

Subjugation of Ethno-nationalism vis-a-vis Oil Imperialism in Ajay Sharma's Petro Fiction *Basra Streets*

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Abstract: Ajay Sharma's magnum opus petro fiction *Basra Streets* marks a new beginning of petro-fiction in modern literary world. *Basra Streets* is a powerful petro-fiction to date that focuses on the oil industry in gulf and portrays the cultural encounter between occident and orient. Drawing from Benedict Anderson's seminal text on nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, in which Anderson defines nations as "imagined political communities," Iraq imagines its community "through and with oil--the communities are 'naturalized' in relation to the effects, social, environmental, political, of oil exploration and production--but produces forms of rule and identity that are often fragmented, unruly, and violent." As the novel is an imagined community, one imagined through oil, does not fit neatly within Anderson's paradigm, the novel's hybrid form (imagined community as protagonist) mirrors the hybrid formation of the hydro-carbon novel's imagined community. Anderson's points are vital to understanding the formation of an imagined community as a result of petro-capitalism instead of print-capitalism, and are key to understanding the imagined community in this novel.

Keywords: Petro Fiction, capitalism, society, nationalism.

Petro-fiction refers to narratives that directly address the issues related to oil industry on one hand but also to fiction that assumes the impact of oil industry on American culture. What makes particularly intriguing of this literary genre is the indirectness with which it addresses the issue- where the oil is, who wants to have it and how they go about getting it. It relates to cultural encounters as the world is exposed to the scramble for oil by developed countries especially in the Middle East. Petro-fiction studies the world literature of energy and natural resources. It is a work that analyses the significance of oil. Our lives are saturated in oil – it is the most significant resource of the modern capitalist world system. It is everywhere, especially in those places where it appears invisible, scarce, or undiscovered. It determines how and where we live, move, work and play; what we eat, wear, consume. It is heavily invested in the shaping of our political and physical landscapes. To think about oil is not solely to think about automobiles or derricks or spectacular spills or barrel prices. Oil's universality makes it as controversial as it is ubiquitous in its apparent vitality and necessity. Modern culture is a Hydrocarbon culture, which germinates petro fiction viz *Basra Streets*. *Basra Streets* reveals connected international patterns in literary form and theme; patterns that confirm the effectiveness of a recently reconfigured world

literature as method and resource to map and critique the way in which the world's resources are unevenly produced, extracted, refined and exploited on a global-local scale. It reveals vulnerable populations like in Iraq around the globe are subject to corporate and state oil imperialism. It portrays the eco-critical frame to view texts registering oil's relations with ecological crisis, war, urbanization, and campaigns for environmental justice. In tracking the development of cultural and political responses to oil production and use throughout the twentieth century, the text of *Basra Streets* also maintains a focus on speculative forms of energy futures – and demonstrates why fiction offers a novel way to think about 'oil politics'

Basra Streets is a forceful petro fiction based on the triangular struggle of war, peace and love. It highlights the social realism, mental conflict and deep psychological insight of an Indian doctor in the oriental city of Basra (Iraq) torn apart by US-Iraq war. The novel effectively portrays the restlessness, helplessness and exploitation of the Iraqi citizens especially of the Iraqi war widows amidst the ugly US-Iraq imbroglio in the post colonial world. The thematic structure of the novel traverses from romantic paraphernalia and reaches national and international dimensions. This anti-war novel depicts the civilized man's basic instinct of ruthless devastation and his inner urge of vain domination of the uncivilized and the civilizing world in the garb of a pseudo-political war.

Dr. Ajay Sharma takes us unknowingly to the exotic city of Basra which is world famous for its priceless glimmering pearls. He unintentionally and spontaneously co-relates these priceless jovial pearls with the painful pearly tears of Iraqi widows in the war torn towns of Iraq. The character delineation is par excellence; especially the characters of Bushra, Aliza, Julia and Indian doctor cum Interpreter Akash are not only pulsating, but also down-to-earth. Dr. Ajay Sharma has successfully created a microcosm out of macrocosm by drawing an exquisite parallel between the U.S-Vietnam war and U.S-Iraq imbroglio. The novel is also an open attack on oil politics and arm-twisting technique of the developed countries, which they often use to subjugate and dominate the developing countries viz Iraq, Iran, Kuwait etc. Dr. Ajay Sharma's fourth novel *Basra Ki Galiyan* (2004) translated into English as *Basra Streets in 2007* has become a milestone and a beacon of light for the millions of subjugated people in the third world countries. The novel is also a fiery dictum against female foeticide, which is the main reason for the sudden decline in the female sex ratio in Asian and Arabian countries. It depicts the miserable condition of young boys who are being used as suicide bombers by Saddam Hussein's regime in the name of *Jehad*. The sarcastic, ironical and caustic remarks of the Iraqi citizens against the dictatorial and brutal attitude of Saddam Hussein are another highlight of the novel. *Basra Streets* portrays that mighty states like USA not only conquer the land but also conquer the psyche of the people that is the major factor responsible for the erosion of the spirit of nationalism like

