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Petrofiction at the Periphery: Reconceptualizing Indian Oil Literature through Gulf Migration in Benyamin's *Goat Days* and Deepak Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People*

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh coined the term "petrofiction" in 1992 to name a global literary failure: fiction's inability to reckon with oil's reshaping of modern society. That the diagnosis came from an Indian writer makes its domestic non-application particularly telling. India consumed approximately 5.3 million barrels of oil per day in 2023, ranking third globally, and is projected to lead global consumption growth through 2025 (EIA), yet has produced no sustained literary engagement with petroleum on its own soil. This article argues that Indian literature's relationship with petrofiction is genuine but limited in scope: it exists almost entirely as Gulf labor migration narrative, most significantly in Benyamin's Goat Days (2008) and Deepak Unnikrishnan's Temporary People (2017), works that render the human cost of petroculture through the disposable bodies of Keralite migrant workers in Gulf petro-states. Drawing on Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer's Energy Humanities framework and Ghosh's concept of the "oil encounter," this article reads both texts as representing only one vector of India's petroleum relationship, namely the externalized labor of a consuming nation, while domestic petroculture, from the Digboi oilfields to ONGC refinery townships, remains narratively invisible. This absence is not incidental; it reflects how postcolonial consuming nations structure their literary imagination of energy, displacing oil onto sites of extraction and labor export while rendering their own petroleum dependency mundane and therefore unwritable.

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Introduction

In March 1992, writing in *The New Republic*, Amitav Ghosh posed a question that helped establish an entire academic field: why, when there was so much to write about, had the oil encounter proved so "imaginatively sterile" (Ghosh, "Petrofiction" 29). The essay, titled "Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel," was ostensibly a review of Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt*, but its real target was a global literary failure: the near-total silence of serious fiction around the commodity that had remade the modern world. Ghosh's review has become a foundational text for the emergent field of Petroculture Studies. The man who named the absence was Indian. The country that produced him consumes, as of 2024, approximately 5.6 million barrels of oil per day, ranking third in the world (EIA). It has produced almost no fiction about oil on its own soil. This is not an oversight; it is a problem worth examining.

Petrofiction, in Ghosh's original formulation, named novels that engaged directly with the "oil encounter": the social, political, and human transformations wrought by petroleum, particularly at the collision point between extracting and consuming nations. Two decades later, writing in a 2012 issue of the *American Book Review* dedicated to the subject, Imre Szeman argued that the term ought to be construed far more capaciously, as a periodizing gesture encompassing all fiction shaped by what he called "petromodernity." Szeman and Dominic Boyer's *Energy Humanities: An Anthology* (2017) consolidated this framework, insisting that the humanities had an obligation to make visible the energy systems that sustain and increasingly threaten the conditions of modern existence.

India's relationship to petrofiction is more complicated than a simple absence. There is a body of Indian literature that engages seriously and powerfully with petroleum, but it arrives from a very specific direction. The novels that constitute India's most sustained engagement with oil are not set in Assam or Gujarat or the refinery townships of coastal India. They are set in the Gulf. Benyamin's *Goat Days* (Aadujeevitham, 2008; translated 2012) follows a Keralite laborer, Najeeb, into the kafala system of Saudi Arabia, a narrative shaped entirely by the economic logic of a petro-state that imports cheap, disposable migrant bodies to sustain its oil-funded infrastructure.

> The Arab literature in the modern era, which began with the invasion of Egypt by Napoleon in 1789, produced, after periods of translations and adaptations, works of different themes starting with poems written by Mahmud Sami al-Barudi, Ahmet Shavki and Hafez Ibrahem who are the pioneers of the neo-classical poetry, and the first original novel in Arab literature, namely Zaynab, by Muhammad Husayn Haykal. (Urun 131)

Deepak Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People* (2017) is formally fragmented, multilingual, and experimental, but its subject is the same: the South Asian workers who built the Gulf's petromodern cities and were erased in the process. Both are significant works of literature. They are also, in a structural sense, incomplete as Indian engagements with oil.

