



The politics of the perimeter: Analyzing state citizen dynamics in the travel narratives of Noor Zaheer and Roy Moxham's *The Great Hedge of India*

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between the state and its citizens as represented in travel narratives, with particular focus on Noor Zaheer's writings and Roy Moxham's *The Great Hedge of India*. By exploring the historical and contemporary significance of borders, surveillance, and control, the study analyses how travel writing reveals the political dimensions of space. The concept of the "perimeter" is used to understand how states regulate movement, resources, and identities, often shaping the everyday experiences of citizens. Through a comparative reading, the paper argues that travel narratives expose the tension between authority and lived reality, demonstrating how boundaries both visible and invisible mediate state citizen relationships. Ultimately, these texts highlight how travel writing can serve as a critical tool for interrogating power, governance, and resistance.

Keywords: State, citizen, borders, travel writing, surveillance, colonialism, governance

Introduction

Travel writing is frequently celebrated for its themes of exploration and cultural immersion, but it serves an equally vital function as a rigorous lens for examining political structures and the mechanics of power. In narratives that traverse militarized borders or strictly regulated terrains, the abstract concepts of authority, control, and citizenship manifest as visceral, everyday realities. The concept of the "perimeter" a boundary designed to define, monitor, and regulate space becomes the central framework for understanding how states exert power over both human movement and material resources. These perimeters are not merely geographical markers; they are the physical manifestations of a state's desire to categorize individuals and maintain socio-political order.

Roy Moxham's *The Great Hedge of India* revisits a staggering, yet often forgotten, colonial project: a massive, living barrier constructed by the British to enforce the salt tax. This physical hedge functioned as an elaborate tool of surveillance and economic extraction, providing a literal example of how colonial authorities regulated movement and access to basic commodities. In contrast, Noor Zaheer's travel writings engage with contemporary landscapes where the perimeters are often ideological or defined by post-Partition geopolitics. Her work explores modern landscapes marked by state intervention and social inequalities, where the "hedge" has been replaced by checkpoints, permits, and the internal boundaries of class and religion.

This paper explores how these distinct narratives depict the friction between state power and individual experience, illustrating the enduring impact of regulated space on the human psyche. It argues that travel writing exposes the ways in which perimeters whether they are the physical remnants of a colonial tax barrier or the modern, bureaucratic hurdles of a divided nation shape the lived realities of citizens. These boundaries often produce a climate of tension and alienation, yet they also become sites of negotiation and subtle resistance. By analysing these texts, we can see how the perimeter acts as a crucible,

testing the individual's agency against the rigid structures of the state.

Theoretical Framework: Perimeter, Power, and Space

The concept of the perimeter extends far beyond mere physical barriers, encompassing sophisticated systems of control and ideological regulation. In political terms, perimeters function as the primary mechanisms through which states delineate territories, enforce legal jurisdictions, and manage the flow of populations. They serve as the "skin" of the nation-state, sensitive to any breach and designed to filter the desirable from the undesirable. By examining these boundaries, we can see how the state manifests its presence in the most remote or mundane locations, turning a simple road or a marketplace into a site of sovereign authority.

Drawing on spatial theory, this paper considers how space is not a neutral void but is actively produced and regulated through the exercise of power. Borders, checkpoints, and surveillance systems are not merely geographical features or incidental infrastructure; they are the active instruments of governance. These structures dictate the "right to the city" and the "right to the road," determining who can move, where they are allowed to go, and under what specific conditions of visibility or silence. In this framework, space becomes a contested field where the state's desire for order clashes with the individual's impulse for mobility.

Travel writing provides a uniquely valuable perspective on these dynamics because it necessitates the physical movement across these regulated spaces. Travellers, by their very nature, are the ones who collide with both the visible and invisible perimeters that structure everyday life. Whether it is a literal wall of thorns or the bureaucratic wall of a visa interview, the traveller documents the friction of these encounters, offering granular insights into how power operates on the ground. Through the travel narrative, the abstract concept of the "perimeter" is humanized, revealing the emotional and physical toll of living within or attempting to cross the boundaries of the state.

