed through a binary relationship with difference. In travel writing, this dynamic takes on a heightened significance as the traveller moves through unfamiliar landscapes and engages with cultures that challenge their internal status quo. However, the distinction between the self and the other is rarely a fixed or stable boundary; instead, it is a porous line perpetually reshaped by the confluence of colonial history, personal memory, and the traveller’s own ideological perspective. The “other” is not an inherent quality of the person being observed, but rather a projection of the observer’s own cultural and psychological positioning, making the travel narrative a map of the writer’s mind as much as a record of the destination.

Noor Zaheer’s *At Home in Enemy Land* and V. S. Naipaul’s *An Area of Darkness* offer two profoundly contrasting approaches to the representation of otherness, highlighting the difference between shared heritage and cultural detachment. Zaheer’s narrative explores the “internalized other,” where the perceived enemy is recognized as a mirror of the self due to a shared linguistic, culinary, and historical heritage across the Indo-Pak border. In contrast, Naipaul’s work reflects an “externalized” and often deeply critical perception of India. As a member of the diaspora returning to a “home” he finds unrecognizable and repulsive, Naipaul views the landscape through a lens of profound estrangement, casting the inhabitants as an inscrutable and alien “other” that he cannot or will not reconcile with his own identity.

This paper examines how these texts construct the “internal” and “external” other to demonstrate that alienation is not a singular feeling, but a complex and structured experience shaped by both personal history and broader socio-political factors. By comparing Zaheer’s empathetic recognition of commonality with Naipaul’s clinical and often harsh detachment, the analysis argues that the traveller’s sense of belonging or lack thereof is the primary architect of the “other.” Ultimately, these narratives reveal that alienation can be either a bridge to understanding shared trauma or a wall that reinforces cultural hierarchy, suggesting that the way we write about the “other” is ultimately a definitive statement on how we understand our own place in a postcolonial world.

Theoretical Framework: Internal and External Other

The distinction between internal and external otherness provides a sophisticated framework for analysing postcolonial travel narratives, particularly regarding how authors position themselves against their subjects. The **external other** refers to individuals, cultures, or geographies perceived as fundamentally different or unfamiliar, typically positioned as an object of study outside the traveller’s own identity. Conversely, the **internal other** resides within the self; it reflects the fragmented parts of one’s own identity, repressed memories, or the psychological conflicts born from a history of colonization and displacement. In this light, “otherness” is not just a person the traveller meets, but a part of the traveller’s own psyche that they confront in a foreign or ancestral land.

Postcolonial theory emphasizes that these categories are not mutually exclusive or static; rather, they exist in a state of constant, often turbulent, flux. The external other can become internalized through the recognition of shared trauma or heritage, while the internal other such as one's own feelings of inadequacy or cultural confusion can be projected outward onto the landscape and its people. Both Zaheer and Naipaul engage deeply with this dynamic, though their trajectories are opposite: Zaheer moves toward the internalization of the "enemy" as a familiar extension of herself, whereas Naipaul projects his internal sense of displacement outward, transforming the Indian population into an externalized, alien entity that validates his own sense of alienation.

Noor Zaheer and the Internalization of Otherness

In *At Home in Enemy Land*, Noor Zaheer explores the intricate complexities of identity within the high-stakes context of India–Pakistan relations, where the personal and the political are inextricably linked. Her travels across these historically fraught borders reveal a startling fluidity of cultural and national identities, fundamentally challenging the rigid, state-sanctioned distinctions between the self and the "other." Zaheer's narrative suggests that the border is an artificial imposition on a landscape that remains culturally continuous, and by navigating this space, she demonstrates that the traveller's identity is not a fixed badge of citizenship but a porous construct that can absorb and reflect the very culture it is taught to view as adversarial.

Zaheer's narrative places a heavy emphasis on shared histories and deep-seated cultural connections, moving toward the radical suggestion that the "enemy" is not an entirely external entity but one that exists within the self. The legacy of the 1947 Partition plays a decisive role in this psychological process, acting as a historical trauma that split a singular cultural identity into two opposing national ones. For Zaheer, recognizing common linguistic idioms, culinary traditions, and social values across the border becomes a process of reclaiming a lost part of the self. In this context, the "other" is not a stranger to be feared, but a long-lost relative whose presence highlights the artificiality of the political rift.