This article argues that while the Kerala-Gulf migration narrative forms India's most sustained engagement with petroleum literature, it represents only one half of the oil encounter, specifically the externalized labor of a consuming nation, leaving domestic petroculture, extraction ecology, and refinery life almost entirely unrepresented in Indian fiction. The article proceeds in four parts: first, it surveys the existing scholarship on petrofiction; second, it articulates its methodology; third, it reads *Goat Days* and *Temporary People* as powerful but partial petronarratives, tracing what each text illuminates and what each leaves dark; and fourth, it maps the domestic blind spots and asks what it means, politically and culturally, that a nation of India's petroleum scale cannot yet narrate its own oil life.

Literature Review

The scholarly history of petrofiction begins with Ghosh's 1992 *New Republic* essay, which established the "oil encounter" as the paradigmatic subject of a missing literature. Ghosh's frame was deliberately narrow: he was interested in the dramatic, historically legible confrontation between extraction capital and local societies, and his exemplary text was Munif's *Cities of Salt* (1984), a five-volume Arabic-language novel charting the transformation of a fictional Arabian community by the arrival of American oil prospectors. That Ghosh found almost no English-language equivalent was, in his reading, a symptom of Anglophone fiction's structural inability to reckon with the material foundations of the modern world.

Szeman (2012) significantly expanded this framework, arguing that petrofiction ought to be understood as a periodizing concept encompassing all cultural production shaped by fossil fuel modernity, not merely those texts set at identifiable extraction sites. This move from oil-as-drama to oil-as-infrastructure opened the field to a far wider range of literary objects, including texts in which petroleum is structurally present but thematically invisible. Szeman and Boyer's *Energy Humanities* anthology (2017) further consolidated the argument that humanities scholarship bears a particular responsibility in the age of climate crisis to make visible the energy regimes that sustain and endanger modern life.

Within this broader field, scholarship on postcolonial petrofiction has developed along two primary axes. The first, rooted in Nigerian and West African contexts, focuses on the Niger Delta tradition: the fiction of Ken Saro-Wiwa, Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010), and the associated tradition of testimony and environmental writing that emerges from communities devastated by extraction capitalism. This body of work, analyzed at length by Wenzel (2014) and Hitchcock (2010), is notable for its proximity to the extraction site itself. The second axis, more recently theorized by the contributors to Balkan and Nandi's *Oil Fictions* (2021), concerns the

petromodernity of consuming nations, that is, the diffuse, infrastructural presence of oil in daily life that realist fiction has historically rendered invisible.

Indian petrofiction occupies an anomalous position within this field. Karinkurayil's *The Gulf Migrant Archives in Kerala* (2024), the most comprehensive recent study of Gulf-Kerala cultural production, examines photographs, films, and literary texts to argue that the Gulf has been constructed in Kerala's cultural imaginary as "a genre considered private, with all its force, emotions, and affect, but devoid of a public language other than that of remittance" (15). Menon's "Kerala's Own Petrofiction" (2022) has mapped the Malayalam literary tradition of Gulf migration, situating texts by Benyamin, Unnikrishnan, and other writers within an evolving genre of petrofiction shaped by the oil economies of the Arabian Gulf. Earlier, Karinkurayil (2020) analyzed *Temporary People* within the framework of refugee and migrant studies, while Bhatia (2017) examined Unnikrishnan's formal experimentation as a response to the disposability of Gulf migrant workers. However, no study has systematically examined what the Indian petrofiction tradition includes and what it structurally excludes, specifically the entire domestic dimension of India's petroleum life. Balkan and Nandi (2021) have noted that petrocultural discourse has been largely tethered to cultural production in the Global North, and that postcolonial contexts, including their ecological dimensions, represent one of the field's most significant blind spots. This article situates itself in that gap.

Recent scholarship in the energy humanities has further sharpened the stakes of this inquiry. Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* (2016) argued that the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture and imagination, and that the realist novel's constitutive tendencies make it structurally ill-equipped to represent either the causes or the consequences of fossil fuel dependency. Trexler's *Anthropocene Fictions* (2015) and Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) have extended this analysis to the Global South, arguing that the slow, diffuse ecological violence of petroculture demands new narrative forms and new critical frameworks. Nayar's *Ecocriticism and World Literature* (2019) has brought these debates to bear on Indian literary contexts, though without sustained attention to the petroleum question. This article draws on all of these traditions while offering a focused analysis of the structural asymmetry within India's own petrofiction corpus.

