Beyond 'Fiction' and Beneath 'Facts' of Diasporic Life-World: The Gulf Migration and the Cultural Artefacts

K. M. SEETHI
Mahatma Gandhi University

In the discipline of International Relations (IR), human life-world experiences seldom appear as a critical domain of investigation. Scholars, by and large, tend to ignore the stark realities of migratory spaces in international relations, even as new discourses on 'Diaspora' capture myriad events and practices beyond nations and territories. While postcolonial and post-structural theories focus on questions of citizenship, rights, identity, marginality, etc as sites of engagement, the mainstream IR scholars do not reckon with the ontological trajectory of new social and cultural spaces. An attempt is made here to bridge the gap between 'facts' (realist artefact) and 'fiction' (cultural artefact) by deploying strategies of reading 'texts' of 'fiction' and the context of 'facts'–as an interrelated/inter-con(textual) activity.

Plausibly, 'text' as a new Level of Analysis in IR would open up immense possibilities for situating critical questions of the life-world (such as identity, marginalisation, discrimination, exploitation, and alienation) in the context of understanding migratory spaces. The emergence of these theoretical constructs obviously provides a green pasture for new IR studies. It assumes that there can be no 'unbiased' or 'objective' study of IR that the reality of the past/present is always constructed from the accessible 'texts' we construe in line with particular historical concerns, and that all histories should be foregrounded, and non-literary texts produced from different orders of 'textuality' are part of the 'inter-texts' for discussions of history and IR. The *culture* here is inevitably *textual* and political and all cultural artefacts are equally the products of *discursive* practices. Thus, the linkages between 'history' and 'text' are critical in that it never privileges *historicity* or *textuality* to the exclusion of either.

The Question of Representation

The issues raised by cultural artefacts are now reinterpreted in the light of Foucauldian discourses, practices, and individual subjectivities. The writings of New Historicists like Stephen Greenblatt, Catherine Gallagher, and Louis A. Montrose contributed to an understanding that the production, categorisation, and analysis of literary texts are determined by forces of history which, in turn, would shape the cultural work itself. They demonstrate how a text could be explored and exploded, and the hidden discourses lying buried within it brought to light. Here the New Historicists deploy the procedures of deconstruction and post-structuralism in the realm of literary texts. The political and cultural turn that this method gave to the interpretation of literature refuelled literary studies to re-establish a link with the political and social world that gave rise to it. In the process of problematising the underlying link between literary discourse and other master narratives, New Historicism has made the relation between text and society its main concern. By exposing the strong economic, political and social forces propelling a literary text, New Historicism has tried to challenge the deeply entrenched hegemony of new formalism, new critical thinking, and historical positivism.

The social and historical conditions that paved the way for New Historicism have been discussed by many scholars in their essays and books. Foremost amongst them is Stephen Greenblatt (1982; 1983; 1990a; 1990b), Catherine Gallagher (1985; 1989), John Bannigan (1998), Edward Pechter (1987), Brook Thomas (1991), Louis Adrian Montrose (1992). The way Greenblatt puts across four "enabling presumptions" of New Historicism is a source of locating 'text' and 'context.' First, literature has a historical base and literary works are not

the products of a single consciousness but many social and cultural forces. In order to understand literature, one has to take recourse to both culture and society that gave rise to it in the first place. Secondly, literature is not a distinctively human activity hitherto believed, but another vision of history. This has obvious implications for both literary theory and the study of literary texts. Thirdly, since literature and human beings are both shaped by social and political forces, it is not possible to talk of an intrinsic human nature that can transcend history. And since history is not a continuous series of events but ruptures, there is no link between one age and another or between men belonging to different ages. And lastly, caught in her/his own historicity, a historian cannot escape the social or ideological constraints of her/his own formation. And, therefore, she/he cannot fully understand the past objectively on its own terms (Greenblatt, 1990).

These presumptions basically point out that New Historicism does not seek to retrieve the original meaning of a 'text' but locates the original context that gave rise to the 'text', which the 'text' represents within the boundaries of culture and sometimes beyond it. The New Historicists claim that since they see the texts as another artefact of the culture of a given age, they can go directly to the instruments that constructed the text unmasking their hegemony. And in claiming this, New Historicists advance two assumptions of post-structuralism: firstly, that a text can only be understood if we lay claims to the ideology of the age and not the intention of the writer; and secondly, the doctrine of textuality (that a literary work is another historical document or a 'text' rooted in the 'context') is the only means to understand the contextual meaning.

'Representation' and Resistance

It was Michel Foucault who provided a new turn to the question of representation. He did not see representation simply as the production of meaning within a given culture but as the production of knowledge itself. Foucault sought to analyse how human beings understood themselves culturally, how social knowledge was produced, and how meanings were shared amongst people in different ages. During his investigation, he uncovered specific ways by which meaning was produced; and these ways were coded in specific statements and regulated discourse. A discourse dealt with the ways knowledge was produced, legitimated, and perpetuated through the medium of language. Most of the things that happened in society and in the lives of people took place within the larger framework of discourse, according to Foucault. Language carries within itself a distinctive social character, which is more or less free from any intrinsic meaning that things might possess or people might ascribe in the act of speaking or writing. Discourses, representation, and knowledge acquire the force of truth only within a distinct historical context and possess no logical continuity from one historical context to another (Foucault, 1977; 1980; 1992).

The New Historicists like Gallagher (1989), Greenblatt (1990), and Montrose (1983; 1992) embrace Foucault's episteme, representation, discourse, and discursive formations in order to relocate the literary text in its context or historical moment. They visualise literary works as cultural artefacts and agents of discourses/knowledge production. They see literature as mediating rather than imitating human action, and in that sense literature shapes rather than reflects an age. A dialectical relationship begins to exist between history and literary texts as production and producer. New Historicists see history, not as blind scholarship but as a process, an ideology that completes itself upon the completion of a work of art. Historical events are now understood as stories of human agents and not as scientific narratives to represent reality. Ricoeur, Barthes, Gadamer, Arthur Danto, Habermas, Foucault and others revived interest in narrative techniques and the function of time. The postcolonial studies also bring into focus such questions of representation and resistance in a wide variety of contexts. Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have done considerable work on such themes.

