

Re-creating the Cultural Apparatus of Human Rights through Petrofiction in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*

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Abstract

The current paper reads petrofiction in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*, where he approaches the climate change crisis by re-imagining an 'exoticised' past, negotiated in the present through narrative multiplicity and cultural specificity. Using Pramod Nayar's work on the cultural apparatus of Human Rights, the paper examines characters in "from the egg seller's end", who instantiate the strategic exoticization and articulation of the liberatory potential of the exotic. There is a re-writing of the diaspora experience by employing the folkloric, and by extension, through exaggeration and parody. The extension of the human rights discourse to the folkloric, as suggested by Pramod K. Nayar, can help to re-vitalize and radicalize the universal human rights discourse. Nury and the Malik's stories, read through Nayar's lens, pose a resistance to the institutionalized abstraction of the human rights discourse by foregrounding rumour, communal voice and cultural memory, moving the conversation from literary style to political reality.

Keywords: *Oil, petrofiction, stereotype, ambivalence, human rights, folkloric*

Historically, the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf, have had an abundance of natural resources, oil and natural gas, in particular. In fact, oil and petroleum fields continue to dominate the region's economy. Europe's competing imperial interests have colonized and controlled this region's oil fields from as far back as the nineteenth century (Aktürk 155). The Gulf was a strategic asset that could fulfil the British navy's rising demand for fuel. However, post-World War II, the exit of the British from these lands, did not end the Western greed for

oil (Jones 208). At the advent of the twentieth century, America started developing and controlling oil reserves in the Gulf region, to supply their own growing needs. Thus, oil continues to be both the bane and the boon of this region (209).

As a postcolonial writer, Amitav Ghosh in his *The Circle of Reason*, re-imagines the 'exoticised' past, negotiated in the present through narrative multiplicity and cultural specificity. *The Circle of Reason* is a bildungsroman about Alu, the novel's central character and his tryst with his uncle Balaram, who is an obsessive champion of European modernity. It is set as a tale of circuitous travel, reflecting the human drain of Indians to the oil rich Gulf in order to improve their living conditions, as well as the refugee crisis in India, accompanying and following the 1971 Bangladeshi War of Independence.

The current paper focuses on a frame-tale in the novel, a micro-petrofiction¹ constituted by a single chapter entitled "from an egg-seller's end". "From the egg seller's end" is another bildungsroman around a fringe migrant character, an egg seller, Nury, the cross-eyed Damanhour, who disrupts and interrogates the narrative of Enlightenment modernity. Using Pramod Nayar's work on the cultural apparatus of Human Rights, the paper examines characters in "from the egg seller's end", who instantiate the strategic exoticization and articulation of the liberatory potential of the exotic.

Pramod K. Nayar argues for a new cosmopolitanism by undertaking a "close examination of the linkage between translation, language and human rights, the textual and cultural apparatuses that enable various stories to be articulated, heard and held in our heads" (Nayar, "Subalternity" 25). Nayar argues that it is in the "rights imaginary's multi-modal discourse where the subject of human rights emerges" (Nayar, *Writing Wrongs* 19). "From the egg seller's end" interweaves two kinds of immigrant stories. First, that of the undocumented worker, Nury's, and another, which involves colonizers like Goat's Arse and Thin Lips. The use of the folkloric in these stories is a narrative technique that radically reposition the marginalized native as well as the immigrant within the broader human rights debate in a manner that "radicalize(s) local political thought by translation and folklorise(s) global discourses of rights by embedding them in local contexts" (Nayar, "Subalternity" 25).

The story takes place in the fictional land of al-Ghazira, which symbolizes the Gulf area. It is rich in oil and natural resources and has been appropriated by both colonialists and neo-colonialists. It is ruled by the Malik, an astute leader who represents cultural pride in his land and history and works towards the interests of his people. The British send their 'Resident' to al-Ghazira. This Resident, is named 'Goat's Arse' by the locals. He tries to 'plead and argue', but fails miserably in convincing the Malik to sign the Oil Treaty that would unilaterally benefit the British. The British, as is their wont, follow the carrot and stick policy. The Malik decides to teach the overbearing British a lesson. He revisits his own historical literature for a solution and devises a scheme for retribution. But the creative plan is only a partial victory because of the last-minute fiasco at the hands of Jabal, the eunuch. Although the Malik, with the aid of Nury and Jeevanbhai, manages to prevent the bombing of his land, his victory is short-lived as the British immediately send in a stiffer replacement. Eventually, the Bedouin tribesmen are exiled and the Oil Treaty is signed. Stripped of all power, the Malik's only saving grace is that the Oilmen are never to leave the Oiltown, nor are they to enter al-Ghazira. Like all lucrative business ventures, in due course, the flourishing Oiltown grows expansively around al-Ghazira.