The internal other in Zaheer's work is ultimately characterized by a profound sense of ambivalence, occupying a liminal space between recognition and estrangement. It reflects a duality where familiarity and difference coexist, creating a sense of belonging that is simultaneously grounded in shared heritage and rendered uncertain by modern geopolitical realities. This internal negotiation reveals that for the postcolonial subject, "home" and "enemy land" are not geographically distinct regions but psychological states that overlap. Zaheer shows that moving through the periphery allows the traveller to confront this internal other, resulting in an identity that is no longer defined by exclusion but by the complex, often painful acknowledgment of a shared, fractured history.

V. S. Naipaul and the External Other

In sharp contrast, *An Area of Darkness* presents a more externalized and detached form of otherness, where the landscape of India is treated as an object of intense, often painful scrutiny. V. S. Naipaul's journey through the subcontinent is fundamentally characterized by a visceral sense of estrangement; as a member of the Indian diaspora, he arrives with a set of inherited expectations that are immediately shattered by the grit and chaos of the social realities he encounters. This disconnection transforms his travelogue into a record of cultural shock, where the practices and behaviours of the local population are not viewed as shared heritage, but as a series of inscrutable and often repellent obstacles that he finds impossible to reconcile with his own internalized sense of order and modernity.

Naipaul's narrative consistently positions India as an external "other," emphasizing the vast psychological distance between the traveller and the subject. His observations are frequently clinical and relentlessly critical, reflecting a deep-seated sense of disillusionment that borders on despair. By focusing on the "darkness" of poverty, bureaucracy, and perceived social stagnation, Naipaul builds a wall of difference between himself and the land of his ancestors. In his eyes, India is not a home to be reclaimed but a foreign entity that validates his own sense of homelessness. This externalization serves as a protective mechanism, allowing him to maintain a colonial-style detachment from a reality that he finds both overwhelming and alien.

However, this rigid externalization is profoundly complicated by Naipaul's own diasporic identity, which creates a restless tension between latent familiarity and active alienation. Despite his efforts to remain a detached observer, his ancestral connection to the soil ensures that the "external other" is never entirely separate from his own self-conception. His anger and discomfort are, in many ways, an admission of a broken bond; the intensity of his criticism suggests that he is not merely looking at a foreign country, but at a distorted reflection of a part of himself he has spent a lifetime trying to transcend. Ultimately, Naipaul's narrative reveals that even the most externalized "other" remains a haunting presence within the traveller's own identity, suggesting that for the displaced subject, total detachment is as impossible as total belonging.

Alienation as Structure and Experience

Both texts reveal alienation not as a fleeting emotion, but as a structured condition meticulously shaped by a confluence of social, cultural, and historical factors. The metaphor of "architecture" is particularly apt here, suggesting that alienation is not a random or chaotic state of mind but an organized experience with identifiable patterns, foundations, and reinforcing structures. In this framework, the traveller does not simply "feel" alienated; they inhabit a space designed by the historical traumas of colonialism and the rigid demarcations of the modern nation-state. This structural alienation dictates the boundaries of what can be felt and recognized, creating a psychological environment where the self and the other are perpetually negotiated within a pre-existing blueprint of conflict or displacement.

In Zaheer's narrative, this architecture of alienation emerges from the painful internalization of historical conflict, specifically the enduring and bifurcated legacy of Partition which forces a psychic split between shared culture and national loyalty. In Naipaul's work, the structure is built from the perception of irreconcilable cultural difference and the profound difficulty of squaring diasporic expectations with a visceral, often disappointing reality. Despite these divergent origins one rooted in an empathetic mourning for lost unity and the other in a detached critique of perceived stagnation both authors depict alienation as a dynamic and evolving experience. Through the act of travel and the friction of the encounter, these structures are tested, revealing that while alienation may be a permanent feature of the postcolonial condition, its form is constantly being reshaped by the movement of the subject through time and space.