In *Location of Culture*, Bhabha brings to light critical questions concerning those who live on the margins of different nations, in-between contrary homelands. For him, living at the border, at the edge, calls for a new 'art of the present.' This requires some sort of

commitment to a contra-logic of the border, making it inevitable to rethink the dominant modes of representing history, identity, and culture. For Bhabha, the border is the site where traditional modes of thinking are disturbed and disrupted by the possibility of 'crossing.' Here comes new, shifting complex forms of representation that deny conventional binary construction. So the argument has it that *imaginative* border crossings are as much a fallout of migration as *physical* crossings of borders. Bhabha thus opens up the possibility of such *imaginative crossings* against the received notions of identity and subjectivity which depend upon fixed, binary definitions such as native/foreigner, master/slave, inside/outside, citizen/stranger, etc.

The role of literature is significant here. Bhabha would suggest that the literature related to "migrants, the colonised or political refugees" could deconstruct received ways of thinking about the world - thereby rediscovering the complexities of culture and identity that exist within. However, these complexities and differences are often displaced, making it difficult for representation. Calling this 'incommensurable,' Bhabha tells us that there exists something that cannot be properly explained or measured by the prevailing system of language. Cultural differences are often made out as unrepresented. According to Bhabha,

"As literary creatures and political animals, we ought to concern ourselves with the understanding of human action and the social world as a moment when *something is beyond control, but it is not beyond accommodation*. This act of writing the world, of taking the measure of its dwelling, is magically caught in Morrison's description of her house of fiction – art as 'the fully realised presence of a hunting' of history. Read as an image that describes the relation of art to social reality, my translation of Morrison's phrase becomes a statement on the political responsibility of the critic. For the critic must attempt to fully realise, and take responsibility for, the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present" (Bhabha, 1994,p. 12).

Bhabha writes that the task would be "to show how historical agency is transformed through the signifying process; how the historical event is represented in a discourse that is *somehow beyond control.* He says that this discourse conforms to what Hannah Arendt suggested, "the author of social action may be the initiator of its unique meaning, but as agent, he or she cannot control its outcome. It is not simply what the house of fiction contains or 'controls' *as content*. Bhabha further draws our attention to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's *Within the Plantation Household* which unfolds "forms of slave resistance" through "murder, self-mutilation and infanticide…the core psychological dynamic of all resistance." Her view holds that, as Bhabha writes, "these forms captured the essence of the slave women's self-definition." We thus come across "how this tragic and intimate act of violence is performed in a struggle to push back the boundaries of the slave world" (Ibid: 16-17). The writings of Bhabha, Spivak and many others in the postcolonial tradition thus take us to a new possible domain of knowledge production that transcends the traditional mode of understanding. Nowhere else is this becoming increasingly relevant today than in the literature of/on migratory spaces (Diaspora). The paper seeks to fill a perceptible gap between a macro-level phenomenon (migration) and a micro-level reality (life-worlds in migratory spaces).

Contextualising Migration in the Gulf

International migration has always provided a spectrum of subjects for scholarly analyses in humanities and social sciences. The emergence of 'Diaspora' as a category further stimulated studies and research in both positivist and post-positivist traditions. In the discipline of IR, migration has drawn considerable attention, in recent years, primarily due to the accelerated pace of globalisation and exchange relations. Under the current spell of the international division of labour, the migratory spaces have emerged as challenging sites of mobilisation, struggle, resistance, and contestation. Issues of marginalisation, discrimination, exploitation, identity, rights, ethnicity, etc. are widely discussed in the literature on migration and Diaspora.

There are around 232 million international migrants living in the world today. Since 1990, the number of international migrants in the global North increased by approximately 53 million (65 per cent), while the migrant population in the global South grew by around 24 million (34 per cent). In 2013 migrants account for nearly 11 per cent of the total population in developed countries. In the developing world, the proportion of international migrants to the total population remained under 2 per cent, due to significant population growth and higher return levels. About half of all migrants reside in ten countries. In 2013, the United States of America hosted the largest number of international migrants (45.8 million or 20 per cent of the global total). Saudi Arabia (9.1 million) and the United Arab Emirates (7.8 million) stand next to the US (United Nations, 2013).

Since the discovery of oil in the late 1930s, the Gulf States has attracted more and more migrant workers. Migration to the GCC countries grew considerably after the oil boom in the early 1970s. After a negative migration rate during the Gulf War in the early 1990s, the number has been increasing again. Today the GCC countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and UAE) have a total population of 48 million, 46 per cent of which are migrants. In some countries, however, the percentage of migrants is almost 90 per cent making the GCC countries highly dependent on migrants. Most migrants are low-skilled workers from developing countries in South Asia like India and Pakistan (Middle East Institute, 2010). These migrant workers together with natural resources like oil are the pillars on which the GCC wealth is built.

The GCC countries are the largest recipients of temporary migrants globally, constituting almost 43 per cent of their population. In some countries such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, more than 80 per cent of the population consists of non-nationals. A majority of all migrants to the region are contract workers. Various studies say that there has been an upward trend in the proportion of expatriates in the GCC countries during the last two decades through measures have been put in place from time to time to reduce the number of foreigners through the indigenisation of the workforce. A consistent shift from Arab to Asian workers has taken place over time with the result that a majority of all foreign workers in most GCC countries are now Asian. About two-thirds of all migrant workers are men while the rest are women. Among men, more than half are engaged in low-skilled occupations in the production and labour occupational category, or in the service sector. A large majority (more than three-fourth) of all Asian women migrants are concentrated in a single occupation, domestic service. Reliance on domestic workers has been increasing in all GCC countries and such workers comprise about 10 per cent of the total population in some countries such as Kuwait. The six major sending Asian countries are India, Philippines, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. Notwithstanding a significant rise in expatriate populations, no concrete measures have been put in place in these countries that could significantly enhance the living and working conditions of workers in low-paid sectors from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh, who routinely face violations of international labour standards and human rights law. The Gulf countries seldom recognise the crucial role foreign workers play in their economies and take measures to ensure that their rights are fully respected.