The colonizers change, while colonization continues. Driven by the spirit of acquisitiveness and plunder, the latest owners of the Oil Company are a trans-national group. This company, as it currently stands, is both the product and the premise of a new neoliberal world economy. They want al-Ghazira's sacred marshy land against all odds. Meanwhile, the Malik's brother, the Amir, is a Western-bred young man, who has little connect with his own

roots. He kowtows to the demands of the Oil Company and derives personal benefit from it. He has conspired to transport especially grown date palm varieties, that can survive the most arid areas. He wants to co-opt the locals by alluring them with the fruits of Western technology. Nury passes on this information to Jeevanbhai. The former takes matters in his hands and locks the Malik in his Old palace to single-handedly and heroically keep the Malik out of any trouble, while earning for himself the opportunity to play a bigger administrative role in future. The plan counter-fires and as result the Malik is further marginalized, the fate of Jeevanbhai in al-Ghazira is sealed forever and he is driven to penury, while Nury himself, dies.

The Malik's story is an extension of the historical colonization of the Arab and Persian lands by British and American ideologies of control and extractivism manifest in global commodity consumerism and neoliberalism. The entire episode interweaves colonialism and neo-colonialism in and through the use of the folkloric to broaden the human rights at stake for marginalized subjects, the undocumented immigrant as well as the native.

Petrofiction as Social Action:

Arguably, realism is too unreal and inadequate to retrieve and recalibrate the violent loss of a past. As a postcolonial political move, revisionist history re-written in purely realist terms, would only re-iterate and fix further the subjugation experienced by the Persian and Arabian people, within the Empire-building narrative of Enlightenment-led Europe in essentialized and reductive terms. Postmodern aesthetics strategically allows the authoritativeness and causality inherent in a realist representation of the past to be subverted in and through the strategic (re)fashioning of the past as a fantasy structure, for example, in magical realism. Befittingly, speaking of Garcia Marquez's use of marvellous realism, Kumkum Sangari argues that "the margin for arbitrariness, the casting up of the strange, the incongruous, the peripheral, is the product of a historical situation. At this level, marvellous realism embodies a specific social relation" (160)

Stylistically, petrofiction in Ghosh's novel enables the retrieval and recreation of a past—a re-writing of history—that is too painful, unreal and inadequate to confront in purely realist terms. Representationally speaking, this fantasy structure is postmodernist and postcolonial in its ethical and aesthetic approach. Arguably, the importance of postcolonial representation as praxis radically disrupts and (re)encounters the legal and institutional foundations of the human rights discourse.

Nury, the egg seller, paradoxically sets the stage for what Pramod K. Nayar calls "heteropathic empathy" (Nayar, *Human Rights* 75) in the discourse of postcolonial human rights. Networks of power and neoliberal economy fail to recognize the interests and rights of marginalized people like indigenous people, migrant workers. The story of Nury, the cross-eyed Damanhourli (Ghosh, *COR* 266) is in the form of an allegorical fable, a frame-tale narrative, which postures as a fantasy matrix that connects other migrants like Jeevanbhai and natives like the Malik. The narrative structure of fantasy and folkloric grotesque enable a radical discourse of vernacular human rights based on shared vulnerabilities. Paradoxically, Nury's death signifies the failure heteropathic empathy at the precise moment where a new history of al Ghazira begins.

Notably, in *Orientalism*, Said inaugurates a postcolonial (re)reading of Western discursive practices and western hegemony, that manifest in the ongoing and continued proclivity of the West to portray the Orient and its peoples as underdeveloped and inferior in contrast to the civilized West. The West was "always in a position of strength" (Said 40), and this position was justified by the stereotyping of the Orientals as "irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, "different"" in contrast to the 'rational, virtuous, mature, "normal"' Europeans. Said argues that the West consumes an oriental view of the Arab as "camel-riding, terroristic, hook-nosed, venal lechers whose undeserved wealth is an affront to real civilization" (108).