Methodology

This article employs a close reading methodology situated within the theoretical framework of Energy Humanities and postcolonial ecocriticism. The primary texts, Benyamin's *Goat Days* and Deepak Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People*, are analyzed in their English-language versions as literary objects whose formal choices are understood to be ideologically and culturally significant, not merely aesthetic. Close reading, in this context, means attending not only to what the texts represent but to what they structurally occlude: the argument of this article depends as much on reading absence as it does on reading presence.

The methodological framework draws on Szeman's concept of "petromodernity" as an analytical lens, understanding oil not simply as a thematic subject but as a structural condition of modern life that may be present in a text even when it is unnamed.

> The fictional work Aadujeevitham (Goat Days), by the contemporary Malayalam author Benyamin, was published in 2008. The book portrays the migrant experience of an unskilled laborer who migrates to Riyadh hoping for a secure life, but he undergoes inhuman hardships that are new to the diaspora experiences. The writer addresses a much-under-researched labor migrant experience in this novel. (Nimmi 27)

This permits the analysis of *Goat Days* as a petrofiction despite the near-total absence of oil as a lexical item in the novel: the kafala system, the logic of disposable migrant labor, and the remittance economy of Kerala are understood as petroculture formations regardless of whether the word "oil" appears on the page. Alongside this, the article draws on Arne Naess's ecosophy (1989) as a framework for analyzing what is absent from the Indian petrofiction corpus at an ecological level: not merely the human communities organized around domestic petroleum, but the non-human world shaped by a century of extraction in ecologically sensitive terrain.

The comparative dimension of the analysis, reading the two primary texts against each other and against the absent domestic tradition, is informed by Ghosh's distinction between the "oil encounter" and the structural naturalization of oil in consuming societies. The article also makes limited use of secondary historical and empirical sources, including EIA data on India's petroleum consumption, historical accounts of the Digboi oilfield, and documentation of the ONGC township culture, in order to demonstrate the material existence of a domestic petroculture that fiction has not yet rendered. This combination of literary close reading, theoretical framing, and historical contextualization forms the article's methodological approach.

What Indian Petrofiction Does: A Close Reading

(i) Goat Days: The Oil Encounter as Labor Trap

The novel opens in a prison. Najeeb, a modest sand-miner from Kerala, travels to Riyadh in the 1990s hoping to earn a fortune, only to become enslaved for over three years in the desert interior of Saudi Arabia on a goat farm at the mercy of a cruel employer, his arbab. What Benyamin grasps, and what literary criticism has been slower to name, is that this enslavement is not incidental to the petroleum economy. Within the kafala system, a foreigner is barred from working in Gulf Cooperation Council countries without local sponsorship; once that employment relationship is severed, foreign workers become illegal residents and must immediately leave the country. Najeeb is not an exception produced by a bad sponsor. He is a logical product of a system designed to ensure that labor can be imported, used, and expelled with the least possible friction.

The novel's most striking formal device is its treatment of the desert as an anti-environment. The world Najeeb is transported into contains none of the cultural or spiritual associations that literature has historically projected onto desert landscapes. Benyamin's narrator reflects directly on this:

> Writers in every language and religion have seen the desert as a space for enlightenment and spiritual revival. There are writings that suggest life in the desert can create an explosion of knowledge in the brain. But the desert did not revive me in any way. I lived in the desert for more than three years. (Benyamin 89)

This passage performs a systematic dismantling of the redemptive desert narrative. Where the literary tradition offers the desert as a site of revelation, Najeeb's desert offers only endurance. The irony is structural: Najeeb inhabits the physical space that a literary imagination would read as transformative, while the actual transformation wrought on him is entirely dehumanizing. Benyamin's refusal of consolation here is also a refusal of the aestheticization of labor violence.