Expatriates in these countries typically have their passports confiscated and are forced to work under the highly exploitative *kafala* system of sponsorship-based employment, which prevents them from leaving employers. Employers are rarely if ever, prosecuted for violations of labour law. As a result, expatriate workers in the Gulf frequently experience hazardous working conditions, long hours, unpaid wages, and cramped and unsanitary housing. The situation is particularly dire for the millions of migrant domestic workers, almost exclusively women, isolated in private homes. Excluded from key protections in national labour laws, they are at heightened risk of exploitation and abuse, and they are sometimes subjected to conditions of slavery. Almost all expatriate workers are driven by 'push' factors such as poverty at home, and the incapacity of their local economies to generate jobs for their bulging populations and to take advantage of their demographic dividends. They are also attracted by 'pull' factors like job opportunities and the possibility of sending back home financial remittances. Though the Gulf migration has brought in

'prosperity' for a major section of the expatriates, it also generated multiple issues of human misery, exploitation, and abuses, especially among the low-paid unskilled workers. It is along with this critical migratory space that the study tries to traverse.

Unfolding 'Slave Narrative'

Having seen the expanding migratory space in the Gulf, we now proceed to unravel the silenced or marginalised voices often held by the literary and cultural artefacts. The study tries to explore the *life-world* experiences of 'sufferings', 'alienation', and 'marginalisation' which the Indian expatriates have been facing for a long time in the Gulf through a reading of a novel (*Goat Days*) that emerged in the cultural domain of Kerala in the recent past. There is also a proliferation of writings (novels, stories, poems, and memoirs) in Malayalam during the last decade and a half. The context of this study is relevant in that Kerala expatriates in the Gulf are quite substantial in terms of number (more than 1.6 million) as well as the range of activities undertaken. These 'texts' of/on Indian Diaspora in the Gulf are immense sources of knowledge that are 'normally' unavailable in the IR literature. The paper, therefore, seeks to problematise the traditional 'fact/fiction dichotomy' by bringing into focus the life-world experiences of the Malayali diaspora.

As Sarah Waheed commented, though migration to the Gulf constitutes "the exemplary South Asian diaspora of our times," no other cultural artefact has cast the migrant Gulf worker as its principal character as that of the *Goat Days*. Benyamin has done it "by weaving rich descriptions of the protagonist's surroundings with a robust interior monologue" (Waheed 2012). The novel unfolds through the narrative of Najeeb, who used to eke out his livelihood by sand mining in Kerala. As the news of a ban on sand mining was gaining ground, he began to explore the dream of going to the Gulf. It was a time when the uncertainty created by the first Iraq war had somewhat settled down. After a while, there was again an upsurge in job opportunities in the Gulf. Najeeb was offered a visa to work in Saudi Arabia. However, he had to struggle hard to pay for the visa. Finally, he managed to raise the amount by mortgaging his house and selling his wife's jewellery, besides collecting small amounts from other sand miners and borrowing from everyone he knew. Thus he "dreamt a host of dreams." "Perhaps the same stock dreams" that the lakhs of "Malayalis in the Gulf had when they were in Kerala - gold watch, fridge, TV, car, AC, tape recorder, VCP, a heavy gold chain" (Benyamin,2012,p. 38).

Najeeb thus travels to Saudi Arabia via Bombay in 1992, with a dream of earning his fortunes. But as he reached Riyadh, a misfortune soon eclipsed his dreams. He became enslaved for the next three years in the desert interior of Saudi Arabia on a goat farm (*masara*) at the mercy of a cruel boss (*arbab*). *Goat Days* then narrates the saga of "multiple crossings: from South India to the Gulf, from Riyadh to rural Saudi Arabia, and from dreams of economic betterment to impoverished disillusionment" (Waheed, 2012). But the journey of Najeeb eventually becomes a journey from slavery to freedom, including a hazardous desert crossing. The novel thus signifies multiple crossings Najeeb has undertaken in his struggle for freedom. On the first day itself, he felt that this journey was not leading him to the Gulf life that he had been dreaming about and craving for (Benyamin 2012,p.52). Najeeb realised that anxiety and worry were futile. The world had become alien to him. Najeeb recollects:

"I am condemned to the conditions of this world. I have fallen headlong into the anxieties of it, and it is better to identify with the here and now. That was the only way to somehow survive. Otherwise, my growing anxieties would have killed me, or my sorrows drowned me. Maybe this was how everyone who got trapped here survived, no?" (Benyamin,2012,p. 95).

Najeeb began to learn to face life alone, to train himself in jobs he has never had experienced before, "to try out a new way of life, to get accustomed to an uncommon situation. It was not as if I had a choice; I was utterly helpless." When Najeeb eventually got landed up in the life of a shepherd, he realised how painfully distant it was from his dreams. He tells: "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,2012,p. 124). The alienation and disillusionment of Najeeb could be seen in his reminiscences:

"I lived on an alien planet inhabited by some goats, my arbab and me. The only interruptions to the monotony of my life were the visits of the water truck twice a week, the hay truck once a week and the wheat trailer once a month. These vehicles were the only means by which I could connect with the outside universe. The drivers were usually Pathans from Pakistan. If I established a connection with those people, I could contact the external world." (Benyamin,2012,p. 125).

Najeeb felt that "everything in the masara had a nauseating stench. The smell emanating from the goats' urine, the stench of the droppings, the reek of grass and hay that got wet with the urine, if I had ever experienced a similar stink before, it was in a circus tent." He recollects that even the goats' milk had a stench. Whenever he dipped *khubus* into the milk to eat, the smell would drill into his nostrils. But soon, as Najeeb tells, "It became so much a part of me I could not believe that such a stench had ever existed" (Benyamin,2012,p. 128).