Bhabha discusses the act of stereotyping as a “colonial fantasy” (Bhabha, *LOC* 116) that is always already counterintuitive in “staging the ambivalence of desire, (as it) articulates the demand of the Negro which the Negro disrupts” (117). For Bhabha, the stereotype is indeterminate and critically innovative because it “gives access to an ‘identity’ which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference, and (the) disavowal of it” (107).

Petrofiction as a form of “social action” (Bergthaller 123) can forge forth new ways of conceptualizing “modes of referentiality” in terms of (neo)colonial encounters in petrochemical terms. Speaking from the post-colony, Nury, the egg seller’s story is not a story about eggs but about oil. It is a highly mediated encounter that deploys migrant-ness within and as a (neo)colonial and post-truth condition. The diegesis links an ongoing re-production of the exoticised stereotype across plausible and ironic encounters.

Alternatively, a deliberate exoticising of the past exemplifies an inescapable fear of history by the postcolonial subject who uses it as a defence mechanism to come to terms with incumbent pain and loss. Thus, there is a convergence of twin postcolonial goals here: First, is the necessity to defend native consciousness by representing a past that cannot be revoked in realist terms. In fact, the past must be liberated by radical re-writing and re-reading practices; the latter involving innovative interpretative strategies. The term ‘native consciousness’, here does not denote a stable category. Taking cue from Bhabha, native consciousness is non-unified, indeterminate and putatively threatening towards any bogus attempt at foreclosing the gap of the stereotype’s inherent ambivalence. The second goal, here, refers to the cogent and pragmatic need for post-colonial representation, particularly when it exceeds and disrupts the limits of the stereotype set by the colonizer.

As argued by Said, colonialism and neocolonialism (re)employ and perpetuate stereotypes about the marginalized and subalternized native individual. In this regard, Ghosh’s petrofiction indexes visibility to a range of filial affiliations that the native individual has, with his/her own past in and through its continuity with the present. This allows for a tectonic shift of the stereotyped ‘dummies’ of the past, both colonial and native, to implode into the present in narrative encounters that are both accidental and necessary. Such a shift becomes a narrative device that can enable the native individual towards a (re)definition and (re)working of postcolonial subjectivity by (re)working the stereotype in ways hitherto unexpected; ways that are elliptical, elusive, disruptive and hence incomprehensible to the (neo)colonizer, but also realistic, embedded and concrete. The strategic use of stereotypes attests to the epistemic violence involved in naming as categorization and as cultural appropriation. Moreover, they create shifting webs of meaning associated with differential social formations engendered by migrant-ness. Thus, as the real tale about the stereotyped native, the telling of Nury’s story is a methodological and epistemic enquiry into the process by which fiction operates interchangeably with and as fact.

The narrative of the petrofiction episode starts in a non-linear and circuitous manner, but after a point, it progressively and contrastively, enters the vortex of a neocolonial-neoliberal present. The story starts with the introduction of a fringe character, who in Ghosh’s lexicon, belongs to the “footnotes” (Ghosh, *IAAL* 18) of history. If the realist colonial plot involves conflict-resolution as the grand colonial scheme of a colonial story authorized by the rational, cogent and logical colonizer, responsible for counter-intuitively controlling, reforming and governing the barbaric, sub-human and un-civil natives and their land; this is a postcolonial-postmodern creative reversal of the realist plot.

To start with, Ghosh introduces the episode in a mythical folkloric manner: "Once many, many years ago, so long ago that the time is of no significance, an odd-looking man, a very odd-looking man, appeared suddenly one day in al-Ghazira" (Ghosh, COR 264). The fabula becomes an optic mechanism for a distinctively postmodernist ethics and aesthetics. The ant-frying episode generates a chronotope that mythopoetically slips between the imagined past and the postmodern-postcolonial present. Like stories around myths and legends, it is interspersed with moral axioms [like "Here is a lesson" (266), "There is a moral" (267)]. However, the story itself is not fantastic, marvellous or magical. It is gritty in its realism, while drawing attention to its inherent parody and irony. Consequently, they intensify the process by which certain kinds of (violent) facts matter more than others in constituting the truth.

The recurrent use of 'many' years ago indicates an unfathomable past horizon, which is jarringly juxtaposed, at the episode's end, with a definitive present, where the episode's temporal framing situates it in the "last (previous) year" (283). This generates a chronotope² of simultaneous and multiple time-spaces where a speculatively (re)configured nostalgia for the past is continued and confirmed (in)credibly in a cogent but alienating present.