That dehumanization reaches its most concentrated expression in Najeeb's account of his attachment to a kid goat born on the farm. Unable to maintain human bonds across the distance that separates him from his family in Kerala, Najeeb displaces parental feeling onto an animal:

> While the rest were fed from the common pail of milk, I made him drink separately. I fed him tender leaves of grass, making him walk by my side when the goats were taken out. Like a naughty boy, he would break away and spring ahead, and turn his head to look at me. when I caught him, I would kiss him. For me, Nabeel was not one of the many goats in the masara. He was my own son. (Benyamin 76)

The passage is simultaneously tender and devastating. That Najeeb has named the goat after the son he has never seen, using the name he had already chosen for his own child, makes legible the depth of the displacement the kafala system enacts. The petro-state does not merely exploit labor; it severs the worker from the relational world that gives his labor its meaning. Benyamin's realist mode, with its interior access and affective directness, renders this severing in ways that structural analysis cannot.

The novel's resolution offers no easy consolation. When Najeeb finally contrives an escape and finds his way back towards India, the anticipated reunion is shadowed by an awareness of irreversible loss. The novel records his reflection:

> I realized how painfully distant it was from my dreams. We shouldn't dream about the unfamiliar and about what only looks good from afar. When such dreams become reality, they are often impossible to come to terms with. (Benyamin 198)

This passage, placed near the novel's close, captures Benyamin's central argument about the Gulf labor economy. The dream of the Gulf, circulated through

Kerala's remittance culture and reproduced through the social pressure of neighbors who "came back with money," is itself a petroculture product. The aspiration that draws men like Najeeb to the Gulf is not a freely formed desire but a desire shaped by decades of Gulf petrodollars flowing into Kerala's social fabric. *Goat Days* never names this structure directly, but the novel's emotional architecture makes it unmistakable.

And yet oil itself is nowhere in the novel. There are no derricks, no refineries, no pipelines. The word petroleum does not appear. This is the central interpretive challenge *Goat Days* poses to petrofiction scholarship: it is a novel entirely organized by the oil economy while remaining almost entirely silent about oil. Benyamin's novel performs that invisibility at the formal level, giving us the human wreckage of the oil encounter without naming the encounter directly. This is not a failure of the text but its most precise achievement: it reproduces, at the level of narrative structure, the same invisibility that the kafala system imposes on the workers it processes.

(ii) Temporary People: Form as Argument, City as Product

Where Benyamin writes in the realist tradition, lucid, interior, and emotionally legible, Deepak Unnikrishnan dismantles it. *Temporary People* compiles twenty-eight short stories across three parts, using official reports, transcripts, lists, and surreal metamorphoses to build a kaleidoscopic portrait of migrant workers in the UAE. As Unnikrishnan has described the UAE in his author's note, it is "a nation built by people who are eventually required to leave" (Unnikrishnan, Author's Note). That phrase works as both epigraph and argument: the entire formal architecture of the collection follows from it.

Unnikrishnan's most direct formal argument is made through the three "Pravasis" chapters, which serve as connective tissue between the collection's three books. The first of these consists entirely of a list of words used to describe the Gulf's migrant population:

> Expat. Worker. Guest. Worker. Guest Worker. Worker. Foreigner. Worker. Non-resident. Worker. Non-citizens. Workers. Workers. Visa. People. Visas. Workers. Worker. A million. More. Homeless. Visiting. Residing. Born. Brought. Arrived. Acclimatizing. Homesick. Lovelorn. Giddy. Worker. Workers. (Unnikrishnan 23)

The formal strategy here is accumulation without individuation. The words pile up not to describe any particular person but to map the administrative and affective vocabulary through which the Gulf state processes the human beings it requires. The repetition of "Worker" throughout the list enacts structurally what the kafala system enforces legally: the reduction of a diverse population to a single functional category. Karinkurayil (2024) has noted that Kerala's Gulf migrants have historically been characterized by a "silence" in public discourse, a silence that Unnikrishnan's formal strategy directly counters by making the very names of that silence into literary material.