For most people, the experience of having been forcibly confined for long is horrifying. Hence it becomes unthinkable to imagine what it must feel like to be trapped in the desert - bathing is forbidden, washing after defecating prohibited, or drinking water is restricted to not more than thrice a day. It is even agonising to live in unending fear of a captor who can mete out lashes, further confinement, and even death, at will. Najeeb is being warned by his *arbab*:

'This water is not for washing your backside. It is meant for my goats. You don't know how precious water is. Never touch water for such unnecessary matters. If you do, 'll kill you !' ...Thus, I learnt my first lesson. It was wrong to wash one's backside after taking a dump...the breaking of all my habits began that day...The harshest for me was this ban on sanitation (Benyamin,2012,p. 78).

Elsewhere Najeeb tells that the "reward for trying to help a goat deliver her baby was severe words, a kick, enough pit, two or three belt whippings and starvation at noon (Benyamin,2012,p.109). The intensity of his alienation and how it is managed are expressed in several places in the novel:

We can endure any misery if we have someone to share it with. Being lonely is very depressing. Words twitched like silverfish inside me. Unshared emotions pulsated, bubbled and frothed in my mouth. An ear to pour out my sorrows, two eyes to look at me and a cheek beside me became essential for my survival. In their absence, one turns mad, even suicidal. It might be the reason why people condemned to solitary confinement turn insane (Benyamin,2012,p. 167).

Najeeb says:
Getting those words out, and expelling them, provides the greatest mental peace. Those who do not get this chance die choking on words. I, too would, have died like that. But it was through the stories narrated to my Pochakkari Ramani, my Marymaimuna, my Kausu and Aravu Ravuthar that I threw out those words accumulating inside me. I kept talking to them as if I were talking to dear ones when I walked them, milked them, filled their containers...and gave them fodder(Benyamin,2012,pp. 167-68).

Benyamin's novel eloquently depicts the experience of a self that is treated as not quite human. Najeeb at times resists the dehumanising conditions of his confinement by establishing new intimacies across the vast expanse of isolation, and by virtue of his resolve to live and return home—a resolve reinforced through faith and brought to realisation by a set of fortunate circumstances. Sarah Waheed writes that being away from his mother tongue, there are only two options of communication left: the language of the *arbab*'s violence, and the language of human intimacy (Waheed,2012). While writing about slave narratives in the United States, the novelist Toni Morrison says:

"In trying to make the slave experience intimate, I hoped the sense of things being both under control and out of control would be persuasive throughout; that the order and quietude of everyday life would be violently disrupted by the chaos of the needy dead; that the herculean effort to forget would be threatened by memory desperate to stay alive. To render enslavement a personal experience, language must first get out of the way." (Morrison, 2004, pp. XVIII-XIV).

Perhaps this is what Benyamin also tries to convey. Najeeb tells us:

"If an Arabic expert among you asks whether the pronunciation and meaning of the words that I have tabled here are correct, I can only say I do not know. I've heard them like that, and have learned them like that…I could understand what the *arbab* meant by those words, and the *arbab* could understand me. One does not need to be a linguistic expert in order to communicate." (Benyamin, 2012,p.97).

Najeeb undergoes excruciating agonies. Yet he survives the beatings, the imprisonment, the stark meals of bread and water, and the fear. Though longing to escape, Najeeb neither knows where he is nor the direction of the closest town. He knows that his *arbab* has a gun and a pair of binoculars. Once Najeeb made an attempt while walking with goats. But the result is, as usual, horrific:

The vehicle stopped in front of the tent. The arbab dragged me out and locked me up in masara after tying me up. Then he beat me to his heart's content. Blood oozed from all parts of my body. Still, I didn't cry. I didn't shed a tear. I endured everything… If I cry about my fate, even Allah will not forgive me…The arbab left me locked up in the masara that day and the next. He didn't let me out at all, didn't even give me a drop of water or a piece of khubus. For two days, I lay there without complaint (Benyamin,2012,p. 149).

Najeeb's experiences taught him that no matter how severe the pain or how harsh the difficulties one faces, "we come to terms with our miseries in the course of time."

"I became used to my life over the course of a year. I no longer found it burdensome. In the past, I used to wonder how beggars, the very poor, the permanently sick, the blind and the handicapped went on with their lives, and how happy smiles broke out on their faces. Now I had my answer- from life itself. I didn't feel like my life had any difficulties anymore. What did I have to do? Wake up in the morning, milk the goats, give fodder to the animals, take the goats for a walk, come back, eat khubus, go to bed in daylight and moonshine. No thoughts, no worries, no desires. What else did I need? I didn't know anything about what was happening in the outside world. I had forgotten my family, my home, my homeland. They had become to me people who had lived with me in some other life or time. I was not at all affected by their sorrows or their miseries. My life was happy." (Benyamin,2012, pp. 175-76).

Najeeb also finds solace in his constant prayers. What is peculiar about *Goat Days* is its straightforward "yet supple discussion of Islam, in terms of how Benyamin writes of Najeeb's religiosity." His "religiosity, prayers, and beliefs are not exotic, nor do they correspond to any political programme. His 'Muslim-ness' is just as incidental and accidental as his *arbab*'s. By defying the many meanings of the Arabic word, *arbab*, which here means boss and saviour, but also denotes the plural of god (*rabb*), Najeeb repeatedly turns to his ultimate saviour, in the very deserts which first heeded His name (Waheed,2012):

I didn't know if Allah heard me or not. But the belief that Allah was looking after me instilled in me a new confidence. Non-believers, those of you fortunate to live merrily in the pleasant greenery Allah has bestowed on you, you might feel prayers are ridiculous rituals. For me, prayers were my bolt-hole. It was because of faith alone that I could be strong in spirit even when I was weak in my body. Otherwise, I would have withered and burnt like grass in that blazing wind (Benyamin, 2012,p.153).