The story of Nury, the cross-eyed Damanhour

Within the human rights discourse, Nury exemplifies the state's ethical paradox. At one level, he may be seen as the facilitator of the right to seek a better life as per Article 13 of the UHDR, and at another level, he may be seen as a disposable body.

Nury illustrates Said's argument about the colonizer's presupposition of the Oriental male stereotype, in general and the Arab, in particular. On closer inspection, however, he (re)occupies and (re)works the liberatory and strategic semiotic space of colonial macro-history, wherein Nury accumulates micro-physical power from within his stereotypically archaic subject position and location. Nury occupies what Kristeva calls the "imprint of an archaic moment, the threshold of space, the chora as primitive stability ... markers of something in the process of becoming stability" (285). Coming suddenly from nowhere in particular, Nury has no origin details and is to be ignored as a harmless, ineffectual old man who has failed to bear children. He is odd looking, rather ghoulish; described as a "mangled rag". He looks "twisted and pulled inside out". His skin is the colour of "bile" and he is "cross-eyed". For the stereotyping colonial gaze, his eye-lid, that has been violently "torn off its hinges", is a "decoy" for his deception. As it turns out, his concomitant strabismus is a stereotypical disguise for "a good eye and a quick mind" (271).

Nury embodies colonial fantasy and phobia—what Bhabha calls, 'mastery and pleasure' along with 'anxiety and defence'. He is a parody of the colonial stereotype as he explodes the limits of, and thereby, inverts the colonial stereotype through the use of exaggeration and oxymoron. The use of the oxymoron in describing him, is striking: "In his own small way Nury was a great man; he had the wisdom to see the world clearly" (265). Interestingly, his reputation is that of an impotent man is a Saidian stereotype of the colonized male. But Nury re-enacts his own brand of strategic dyspraxia and concomitant strabismus from within the framework of this stereotype. His (dis)ability is supplemental and excessive. His harmlessness to women is recoded as oral lore, his ability to partake in old wives' tales within the traditional, orthodox and segregationist Arab world.

Arguably, his radical oddness is what enables him to partake of the folkloric, while (re)inscribing and (re)inventing his own stereotype. Thus, he obtains agency and resource out of this strategic exoticization.

As it transpires, Nury is the most astute entrepreneur, the city has ever seen. For the first time in the region, he has had the sharp business sense to start a retail trade in eggs; his totem—the role of rumour and reputation, that hinges and capitalizes on the entrepreneurial and

innovative commodification of a capitalist (neo)colonial encounter that validates western fashions like the new Malik's excessive fondness for eggs as well as insidiously and spontaneously obtained retail success in non-colonial indigenous encounters that are based on semiotic interrelationships within the colony.

In fact, narratively speaking, his entrepreneurial success pivots around his transformative ability to re-orient the manner in which traditional colonies are mediated through the colonial gaze. Rumour is not just his *modus operandi*, it is a part of his spectral visage, enabled within and through the modes of strategic exoticism. What he does or is capable of, precedes his physical presence and opens up the possibilities for modes of referentiality that subvert the modernist logic of medicine and order. He challenges the gaze of rationalist colonial authority and his ambivalent gaze is a coping mechanism that creates the third space of migration, where the migrant is bereft of any rights. It is in his narrative positioning as the strategic stereotype that incarnates the gaze, that he performs the interrogative role of an emergent and strategic stereotype of Arab society. He opens up the possibilities of narrative conditioning and truth-telling as politically and linguistically mediated encounters.

Yet, Nury's story is marked by his vulnerability. His position of economic, masculine and capitalist dominance is undercut by the implosion of another—the sexually conquering, seventy-five-year-old hag Saneyya, who is referred to as the “Terror of the Deep” (277). As Jeewanbhai's plan to burn the date palms fizzles, Nury is at the end of his tether and flees from the harbour towards the Oiltown. Nury, dies not die a valiant death in championing the Malik's cause for self-determination and a moral and literal victory for the native indigene. Nury's unsentimentally normalized death is a grotesque anticlimax. While fleeing from the Amir's men, he begs “a whole world of faces... masks” to open the gates of the Oiltown, but no one does. The folkloric subject is left unacknowledged and anonymized by the global capitalist order. Finally, he is attacked by a frightened camel that bites his head off. Nury, is thus a resurgent cog in the wheel of al-Ghazira's micro-history.