The opening story of the collection pushes this formal strategy to its logical extreme, depicting a laborer who physically transforms into a passport as he navigates the airport bureaucracy of departure:

> . . . past the guard on night duty, made it on the morning bus to the airport, past the bored ticket agent at Check-In, past Security, past pat down and a rummage through his suitcase, past using the bathroom once, twice, thrice, to pee, to shit, to sit, past Duty Free where he stared at chocolates and booze and magazine and currencies . . . (Unnikrishnan 3)

The passage's relentless "past" construction formally enacts the condition of invisibility it describes. The migrant is not an agent moving through the airport; he is an object being processed through it, catalogued and cleared at each checkpoint. The surreal metamorphosis into a passport that follows is Unnikrishnan's most condensed argument: the Gulf migrant labor system ultimately reduces its workers to documents, to the visa and the passport that authorize their presence and define the terms of their expiry.

The collection's engagement with the petromodern city is equally direct. A highway passage in one of the stories registers the built environment of Gulf petromodernity with characteristic precision:

> The highway that takes travelers from Abu Dhabi to Dubai is clean and fine. Illuminated at night by cat's eye reflectors, it's a highway designed for machines, where Lamborghinis speed, why the desert got bisected, why the camels were fenced out. (Unnikrishnan 112)

The final three clauses of this sentence perform an interpretive move of remarkable economy: the highway is not merely described but explained. It is the reason the desert "got bisected," the reason the camels "were fenced out." The petromodern infrastructure does not merely alter the landscape; it reorganizes the relationship between the human and non-human world, substituting the logic of machine speed for the logic of ecological cohabitation. The workers who built this highway are absent from it, displaced into the stories that the highway itself passes through without acknowledging.

Both texts, taken together, define the shape of India's petrofiction tradition and the precise nature of its limitation. *Goat Days* and *Temporary People* are set in Saudi Arabia and the UAE respectively. India exists in both as origin-point and structural absence: it is the place of poverty and longing, the landscape of flashback, and the country the characters carry inside them as they build other people's nations. Neither novel looks at Digboi or Koyali, at an ONGC township in upper Assam, at a truck driver on NH-8 hauling diesel across the Gangetic plain, or at the decades-long politics of the kerosene subsidy that structured the kitchen lives of India's rural poor.

> The non-oil-producing Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa are suffering from chronic high unemployment rates, especially among the youth. The availability of affordable and secure financial services is considered as one

> of the pillars for generating economic growth, stimulating job creation and reducing unemployment. (Alshyab et al. 100)

This is a structural feature of how India's literary class has imagined its oil encounter, not a failure of individual artistic imagination.

The Missing Half: Domestic Petroculture and the Research Gap

(i) India's Domestic Petroleum Landscape

The material exists for an Indian domestic petrofiction. It simply has not been written. India's commercial oil history began in 1889, when the first significant gush of crude was struck at Digboi, Assam, among the earliest commercial oil discoveries in Asia and one of the first in the world. The Digboi Refinery was commissioned on 11 December 1901, making it one of the world's oldest continuously operating refineries. This is a 135-year-old industrial site with a colonial origin story, a World War II history, a postcolonial transition through nationalization, and an entire township culture built around extraction, a culture that has produced, to this article's knowledge, almost no literary representation in Indian fiction in English.

For decades, India's petroleum exploration and production was controlled by two nationalized companies, Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) and Oil India Ltd., while refining, distribution, and marketing were conducted by Indian Oil, Bharat Petroleum, and Hindustan Petroleum.

> Oil and Natural Gas Corporation is a leading Exploration and Production Company in India. In order to manage, monitor and supervise its vast machinery and sensor data at its diverse drilling and production sites, it needs an automated supervisory system. ONGC uses the industry-popular Supervisory Acquisition and Control System (SCADA). (Butta 1)

These are not neutral corporate entities; they are state formations, institutions that embody Nehruvian nation-building ambitions. Nehru famously described dams and industrial plants as the "temples of modern India"; the same rhetorical frame applied to refineries, to the ONGC township at Nazira, to the Barauni refinery in Bihar that became a pipeline terminus for Assam crude. These sites produced communities, class identities, and human lives. They have not produced novels.