Najeeb's staunch companions during his isolated life-world situation seemed to be goats alone. Compelled to sleep amongst them, Najeeb says, "I had become a goat." As Najeeb's most awful days on the farm pass, he tries to identify each and every one of the goats, humanising them in turn:

Apart from Pochakkari Ramani, I gave a name to each goat in the *masara* that I recognised to help me scold them and to make cuddling easier. People from my locality like Arabu Rabuthar, Maryamaimuna, Indipokkar, Niandu Raghavan, Parippu Vijayan, Chakki, Ammini, Kausu, Raufat, Pinki, Ammu, Razia and Thahira, and public figures like Jagathy, Mohanlal, and even EMS himself were a part of my *masara*. Each of them was dear to me in one way or another. Have you ever looked carefully at a goat's face? It is quite similar to a human's. I named the goats not only by looking at their faces but also by relating their names to some character traits, their gait, the sounds they made, and by incidents that reminded me of them. Just as how one gets a nickname back home...So there were many strange and personal reasons for each name I gave the goats. The logic of the names might be lost on others but they made perfect sense to me (Benyamin,2012, pp. 161-163).

For Najeeb, these goats are the physical broadening of his internal longings for home. He thus creates a 'diaspora' of his own making. As Sarah Waheed says, an "entire Malayali world comes alive as he narrates the colourful stories behind the names of family members, past loves, town-dwellers." Through this, he tries "to temporarily subdue his nostalgia (Waheed, 2012), 'an acute craving' that "takes the form of a crazy urge to rush home, like a wild boar rushing wildly through sugarcane fields when it's been shot" (Benyamin, 2012,p. 146). Story-telling itself is the inevitable strategy of Najeeb, for he has been thrown violently into the midst of acute alienation. Najeeb "is isolated from language, isolated from geography, and isolated from people, other than his *arbab*. He is even isolated from water." And so, "Najeeb makes the strange and unfamiliar surroundings of his isolation recognisable in order to hold on to his humanity and his sanity" (Waheed, 2012). Interestingly, Najeeb has also something to tell us about his forgotten sexuality. He says that in the course of time he "had been impotent." He did not think he "would have the urge to be sexually active again." But "it happened."

In those days when I had only goats for company, there was an occasion when I shared with them not only my sorrows and pains but also my body. One night, as I lay down, I could not sleep. I didn't know why, but I was covered in sweat. I had an insatiable desire a passion building up inside me like a desert storm (Benyamin, 2012,p. 168).

Meanwhile, Najeeb comes across Hakeem after a long. He had accompanied Najeeb to Saudi Arabia with the same dream. Hakeem's life-world experience in a nearby *masara* is the same as that of Najeeb. His arbab was worse than that of Najeeb. Sometimes Hakeem tells him about "the torment he had to undergo. His *arbab*'s pastime included flicking boiling water on Hakeem's face, pulling his hair, poking a stick into his backside, kicking his chest, dunking his head in water, etc. (Benyamin, 2012,p.169). When they encountered in the desert while walking with goats, memories of homeland flashed for both. Najeeb recollects:

Maybe because of that distant view of Hakeem, suddenly I was struck by the thoughts of the homeland. It did not happen very often during my life in the masara. All my longings rose in unison inside me. My Sainu, my ummah, my son...my daughter...? My house, my canoe. How many times had I heard about the nostalgia of the diaspora? It often surprised me later that I never grieved for my shattered dreams even in those hostile situations. I think such thoughts come only to those who can see an exit. I never thought that I would escape from the hell I was in. Once trapped, I carried on living with no hopes of escape. The dead don't dream about life (Benyamin,2012,p. 172).

The cruelty of his *arbab* further came to light when he realised the fate of the man whom he met and with whom he had spent his first three days in the *masara*. Though a scary figure he was, Najeeb learnt the first lessons of slave life and the ground rules of the *masara* from him. He was wondering, over weeks and months, what happened to him when he disappeared. One day he spotted some evidence of the previous digging in one part of the

desert. As he removed a layer of earth, a human skeleton came into view. Najeeb was really terrified. He also saw a leather belt that had not yet decomposed. Obviously, he had seen that belt on the waist of the scary figure who had disappeared from the masara the third day after he reached. In a panic mood, Najeeb bolted towards the masara, leaving the goats there. He says, "I went and fell at the feet of the arbab. 'I don't want to go anywhere. I am not going to abscond from this place. It is enough if you don't kill me. I don't even mind living like this. I am afraid of death" (Benyamin,2012,p. 174).

Though he kept crying, the arbab could not figure out anything. The horrifying effects of deserting the *arbab!* Helplessness and fear gripped the life-world of Najeeb further, "Every happiness in life has a climax, whether it be happiness, sorrow, sickness or hunger. When we reach the end, there are only two paths left for us: either we learn to live with our lives or protest and struggle in a final attempt to escape. If we choose the second path, we are safe if we win; if not, we end up in a mental asylum or kill ourselves" (Benyamin,2012,p.175).

This helplessness and fear of Najeeb could be seen when Hakeem came to him one day to tell him about the possibility of an escape. But Najeeb seemed to have "lost all urge to escape." He recounts, "Even when it is set free, a goat reared in a cage will return to the cage. I had become like that. I cannot go anywhere in this figure and form. I am a goat. My life is in this masara. Till I end my life or die of some disease, I don't want to show anyone this scruffy shape, this scruffy face, this scruffy life. Mine is a goat's life (Benyamin,2012,p. 181). The narration of his helplessness, the *arbab*'s violence, the degeneration of his body etc are interspersed by passages recounting flash moments of joy, such as the rains, and the hope of escape. Najeeb depicts his life-world as a surreal one, trapped on an "alien planet with the goats and the *arbab*."

Meanwhile, Najeeb had second thoughts about escape when an opportunity suddenly came. Hakeem with his companion, a Somali named Ibrahim Khadri, in their *masara* arranged a plan for when the *arbabs* of the two masaras would go for a wedding. Najeeb now begins to think about freedom. Even while heading towards freedom, it was agonising for him to depart from his loved ones. Najeeb experienced "intense grief in that happy moment of freedom" (Benyamin,2012,p.187).