However, this micro-history from “long ago” (281), which continues to be systematically obliterated by the imperial (over)writing of macro-history, is (re)written after all. At stake, moreover, his story is a differential representative device, one that foregrounds the resistance, agency and consciousness of the native individual and their (re)claiming of their (en)gendered land, not literally but in the metaphorical terms offered by the folkloric. Their geopolitical gap marks their narrative re-opening in terms that exceed and invert the limits set by the stereotype traditionally engineered by the colonizer. Thus, the frame-tale narrative of Nury, embedded within the myth/lore of ‘ant-frying’, partakes of a “creative nostalgia” for a colonized past. The past is thus trans-coded within the ambivalence afforded by the strategic stereotype into the transgressive act of writing back of the ‘exotic’. Such an attempt, renders itself as well as the experience of colonialism, incomprehensible to the colonizer, while enforcing a heterogenous and vitally productive narrative re-telling of the emergent post-peak oil transnational individual.

Ant-frying in al-Ghazira

The fictitious island of al-Ghazira is the symbol of a land rich in natural resources, appropriated by colonialists and neo-colonialists. Their appropriation of al-Ghazira for its oil resources suggestively illustrates America's appropriation of Iraqi oilfields. The British send their ‘Resident’ (s) to al-Ghazira. Re-reading from an Indian perspective, the Residents allegorically represent the officials of the British East India Company, espousing the ethic of free trade. Ghosh's description of the quintessential British officer, in his pomp, ceremony and

great fanfare, is telling. Here, Ghosh mock-heroically deflates European racial and intellectual priority and privilege. Thus, al-Ghazira instantiates a political and social allegory of colonialism and continuing neocolonialization.

The town of al-Ghazira is welcoming and hospitable to a range of fortune-seekers. It represents a space that appreciates individual merit and hard work. But this hospitality is undercut by the hostility espoused by neoliberal and neocolonial entities, who will just easily as their colonial counterparts, loot native people and their lands, often by meddling into the country's internal politics. Thus, al-Ghazira illustrates the (re)creation of a national history chequered by bloodshed, exclusion and dispossession.

At a private dinner invitation with the Malik, the British Resident arrives with his elaborate accoutrements. His assumed position of priority and divine right is deflated mock-heroically through the local act of writing back. Through an act of reverse stereotyping, the colonizers are christened Goat's Arse and Thin Lips. 'Goat's Arse' tries both to 'plead and argue' and fails miserably to convince the Malik, to sign the Oil Treaty. The stereotype of the undeservingly rich, obdurate, irrational, irascible, barbaric and odd Arab who lacks intelligence correlates with Said's exposition of the stereotypical Arab. There is a lyrical quality to Ghosh's description of the old Malik in his young days, which operates through concealment and unprovoked defence. "He never laughed, never smiled, and such was his temper that much of the time people were grateful to leave the Fort alive" (268). The Malik and his stratagem in dealing with Goat's Arse contrapuntally (re)configures the stereotypical Arab. "He (the Old Malik) decided to fry Goat's Arse" (268). The Malik's rejoinder to British ambition, materialized through the representational politics of colonial discourse, is disruptive, experimental and pragmatic. He revisits his own history from a simultaneously embedded and multi-locational perspective. Ant frying is allegedly an old al Ghaziri custom. The precise time at which it is revoked (re)fashions international diplomacy and tips the power balance in favour of the al Ghaziris, enough to have them live to fight another day. The Malik's plan is innovative, revisionist, farcical, and strategically inverts a brave, if misfired, attempt at teaching the British a lesson.

Right above the palace gate, Jabal, the coward eunuch, is positioned with a huge cauldron of boiling oil. As per plan, the Malik lights his signal fire. The oil from Jabal's vat goes pouring over the tail of Goat's Arse's horse, Goat's Arse himself missing it within a hair's breadth. Such a dire act of defiance against a British representative could spell instant doom for the Malik, but this is where the "speaking truth to power" comes in handy. Nury, who is lucky to have witnessed this scene first hand, rushes to report it to Jeevanbhai.