Colonial Control in *The Great Hedge of India*

Roy Moxham's *The Great Hedge of India* uncovers the staggering history of a massive, living barrier that once spanned over 2,500 miles across the Indian subcontinent to enforce the British salt tax. This "inland customs line" was not merely a botanical curiosity but a formidable instrument of colonial policy, designed to prevent the smuggling of salt a basic biological necessity from low-tax regions into high-tax ones. By transforming the landscape into a militarized zone of extraction, the British created a perimeter that was as much an economic trap as it was a physical obstacle, fundamentally altering the geography of the region to prioritize revenue over the survival of the populace.

The hedge represents a striking historical example of "biopower" exercised through absolute spatial control. By regulating access to a life-sustaining resource, the British colonial state imposed severe economic hardship and malnutrition on millions of subjects, demonstrating the cold link between governance and resource monopolization. This perimeter functioned as a one-way filter: it allowed for the smooth flow of colonial capital while strictly prohibiting the traditional, local movements of traders and commoners. Through this massive thicket of thorns and prickly pear, the state asserted its right to dictate the terms of existence, proving that territorial sovereignty is often most visible at the point where it restricts human needs.

Moxham's narrative masterfully combines meticulous historical research with the physical act of travel, as he attempts to retrace the elusive remnants of this vanished wall. His journey through modern India reveals a profound paradox: while the physical structure of the hedge has largely been swallowed back into the earth, its legacy remains deeply embedded in the collective memory of colonial exploitation. Through this narrative, the perimeter emerges as both a material ruin and a powerful symbolic construct, highlighting how colonial authority permanently reshaped the relationship between the state and its subjects. Moxham shows that while hedges may die, the structures of surveillance and control they pioneered continue to haunt the contemporary landscape.

Contemporary Borders in Noor Zaheer's Travel Writing

Noor Zaheer's travel narratives shift the focus to contemporary South Asian contexts, where borders are not merely lines on a map but active forces that dictate social and political realities. Her writings frequently traverse regions marked by deep-seated conflict, systemic marginalization, and an overbearing state presence. In these landscapes, the "perimeter" is transformed from a physical barrier into a pervasive atmosphere of regulation. Zaheer highlights how modern boundaries are often invisible yet deeply embedded in the social fabric, manifesting as restricted zones, checkpoints, and the psychological weight of being "watched." Her work demonstrates that the modern state maintains its grip not through thorns and hedges, but through the strategic management of movement and the categorization of its people.

These narratives place a profound emphasis on the human dimension of regulated space, focusing on the granular experiences of individuals who must navigate these high-stakes environments daily. By foregrounding personal stories, the struggle to visit a dying relative across a border or the indignity of a bureaucratic interrogation Zaheer reveals the exhausting complexities of living within a

"parameterized" society. Her accounts suggest that for those on the margins, the state is not an abstract entity but a tangible obstacle encountered in every commute and conversation. This focus on the intimate and the domestic allows Zaheer to expose the cracks in the state's facade, showing how personal resilience and cross-border empathy often persist despite the official mandates of hostility.

Unlike the literal, botanical barrier of the colonial era, contemporary perimeters are often less tangible but arguably more powerful because of their institutional nature. They operate through a complex web of policies, surveillance mechanisms, and digital tracking that shape how citizens interact with authority and one another. Zaheer's writing illustrates that while a physical hedge can be outgrown or cleared away, a bureaucratic perimeter is much harder to dismantle as it lives in the laws and the mindsets of the populace. Ultimately, her travelogues serve as a critical record of how the modern state continues to define the limits of belonging, proving that the struggle for agency is as much about navigating the invisible barriers of the present as it is about remembering the physical ones of the past.

State Citizen Dynamics: Control and Negotiation

Both Moxham and Zaheer masterfully illustrate the persistent tension between state authority and individual agency, positioning the "perimeter" as a site of constant friction rather than absolute control. While the state employs physical or bureaucratic barriers to regulate and monitor, individuals are portrayed as resilient agents who find ingenious ways to navigate, resist, or adapt to these constraints. This dynamic suggests that power is never a top-down monologue but a turbulent dialogue. In these narratives, the act of traveling serves as a diagnostic tool that reveals the limits of sovereignty, showing that no matter how high the hedge or how strict the checkpoint, the human impulse for mobility and survival remains a potent counterforce.