Then comes the saga of the desert journey in search of freedom. Najeeb problematises 'desert' as a new space of unfreedom! 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 didn't revive me in any way. I lived in the desert for more than three years. Then I tried crossing it. All through, the desert gave me nothing but grief and frustration. Maybe the desert gave spiritual knowledge to those who came seeking it. I did not set out to look for anything, so go trapped. It must have decided that it had nothing to offer me" (Benyamin,2012,p.215).

Yet the journey of 'crossing' generated considerable hope for Najeeb, Hakeem and Ibrahim Khadri. The troubles ahead did not detract them from moving. "The heat of the desert didn't even touch us. We had withstood its heat and thirst every day. The desert can't easily overpower someone who has been in a massacre for many years. It is only those who live in palaces and head out to the desert out of curiosity or for fun who get tired in its heat...It was our faith and confidence that helped us bravely walk through that desert" (Benyamin,2012,p.202).

Najeeb reminds us,

"If you are unfamiliar with deserts, you may wonder if this desert was a desert at all. Swarming with living beings, it was almost a forest. Snakes, centipedes, lizards, spiders, butterflies, vultures, wolves, rabbits and so many other creatures like them. Each with their own paths, their own territories, their own laws – man, his law and his life had no significance here. Those creatures didn't value human boundaries. They were the inheritors of the desert" (Benyamin,2012,pp.204-05).

While crossing the desert, Najeeb lost Hakeem who could not withstand the pressures of the journey, having died without food or water. The remaining companion in the desert, Ibrahim Khadri, also disappeared mysteriously on the way. Having reached a highway after the arduous journey, Najeeb managed to get a lift to the nearby city. Yet the city was so strange to him as was the case of the people around who sneered at him, seeing his scruffy look. On the third day after reaching the city, Najeeb found himself in Kunjikka's room who runs the Malabar Restaurant, a refuge for Malayalis in Batha market in the city. Najeeb had collapsed before the restaurant after several days of travel without food or water. It was while Najeeb was getting better than a new victim of slave life, Hameed, sought refuge in Kunjikka's room. Hameed "had been working as a labourer in an Arab's farm. He had to work hard till night and undergo much abuse for too little compensation. He absconded when it became intolerable" (Ibid: 248). After several days of thinking and consultations, both Najeeb and Hakeem decided to surrender before the police without delay and thus landed up in the prison (Benyamin,2012,p.249).

The novel actually begins in a prison in Sumesi, the largest prison in the country. It is there that Najeeb and Hameed voluntarily register themselves, for there is hardly any other option if a worker has left his sponsor, and wishes to go home. Under the *kafala* system, an expatriate is barred from working in the GCC countries without local sponsorship (*kafil*). Once that 'contractual' relationship is cut off, expatriates become 'illegal residents,' and must immediately quit the country. Since the kafala system ties workers' permission of living and work in their host country to the permission of their sponsor, it forbids them to seek alternative employment. Those who resist or complain about their slave life world run the risk of losing their jobs, criminalisation, and deportation. Najeeb describes Sumesi jail as a place where "the prisoners, lying down in whatever space they could manage, resembled dead bodies laid out after a natural disaster" (Benyamin,2012,p.13), and elsewhere refers to his particular block as "a railway station where people arrived and departed" (Benyamin,2012,p.25).

Most horrifying for Najeeb and his fellow inmates is what is known as the weekly 'identification parade' in prison:

It was the day for the Arabs to identify the absconding workers—a tear-filled day in prison. On that day, after breakfast, all of us were made to stand in a line outside the block. Arabs would walk in front of us looking at each face carefully, like eyewitnesses trying to identify the accused. There would be a few unfortunate ones among us each week. The first reaction of the Arab who recognised his work was to land a slap that could pop an eardrum. Some even unbuckled their belts to whip the prisoners till their anger subsided. The policemen would keep an eye on the scene from a distance, and might not even pay attention. Knowing this, some prisoners who spotted their sponsors from a distance, lost all courage and cried loudly. It was only then that one realised how a man becomes a coward when he feels completely helpless. For him, the jail must have provided relief from the suffering he had been enduring. For many, it was inconceivable to return to the Arabs who had been torturing them. They must have endured so many beatings before they reached the jail (Benyamin,2012, pp. 21-22).

Najeeb recounts,

But the Arabs didn't have any compassion or consideration. They would immediately take the prisoners away shouting accusations: 'he ran away after stealing my money; he tried to rape my daughter; he tried to kill me.' The prisoner's face would reflect the abjection of a goat being led to slaughter. His loud cries protesting his innocence would soar above the jail walls; it would be a cry in the wilderness. The Arabs could execute the law as they pleased (Benyamin,2012,p. 22).

Najeeb would have us believe that "the Arabs enjoyed more freedom inside a prison in his country than we did outside in a foreign land." During parade days, any Arab could freely move around the Sumesi prison if he has some evidence that he had registered a complaint in a police station. If he is successful to identify his "absconding slave, he could drag him out

and present him before the jail warden and submit his petition to him." Then the nature of the case would change. The man who was jailed for a petty case would be declared "a criminal offender." The Arab could even ask that he be "allowed to take away the prisoner, or that the prisoner be expelled from the country. Here, expulsion was salvation. If the prisoner was ordered to return to the Arab, his fate was sealed" (Benyamin,2012, pp.22-23). Najeeb narrates tension-ridden days thus:

"On parade day, the block would be eerily quiet. We would grieve for the loss of friends who had been with us in the block till then, sharing food, talking, smiling and playing, dreaming of our homeland. Our ears would be ringing with their long howls from the main hall and beyond... The prison wasn't entirely a pleasant memory after all! ...Hundreds of Arabs would cross our parade line in those two hours till lunch." (Benyamin,2012,p. 23).