(ii) Structural Reasons for the Absence

At least four structural reasons converge to produce this absence. The first is that India's domestic oil encounter does not fit the classical petrofiction template. Ghosh's original formulation of the "oil encounter" was predicated on a dramatic confrontation: American capital arriving in the Arab world and the transformation of desert communities by the sudden presence of foreign extraction machinery. India's domestic oil history has none of these features in the same form. ONGC is a state entity, the inheritor of a colonial infrastructure, not a dramatic foreign intruder. The "oil encounter" in India is mediated by postcolonial bureaucratic nationalism. Bureaucratic extraction in a nationalized industry is simply harder to translate into fiction.

The second reason concerns narrative affect. Gulf migration fiction is emotionally immediate in a way that domestic petroculture is not. Najeeb's imprisonment in a desert goat farm, Unnikrishnan's workers processed through airport bureaucracy: these are acute, individualized conditions that literature is constitutively well-suited to render. The diffuse, infrastructural presence of oil in domestic Indian life does not lend itself to the same emotional legibility. Ghosh himself observed, in *The Great Derangement*, that the contemporary realist novel "rarely allows the climate to violently intrude upon the habitual routines and ordinary concerns it prefers to portray." Precisely because petroleum infrastructure has been so successfully naturalized into the texture of Indian daily life, it has become invisible in the way that all infrastructure becomes invisible, by working.

The third reason concerns caste and class. The communities most directly shaped by India's domestic petroleum infrastructure, including the workers of the Digboi oilfield, the refinery labor force at Barauni, and the contract workers at Koyali, are not the communities from which India's literary class is drawn. Kerala's Gulf migration tradition partly escapes this problem because the Keralite middle class is itself implicated in the migration economy: as Karinkurayil (2024) has shown, the Gulf exists in Kerala's cultural imaginary not as an alien site but as a familiar, if privately encoded, dimension of social life. The subaltern petroculture of domestic extraction sites does not have the same class proximity to the writers who might represent it.

> Migration from Kerala to Gulf countries began to be studied by considering the changing economic structure of the Gulf countries after the oil upsurge that was a significant pull factor in the migration of numerous laborers from Kerala and other parts of India. (Nimmi 27)

A fourth dimension, less frequently theorized, is philosophical rather than structural: the absence of an ecosophic framework in Indian literary culture's engagement with petroleum. Deep ecology, as Naess (1989) formulated it, insists on the intrinsic value of nature independent of its usefulness to human beings, a position that stands in direct tension with the instrumental logic of petroculture. The Digboi field and the broader upper Assam petroleum basin sit within one of the world's most biodiverse regions, the Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot, contiguous with the eastern Himalayan foothills and the Brahmaputra floodplain. Oil extraction in this landscape, conducted continuously since 1889, has produced an ecological history of hydrocarbon seepage, pipeline rupture, and refinery effluent that remains almost entirely unnarrated in Indian fiction. Balkan and Nandi (2021) note that the absence of a sustained petrocultural paradigm in postcolonial contexts, including the ecological dimensions of extraction, represents one of the field's most significant blind spots.

This gap matters now, not eventually. India is now positioned at a geopolitical and ecological crossroads: the third-largest consumer of oil in the world, also among the most climate-vulnerable nations on earth, and also one of the largest

investors in renewable energy transition. A national literature that has narrativized oil exclusively as a phenomenon of labor export has not equipped its readership with the imaginative resources that energy transition requires. As Nixon (2011) argues, the slow violence of petroculture, its incremental, diffuse, and politically unmemorable damages, demands sustained narrative attention precisely because it resists the dramatic eventfulness that dominant narrative forms prefer.

Conclusion

Indian petrofiction constitutes a meaningful and formally accomplished literary tradition. *Goat Days* and *Temporary People* are not peripheral works: they represent among the most rigorous engagements with the human consequences of the global oil economy that postcolonial fiction has produced in the past two decades. Benyamin renders the petrodiaspora with an economy of prose that transforms individual suffering into structural critique; Unnikrishnan dissolves the realist novel's formal coherence to enact, at the level of narrative architecture, the disposability his characters cannot escape within the Gulf's sponsorship regime. Both texts fulfill the foundational imperative of petrofiction as Ghosh conceived it: to make visible the human cost of the oil encounter that the global economy consistently keeps invisible.