In *The Great Hedge of India*, the imposition of the draconian salt tax and the construction of the customs line led to widespread smuggling and localized resistance, highlighting the inherent flaws in colonial spatial control. Despite the British state's massive investment in a literal wall of thorns, the sheer necessity of salt forced the local population to find gaps in the perimeter, proving that economic desperation can bypass even the most formidable surveillance. Similarly, Zaheer's narratives reveal the modern equivalent of this resistance through everyday acts of negotiation. Her subjects work within and around contemporary systems of regulation using shared linguistic codes, navigating informal trade routes, or exploiting bureaucratic loopholes to maintain their dignity and social connections in the face of state-mandated division.

These interactions underscore the fact that the relationship between the state and the citizen is fundamentally transactional and continuously negotiated. Power is exercised through the creation of perimeters, but it is also contested the moment someone attempts to cross them. By documenting these lived experiences, travel writing offers a far more nuanced understanding of governance than official historical records or political treaties ever could. It captures the "micro-politics" of the border, where the grand designs of the state are often dismantled by the small, persistent actions of individuals. Ultimately, both authors demonstrate

that while the state can design the architecture of a space, it cannot entirely dictate the movements of the people who inhabit it.

Memory, History, and the Politics of Space

Memory serves as the essential scaffolding for understanding the perimeter, transforming a mere physical barrier into a site of historical consciousness. In Moxham's *The Great Hedge of India*, the investigative journey to rediscover the "customs line" serves as a radical act of historical recovery, dragging a largely forgotten chapter of colonial extraction back into the light. By tracing the faint, overgrown remnants of the barrier, Moxham challenges the sanitized, dominant narratives of "benign" British administration. This act of remembering proves that the perimeter's most enduring impact is not the physical hedge itself, but the economic and psychological scars it left on the Indian landscape scars that only become visible when someone makes the deliberate effort to look back.

In Zaheer's narratives, memory is inextricably tied to place, illustrating how the ghosts of history continue to haunt and dictate contemporary realities. For her subjects, borders are never just abstract lines or modern physical divisions; they are deeply embedded in a collective memory of Partition, displacement, and shared heritage. The contemporary perimeter is thus layered with the weight of what was once there, making the act of crossing it a bittersweet confrontation with a divided past. Zaheer reveals that the state may control the current territory, but it cannot entirely colonize the memory of those who remember the landscape before it was fractured, turning the travelogue into a repository for a "hidden" history that resists official erasure. The politics of space, therefore, involves a dual struggle: the physical control of territory and the ideological shaping of historical narratives. Travel writing sits at the intersection of these two forces, offering a critical perspective on how spaces are constructed, policed, and remembered. By moving through these perimeters, both authors demonstrate that the state's power is most effective when it can force the populace to forget alternative ways of being. Ultimately, by documenting both the material ruins of the past and the lived tensions of the present, Moxham and Zaheer prove that memory is a form of counter-mapping a way for individuals to reclaim their own geography from the rigid, exclusionary blueprints of the state.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that contemporary travel narratives provide an essential lens through which to examine the intricate relationship between state power and individual experience. Through their sustained engagement with perimeters both the literal colonial barriers explored by Moxham and the bureaucratic, post-Partition divides navigated by Zaheer these authors reveal the complex, shifting dynamics of control, resistance, and negotiation. The concept of the perimeter serves as a vital framework for understanding how states systematically regulate space and movement to assert sovereignty, thereby shaping the lives of citizens in profound, often restrictive ways. However, these narratives simultaneously prove that individuals are not merely passive subjects of statecraft; they are active participants who constantly navigate, subvert, and challenge these structures through their own mobility. Ultimately, travel writing emerges as a critical tool for understanding

the politics of space, as the act of moving across boundaries and documenting lived experiences exposes the inherent tensions between authority and agency, offering a significantly more nuanced view of the state citizen relationship than official records ever allow.

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