The day after the inspection by the Arabs would be the day of the embassy visit. Embassy officials of different countries come to the prison with release papers for the prisoners of their respective countries. Najeeb remembers that if the previous day was "one of the tears, the next one was of joy." Embassy officials would read out the names of those prisoners in the roll whose exit passes had been processed. Benyamin depicts that "the roll marked the final release from a long agony." There would be "many for whom the waiting - wracked with anxiety and hope- continued." There would be "despair when one recognised that one's name wasn't among those that were called out. Some, who had been waiting for months, would just burst into tears" (Benyamin,2012,p. 26). One of the initial traumas started with the experience of Hameed. There was a high expectation that he would get an exit pass. Najeeb's fear came true when Hameed's *arbab* turned up one day. When the parade was underway, the *arbab* "jumped at him like a cheetah and rained blows on him. He beat him with his hand, his belt, and the *iqal* which secures the *gutra*, till his anger subsided. Like the others in the block, i could only watch and cry." "I wanted to go home. I could not bear to be there any longer. Let me go...leave me..." Although Hameed begged, the *arbab* dragged him into the room of the warden (Benyamin,2012,p.29).

Najeeb recollects that he could not trace him afterwards: "How many lives like that end halfway incomplete! Helpless creatures who fade away, unable to recount their stories to anyone" (Benyamin,2012,p. 30). He says that Hameed had been working on a farm "from dawn till night, undergoing torture for low wages. He ran away when it became unbearable. When he reached the prison, Hameed was four times happier than I was. He strongly believed that once he had reached the safety of the government, he would not be caught by the Arab again" (Benyamin,2012,p. 30). But Hameed's fate was different. The most awesome fate was that when the embassy officials came the next day for a roll-call, the name of Hameed was called. Tragedies and sorrows knew no bounds in the jail.

And, to the sheer astonishment of Najeeb, his *arbab* also emerged in another parade. In the parade, his *arbab*, contrary to his fear, did not seem to have recognised Najeeb, "throwing in a shovel of burning coals of doubt in my mind" (Benyamin,2012,p.250). The friendly policeman in the jail, upon speaking to him after his return, said that the *arbab* has gone back saying that Najeeb was not under his visa; otherwise, he "would have dragged him back to the mascara!" (Benyamin,2012,p. 251). Shocking to hear this, Najeeb indulged in thoughts. "Wasn't he my sponsor then? Had he illegally held me captive" on that day at the airport, had he kidnapped me? Was I brought on someone else's visa?"(Benyamin,2012,p.251). The novel ends with several questions of unfinished 'goat days' and the crossing of the Arabian Sea once again!

Najeeb's "forceful narrative" not only surprised Benyamin, the novelist (who himself has been an expatriate in Bahrain since 1992) but the readers who were waiting for such a narrative from the South Asian Diaspora. *Goat Days* is a slave narrative with a substantial 'explosive material' of the life-world situation that the South Asian expatriates in the Gulf have been facing for a long. The work has generated considerable interest due to the style of narrative and the strategies deployed to convey the message of the story. Sarah Waheed is right that narrating his experience and having it heard is something Najeeb would like to see

as an act of liberation. He would like to tell us at the beginning itself that "A way to come out is to listen to the stories of those who endure situations worse than ours."

Afterword

The Keralites' journey to the Gulf, in search of jobs, is one of the exemplary Indian arcs of migration of contemporary times. But a sense of its atypical risks and dislocations—of the tensions between a 'self' willing to remake itself in a new world and a new world not particularly interested in that 'self' except as a body that works—is yet to appear in Indian writings in as compelling a form as in Benyamin's novels from *Goat Days* to *Al Arabian Novel Factory* (2014). His perceptive threading of external description and interior monologue powerfully brings home the life-world of an expatriate's predicament. Benyamin's work cannot be seen as an 'autonomous universe' of an 'autonomous' writer. His works are cultural artefacts to be read and understood by applying the method of 'thick descriptions' as suggested throughout his novel, and myriad events are described which give us a glimpse of social, cultural, and political life in the contemporary Gulf. His work represents 'authorial context', 'textual context', and the 'context of the readers' which provide a new field for New Historicist IR Studies. As a writer, Benyamin has 'textualised' the life-world and 'historicised' the text' which produces both 'meaning' and 'panic' and are the essential qualification for good writing. Benyamin has "reproduced" a model of historical culture, in which social and cultural issues are raised in their historical context, thereby he has provided insights for a better and acceptable change in the condition of the expatriate life world.

Though the focus of the paper is on Benyamin's novel, it also recognises other contemporary vernacular novels on the life-world experiences of the Kerala expatriates in the Gulf as well as Malayalam films that look upon the life-worlds of the expatriates. *Vilkkanundu Swapnangal* (Dreams for Sale) is one of the earliest Malayalam films that deal with the life world of an illegal immigrant. *Gaddama* (Arabic word 'Khadima' meaning servant) is a 2011 film that narrates the story of some immigrants in the Gulf through the life of a housemaid in Saudi Arabia. *Nilavu* (Moonlite) brings to life the emotional complexities of expatriate life in the Gulf. It captures the dreams, desires, and aspirations of the migrant workers and families as well as the cultural ethos of the region. The paper thus underlines the significance of a new *Verstehen* in IR Studies. It calls for interweaving 'facts' and 'fiction' by deploying 'text' as a critical Level of Analysis. As such the method of study goes beyond a mere 'content-analysis', thereby 'content' itself is being interrogated by close and critical reading of contexts.

Acknowledgement

This is a modified version of the paper presented at the International Studies Association (ISA) 56th Annual Convention Proceedings, held in New Orleans, Louisiana, USA. The theoretical discussion on New Historicism and International Relations has already appeared in the Indian Journal of Politics and International Relations (2016).

References

Ahammed, M. V. (2014). *Kudiyettakkante Veedu* (Home of an Expatraite).DC Books.
Ahmed, S. (Director). (2015). *Pathemari* [Dhow] [Film]. Allens Media.
Anderson, B.(1994).Exodus. *Critical Inquiry*, 29(2),314-27.
Bannigan, J.(1998). *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism*. Macmillan.
Barthes, R. (1975).*The Pleasure of the Text*. Hall & Wang.
Benyamin (2011).*Aatujeevitham* (Goats Days).Green Books.
Benyamin (2012).*Goats Days*(J.Koyipally, Trans.).Penguin. (Original work published in 2008)
Benyamin (2014). *Al Arabian Novel Factory*. DC Books.
Benyamin (2014).*Mullappooniraulla Pakalukal* (Days of Jasmine Colour). DC Books.
Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *Location of Culture*. Routledge.