The limitation this article identifies, however, is not one of quality but of orientation. Both texts direct their literary gaze outward, toward the Gulf petro-state. India functions in each narrative as point of origin and structural absence: the landscape of longing from which migration departs, never the site of petroleum's domestic operations. Indian fiction sees the worker in the petro-state, but not the petroleum in the nation-state. Szeman's expanded framework, which encompasses all cultural production shaped by petromodernity, only sharpens the paradox: India's petromodern condition is wide-ranging and complex, yet its literary representation remains limited.

The consequence of this partiality extends beyond literary-critical accounting. In *The Great Derangement* (2016), Ghosh argued that a society's capacity to respond to fossil fuel dependency is conditioned, in part, by its capacity to represent that dependency in narrative form. A national literature that has narrativized oil exclusively as a phenomenon of labor export, locating India's petroleum encounter in the Gulf rather than in the Assam oilfields, the ONGC refinery townships, or the domestic infrastructures of petromodern daily life, has not equipped its readership with the imaginative resources that energy transition requires.

Scope for Further Research

This article identifies several directions for future research. First, the Gulf migration tradition itself contains within it the materials for a return narrative: the remittance economy, the petromodern domestic space constructed in Kerala with Gulf capital, and the returned worker as a figure who carries the contradictions of

the petro-state back into Indian social life. Karinkurayil's *The Gulf Migrant Archives in Kerala* (2024) and Menon's "Kerala's Own Petrofiction" (2022) have begun to map the Malayalam literary tradition of Gulf migration in depth; the next step would be a systematic analysis of return narratives in this tradition and their relationship to the domestic petroculture the present article has identified as absent.

Second, the sites this article has identified as conspicuously absent from Indian fiction, Digboi, Barauni, the kerosene-to-LPG transition, and the ONGC township as a postcolonial institutional formation, represent not merely gaps in the archive but unwritten chapters of India's modernity. Future research might examine whether Indian climate fiction, as it develops in response to accelerating ecological crisis, assumes the representational burden that realist fiction has declined; whether regional-language fiction, in Assamese, Hindi, or Odia, has produced domestic petroculture narratives that the English-language critical tradition has overlooked; and whether the genre of the industrial novel, undertheorized in Indian literary studies, might offer a framework for such a literature to emerge. The comparative question also remains open: how does the structural partiality of India's petrofiction compare with that of other large postcolonial petroleum consumers, such as China, Brazil, or Indonesia?

Contribution to Existing Knowledge

This article contributes to the emerging field of postcolonial petrofiction studies by identifying and theorizing what it terms the "structural partiality" of Indian petrofiction. While previous scholarship, including Karinkurayil (2020, 2024), Menon (2022), and Bhatia (2017), has analyzed specific texts or aspects of the Kerala-Gulf literary tradition, no prior study has systematically mapped the Indian petrofiction corpus as a whole, distinguished between its accomplished Gulf-migration axis and its absent domestic axis, and theorized the structural reasons for that asymmetry. The article's central argument, that India's literary class has displaced its oil encounter outward, rendering domestic petroculture invisible through a combination of class distance, narrative affect, and petromodernist naturalization, is new to the field.

Beyond corpus-level mapping, the article makes two further contributions. First, it introduces the concept of "structural partiality" as an analytical category applicable to petrofiction traditions in other postcolonial consuming nations whose domestic petroleum histories may be similarly occluded by more legible narratives of labor export or extraction-site suffering. Second, the application of Naess's ecosophy to the Indian petrofiction gap introduces a non-anthropocentric dimension into an emerging field that has largely been concerned with human communities and labor politics. By reading the absence of ecological oil narratives alongside the absence of domestic human ones, the article argues that Indian literature has failed to reckon with petroleum at both the social and the biospheric level, a double silence with significant implications for how Indian society can engage with the demands of energy transition.

In situating these arguments, the article also makes a methodological contribution: it demonstrates that close reading can be productively applied not only to what texts say but to what entire literary traditions structurally cannot say, using the tools of Energy Humanities and postcolonial ecocriticism to make visible the constitutive silences of a national literature. This approach, reading a tradition by its absences as much as by its achievements, offers a model for petrofiction scholarship beyond the Indian case.

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