Jeevanbhai is the quintessential cosmopolitan from India and is known by his travel history. Though hailing from multiple locations, in terms of their experience, both the Malik and Jeevanbhai are lumped under the generic stereotype of the Oriental male. Thus, together they share the ignominy of colonial domination by the British in different contexts/situations and with different experiences, with colonialism as the common denominator that undergirds their embedded positions. Through their atavistic collaboration encoded in Urdu, together they mount an offensive against the colonizer. As per Jeevanbhai's advice, the Malik makes the first move, preempting the British. The matter reaches Goat's Arse's boss, who swears by the British policy of not meddling with the natives' own beliefs and practices. He invokes(ents) the ancient al-Ghazira custom of Ant Frying. This is the oriental mock-heroic rejoinder to British organizational supremacy and control. As folk-lore, the ant frying is a defense mechanism that preserves the memory and the dignity of the marginalized.

The new Oiltown

The British send Thin Lips to al-Ghazira, who quickly and more efficiently slips into his predecessor's role. Even more greedy and cunning than Goat's Arse, Thin Lips, finally procures the Oiltown for the British. The final deal is that the Malik is to remain confined to his fort, while his Bedouin tribesmen are exiled and the Oil Treaty is signed. Stripped of all power, the only saving grace for the Malik is that the Oilmen are never to leave the Oiltown, nor is he to enter al-Ghazira.

However, the expansionist agenda of the new imperialists, the Americans, continues unabashed. The ownership of the oil company changes and the oil market gets more competitive. The aggression and greed for Gulf land and oil resources intensifies. The Malik has shots fired at the trespassing Oilmen at the Old Fort. Responding to the Oriental encounter, the Americans secretly liaison with the Amir, the Malik's half-brother. The Amir is Ghosh's fictional recasting of Bhabha's "mimic man" ("Of Mimicry" 126). Having received his education in England and America, he is predominantly Western in his tastes and habits. His disconnect with his roots is illustrated by his ludicrous weakness for boiled eggs. In response to the offers by Oil companies, he has no cultural pride for his own land and culture and hence no imperative to review and refer to his own history. He mounts no defence against those who aggress against his land or its people. In fact, the Amir conspires to forward his own neoliberal agenda.

Deconstructing rootedness through stereotypes

If the stereotype denotes both a subversive rite of passage of the native individual and the multi-locality of routes "to come" (Derrida 39) through an embedded and critical (re)examination of the racist/racialized global citizen, rootedness is a virtue that resurrects and (re)installs itself at the precise moment of the postcolonial encounter that refuses obliteration by a proxy (re)writing of history. Rootedness, however, always carries with it the risky proposition of being ossified into overuse through stereotypes, which are, in fact, liable to being endlessly clichéd, thereby losing their political valence as a postcolonial device for 'writing back'. While the stereotype as a postcolonial device may expose the nihilistic presence of the colonized as it 'articulates the demand of the Negro which the Negro disrupts', the stereotype itself runs the risk of being clichéd, thereby losing its nihilistic edge in postcolonial praxis. Therefore, contrapuntal stereotypical praxis must reiterate its disruptive operations in radical and unexpected ways.

Moreover, despite the constraints of the stereotype, if rootedness is a condition that obliterates the proxy voice, global encounters and travels that privilege the free-flow of individuals too run the risk of a complete obliteration of local and embedded histories on the travelling/local individual's own terms. Men like Jeevanbhai and Nury exemplify the loss incurred due to their root-less status in al-Ghazira. Jeevanbhai, for example, acts as a go-between and makes no scruples about earning his own profit-share. He has willy-nilly remained loyal to the Malik. He has kept the besieged Malik aware of the city's local affairs, even and especially those concerning the colonizers. He has also clandestinely supplied arms and ammunition to the Malik, making his own profit in the bargain. For the most part, his allegiance is not questioned because of his ready slippage as a flexible stereotype, who does not pose a threat to ideological demands of colonialism. His root-lessness in al-Ghazira as the temporary home for a cosmopolitan traveler from India, grants him a flexible operability around the old Malik (as his most trusted unofficial Lieutenant) as well as the British.

However, the moment he invokes a presumptive allegiance to the Malik in a rooted defense of al-Ghazira's national history, his very rootless-ness menacingly boomerangs at him.