Bhabha, H.K. (ed.).(1990). *Nation and Narration*.Routledge.
Bharadwaj, B. (2012). *Pravasathinte Murivukal*. Mathrubhumi Publishers.
Bharadwaj, B.(2013). *Pravasiyude Kurippukal*. Mathrubhumi Publishers.
Brah, A. (1996). *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. Routledge.
Brannigan, J.(1998). *New historicism and cultural materialism*. Macmillan Press
Chambers, I.(1994). *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*. Routledge.
Clifford, J.(1994).Diaspora. *Cultural Anthropology*, 9(3), 302-38.
Dinesen, E.K. (ed.)(2013).*Pravasajeevitham* (Expatriate Life). Olive Publications.
Foucault, M. (1992). *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Routledge.
Foucault, M., & Bouchard, D. F. (1977). *Language, counter-memory, practice selected essays and interviews*. Cornell University Press.
Foucault, M., & Gordon, C. (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977*. The Harvester Press.
Foucault, M.(1977).*Discipline and Punish*. (A.Sheridan, Trans.). Pantheon.
Gallagher, C. (1989).Marxism and the New Historicism.*The New Historicism*.Routledge, Chapman and Hall.
Gallagher, C.,& Greenblatt, S.(2000). *Practicing New Criticism*. University of Chicago Press.
Gallanger, C. (1985). *The industrial reformation of English fiction: Social discourse and narrative form 1832-1867*. University of Chicago Press.
Greenblatt, S. (1983).*Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. California University Press.
Greenblatt, S. (1990). *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture*. Routledge.
Greenblatt, S. (1990).Towards a Poetics of Culture. *Learning to curse: essays in early modern culture*.Routledge.
Greenblatt, S.(1982).The Forms of Power and the Power of Forms in the Renaissance.*Genre,* 15,3-6.
Habermas, J. (2001). *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays(* M. Pensky Trans.)The Polity Press.
Helweg, Arthur W. (1986).The Indian Diaspora: Influence on International Relations. *Modern Diasporas in International Politics*. Croom Helm.
Jabbar, F.(2012). *Saya*. DC Books.
Krishnadas (2014).*Dubaipuzha* (River of Dubai). Green Books.
Majeed, K. M. (Director). (2011). *Gaddama* [Housemaid] [Film]. Anitha Productions.
Memunda, R.(2014).*Penpravasm*. Olive Publications
Middle East Institute. (2010). *Impacts global economic crisis migration Arab world*. https://doi.org/http://www.meu.edu/content/impacts-global-economic-crisis-migration-arab-world
Mishra, S.(2006).*Diaspora Criticism*. Edinburg University Press Ltd.
Montrose, L. A.(1992).New Historicisms. *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*. MLA.
Montrose,L.A.(1992).New Historicisms. In *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Study*.MLA.
Morrison, T. (2004).*Beloved*. Vintage International.
Mukundan, M. (2012).*Pravasam* (Diaspora). DC Books.
Murfin, R.C. (1992).The New Historicism and The Awakening.*The Awakening: Complete, Authoritative Text With Biographical & Historical Contexts, Critical History, & Essays from Five Contemporary Critical Perspectives (Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism)*. Bedford/St Martins.
Nair, A. (Director). (2010). *Nilavu* [Moonlite] [Film]. Convex Productions.
Nair, V.M.D. (Director). (1980). *Vilkkanundu Swapnangal* [Dreams for Sale] [Film].
NewMahi, H. (2013). *Arabian Jeevithathinte Noorukathakal* (Hundred Stories of Arabian Life).Green Books.
Newton, J. (1988).History as Usual? Feminism and the 'New Historicism'.*Cultural Critique*. 9.
Odamveli, B. (2013) *Maruppottal*. Green Books.
Parakkal, R. (2014). *Oru Thakkalikrishikkarante Swapnangal* (Dreams of a Tomato Farmer).Green Books.
Pechter, E. (1987).The New Historicism and Its Discontents: Politicizing Renaissance Drama. *PMLA*, 102(3), 292-303.
Rajan, I.,& Marie P. (eds.). (2011). *Dynamics of Indian Migration: Historical and Current Perspectives*.Routledge.

Raphael, J. C. (2014).*Saudikalude Adimakal* (Slaves of Saudis). Mathrubhumi Publishers.
Ravuthar, N.(2013). *Arabyayile Atima* (Slave of Arabia). Green Books.
Ricocur, P. (1981).*Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*. CUP.
Rutherford, J. (1990). *Identity: Community, culture, and difference*. Lawrence & Wishart.
Said, E. (1983). *The World, the Text, and the Critics*.Harvard University Press.
Seethi, K.M. (2016).New Historicism and International Relations Theory: Diaspora and Representation of Life-Worlds. *Indian Journal of Politics and International Relations*,9(2), 23-30.
Simel, E.,& Monica, S. (eds.). (2004).*Gender and Migration in the Arab States: The Case of Domestic Workers*.International Labour Organisation.
United Nations. (2013). Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division *Trends in International Migrant Stock.The 2013 Revision*
Veeser, H. A.(1994).*The New Historicism Reader*. Routledge.
Veeser, H. A.(ed.).(1989). *The New historic*ism. Routledge.
Vijayan, P.(2014).*Salala, Salala*.Green Books.
Waheed, S. (2012). Literature in the Oil Age: Goat Days. https://doi.org/http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/6206/literature-in-the-oil-age_goat-days
Williams, M. (2003). New Historicism and Literary Studies. Soka University Repository (2003). 115-44
https://doi.org/file:///C:/Documents%20and%20Settings/User/My%20Documents/Downloads/New-Historicism-and-Literary-Studies-Soka.pdf
Wrigley, J. (2005).Migration, Domestic Work, and Repression. *New Politics*, 10(3).
Zacharia K.C.,& Irudaya, R. S.(2009). *Migration and Development: The Kerala Experience*. Daanish Books.