Memory, History, and Identity

Memory and history function as the primary scaffolding for the experience of otherness, acting as filters through which the traveller interprets every landscape and encounter. In *At Home in Enemy Land*, memory serves as a subversive force that connects individuals across militarized borders, actively challenging the state-sanctioned notion of fixed national identities. For Zaheer, the act of remembering shared cultural practices and pre-Partition lineages becomes a way of dismantling the "enemy" status of the other. Here, memory is a restorative tool; it bridges the gap created by political history and suggests that the cultural self is much broader and more resilient than the narrow definitions provided by a passport or a border fence.

In sharp contrast, memory in *An Area of Darkness* is far more fragmented and spectral, reflecting V. S. Naipaul's fraught and complicated relationship with his ancestral homeland. For the diasporic subject, memory is often a collection of inherited myths and second-hand stories that rarely survive the impact of a visceral, physical encounter with the reality of the subcontinent. This fragmentation contributes to a profound sense of alienation, as the "India of the mind" fails to align with the India of the present. Instead of memory acting as a bridge, it becomes a source of externalization; the gap between the remembered ideal and the observed reality creates a psychological distance that Naipaul fills with critique and detachment, further alienating him from the "other" he expected to recognize.

Both texts demonstrate that identity is never an isolated construct but is deeply influenced by the weight of historical context and the selective nature of memory. They illustrate that the experience of otherness cannot be understood in a vacuum; it is always a dialogue between what is seen in the present and what is remembered or forgotten from the past. Whether memory acts as a conduit for empathy, as with Zaheer, or as a catalyst for estrangement, as with Naipaul, it remains the decisive factor in how the traveller perceives their place in the world. Ultimately, these narratives show that the "other" is often just a shadow cast by history, and memory is the light that either brings that shadow into focus or obscures it further.

Negotiating the Self and the Other

The interaction between the self and the other serves as the central axis around which both narratives revolve, transforming the act of travel into a liminal space where psychological and cultural boundaries are tested, breached, and ultimately redefined. For the traveller, movement across geographical terrain is secondary to the movement across the internal landscape of the psyche. In these narratives, the "border" is not merely a line on a map but a site of encounter where the traveller is forced to confront their own prejudices, memories, and sense of belonging. Through this process, travel becomes a transformative mechanism that strips away the static definitions of identity, replacing them with a more volatile and honest understanding of the self in relation to the world.

Noor Zaheer's narrative leans toward a philosophy of reconciliation and profound connection, suggesting that the "internal other" those parts of the self that have been alienated by political division can be understood and successfully integrated. By recognizing herself in the "enemy," she heals the psychic rift created by national borders. In contrast, while V. S. Naipaul's work is famously marked by clinical detachment and harsh critique, it also reveals subtle, involuntary moments of reflection where his rigid boundaries between self and other begin to soften. Even in his most caustic observations, there is a recurring sense of "the ghost of a personality" that he recognizes in the landscape, suggesting that the external "other" he criticizes is a mirror he cannot fully turn away from.

These complex negotiations highlight the inherently fluid and performative nature of identity, which is never a finished product but is constantly being shaped by ongoing interaction and experience. Whether through Zaheer's empathetic bridge-building or Naipaul's defensive externalization, both texts demonstrate that identity is a process of constant "becoming." It is a dialogue that remains open as long as the traveller continues to move and engage with the unfamiliar. Ultimately, these narratives prove that travel writing is less about the destination and more about the evolution of the traveller's own perspective, revealing how the collision with the "other" is what truly defines the "self."

Conclusion

This comparative study demonstrates that *At Home in Enemy Land* and *An Area of Darkness* offer profound insights into the construction of internal and external otherness, using the travelogue as a lens to decode the psychological landscapes of the postcolonial subject. Through their starkly different narrative trajectories, Noor Zaheer and V. S. Naipaul reveal that alienation is both a structural byproduct of history and a deeply visceral experiential phenomenon. The analysis proves that the distinction between the internal and external "other" is never a static boundary but a fluid negotiation shaped by the weight of cultural memory, the trauma of national history, and the traveller's own evolving perspective. In this context, travel writing emerges as a vital medium for exploring these shifting dynamics, transforming the journey into a site where the self and the other are perpetually dismantled and

reimagined. Ultimately, the paper underscores that alienation is not merely a terminal condition of separation but an active, ongoing process of negotiation through which individuals grapple with the complexities of identity and belonging in a world still defined by the echoes of colonial and national divisions.

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