He becomes not only un-representable but also disposable or unnecessary to represent. In a bid to save al-Ghazira from the nefarious designs of the foreigners, he plans to soak the date palms in oil and set them alight with the aid of Jabal and Nury. Jabal betrays them and curries favour with the Amir, followed by the former's rise to power. Meanwhile, Jeevanbhai's possessions are seized and he is driven to penury. Thus, Jeevanbhai's counter-plan to ward off complete control by the oil companies is foiled, and with this, is ruined his fantasy about mastering the game-changing plan synecdochally for his master. Like Nury, he too comes to learn the bitter truth about the disposability of his relation with al-Ghazira and its people. Both Nury and Jeevanbhai, do not have their roots at al-Ghazira. They are the racialized homogenized Oriental stereotype, subject to differential forms of local racialization at the hands of those who are themselves racialized—the people of al-Ghazira as well as the cosmopolitan group of quasi-indentured Oilmen. Nury's grotesque killing and Jeevanbhai's death-in-life condition exceed the racialized encounters illustrated by the stereotype and constitute a different kind of 'writing back' against "nanoracism"³ (Mbembe 363).

According to Pramod K. Nayar, traditional human rights discourse is fundamentally flawed because it relies on legalistic, institutionalized and state-sanctioned definitions of the human. For marginalized, undocumented and displaced people, these frameworks are not accessible. The folkloric matrix emerges as a space where the vernacular human rights discourse is forged. This new ethic and aesthetic of human rights signify precarious lives like those of Nury, Jeevanbhai and the Malik, who the law ignores but folklore embraces. Their shared lives, vulnerabilities, laughter and tragedy validate each other's presence within the folkloric orientation of the vernacular human rights discourse.

Conclusions:

To conclude, *The Circle of Reason* approaches the climate change crisis by re-imagining an 'exoticised' past, negotiated in the present through narrative multiplicity and cultural specificity. The novel's use of the folklore instantiates a deliberate and strategic attempt at exoticizing and thereby articulating the liberatory potential of the exotic by narratively employing local myth and legend. Stylistically, the folkloric in Ghosh's story enables the retrieval and recreation of a past—a re-writing of history—that is so full of pain and loss, that realism is too unreal and inadequate to confront it. The frame-tale narrative of Nury, embedded within the myth/lore of 'ant-frying', partakes in the nostalgia of a colonized past trans-coded into the transgressive act of writing back of the 'exotic', so as to attempt to render itself as well as the experience of colonialism, incomprehensible to the colonizer. Such a (re)fashioning is made possible by the radical and strategic use(s) of colonial stereotypes to continually deconstruct the inscrutability of the Orient. Thus, postcolonialism becomes an ongoing process motored by the fear of (neo)colonial history, rendering a cyclical (re)production of hope and anxiety that continue to offset each other within the folkloric matrix.

The strategic and agential use of exaggeration and parody as a belated postcolonial encounter works at positively re-affirming the stereotype by inverting the colonizer's logic of the stereotype. The code is set by the fringe native individual, who now decodes the rights' narrative from his own vernacular position. The distancing effect produced by the frame of the tale, in fact, re-frames the colonizer's act of deploying stereotypes, thereby producing them in strategic, individual, local, critical and situational terms. A critical inquiry into these lives involves a reorientation from epistemology to ontology, linking individual and collective consciousness, in ways that are distinctly heteroglossal, non-linear (as against a linear historical consciousness) and contingent.

Notes:

1. This tale is not explicitly about the novel's central protagonist, Alu, but is, in fact, interlinked with his destiny. A minor and technically experimental avatar of Alu's life, this tale exemplifies and presages Alu's increasing alienation.
2. Speaking of Amitav Ghosh's essay "Petrofiction: The Novel and the Oil Encounter", Ilana Xinos explains that:

Ghosh coins the term 'petrofiction' to classify literature about the oil industry, and likens petrofiction to literature about the spice trade. Ghosh remarks, 'If the Spice Trade has any twentieth-century equivalent, it can only be the oil industry' (Ghosh, IC 8). Ghosh speculates that the reason behind the lack of petrofiction is the history of oil, which is embarrassing to all parties involved. He argues that places where oil encounters happened were inhabited mainly by oral cultures, and were 'those parts of the Middle East that have been the most marginal in the development of modern Arab culture and literature—on the outermost peripheries of such literary centers as Cairo and Beirut' (Ghosh, IC 8)". (2)

1. Bakhtin defines the chronotope as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" and understands it as "a formally constitutive category of literature" (Bakhtin qtd in Vlasov 42).
2. Mbembe uses the term "nanoracism" to denote the racism that is deployed in everyday social relations, and is designed to stigmatize, to injure and to humiliate "those we do not consider to be one of us" (364).

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