Iraq. Nationalism refers to a set of beliefs about the nation. Nationalism is not a homogenous but a heterogeneous concept. Nationalism is historically determined phenomenon based on past understanding and collective consciousness. Nationalism was also a spirit or consciousness that people developed during the colonial period when they resisted the designs of the colonizers. There are six factors which help to explain the concept of Nationalism and Nation explicitly namely geography, religion, language, history, culture and literature. Geo-political boundaries determine a nation, divides people in terms of political divisions but it cannot divide the consciousness of the people. The concept of nationalism can also be divided in two broad categories namely territorial nationalism and ethno nationalism. Territorial nationalism protects and nurtures our physical identity. Its boundaries are more physical and strength can be measured. Territorial nationalism is often need based and its loyalty is usually rational. Ethno nationalism is emotional, intuitive and psychological. Its strength cannot be seen but always be felt. In contrast to nationalism, the nation is a particular kind of society. If nationalism is liberating then it can be called positive nationalism and if it's oppressive or persecutive then it is termed as negative nationalism. *Basra Streets* depicts the concept of nation and nationalism namely territorial, cultural, ethno, positive, and negative nationalism at various levels. It is effectively portrayed and projected through the characters like Akash, Bushra, Gulnar, Aliza, Julia, Abu Majid, Umar, Channan Singh etc. We are able to witness the different layers of meanings of nationalism of the countries like Iraq, Iran, India and USA, when the above-mentioned characters undergo different experiences in complex situations in these countries. The main protagonist Akash- Indian doctor cum interpreter has a keen desire to go abroad in search of better career prospects after completing his B.A.M.S in Punjab. Akash's three friends come back from Iraq and narrate to him the high standard of living, nice salary package and exquisite lifestyle there. This motivates Akash and his friend Naresh to go to Iraq to earn money. Here we witness the nature of the migration of Punjabis to Middle East in lure to earn petro-dollars. The glimmer of Iraqi Dinars attracts Akash and his poor parents are more than ready to send their sole son abroad, even if they have to borrow money. The sense of culture nationalism is deep rooted in Punjabi families to such an extent that they can do anything to settle their children abroad inspite of all odds:

I had often witnessed such a sight before, whenever there was a need for money in house, the demand was instantly met ... my mother's gold ornaments was usually mortgaged. (29).

And the sons who go abroad in search of better pastures also believe in this notion that the spend money could be easily earned back within a short span of time. Thereafter, they would send the money back home to their families in Punjab to uplift the standard of their living and solve all of their monetary problems. When Akash reaches Iraq he has to work as a

translator in a hospital at Basra, where his job is primarily to translate the conversation of the Iraqis and Asians into English to the concerned doctors and vice versa. Akash meets Bushra in a telephone exchange company situated nearby his hospital. Bushra comes there daily in order to supply the delicacies of Basra- *Khajoor* biscuits. Akash develops strong affinity, fascination and intimate bond of love with Bushra. One day, they decide to marry. Bushra's mother wants wedding ceremony to be conducted with Iraqi rituals and Islamic customs. Therefore, Bushra tells Akash that he has to undergo the traditional circumcision ceremony- *Khatna* before their Nikkah, so that he is duly inducted into Iraqi community as per the Islamic traditions. Akash's identity is totally shattered in the name of marriage. Bushra and her mother try to crush and devastate Akash's Ethno nationalism. Akash is forcibly subjected to the cruel and brutal ceremony of *Khatna* in the name of Islamic tradition.

They shut me with a man, armed with a crude weapon in a room. I felt as if a scapegoat was being mercilessly slaughtered at the hands of an inhuman butcher. He ordered me to strip. I abided by his instructions and fully surrendered before his sweet will. He pulled the foreskin of my vital organ, recited some scriptures- which were Greek to me and severed the foreskin brutally in a flash of a second with his crude weapon. I uttered a shriek and blood gushed out. I was conscious but I became senseless soon. But my mind still raced in such a pitiable condition. For a moment I felt as if I was relieved of all kinds of pains. He placed the piece of foreskin on a plate, opened the door and went out. People applauded and clapped on seeing the piece of foreskin and started singing folksongs. (20).

Akash loses his identity and individuality when he has to undergo the cruel circumcision ceremony for the sake of his survival in alien land. Many multinational companies run hospitals and other businesses in Basra. They sow the seeds of hatred amongst the workers of different countries because they often unite together for their genuine demands. Therefore, the company adopts the strategy of divide and rule like the British Colonizers.

The authorities of the multinational companies exploited not only the local Iraqis but also sowed the seeds of hatred among Indian and Pakistani workers in camp area. They were infact worse than the British Colonizers as they not only paid the workers less wages and but also provided minimum facilities to them. When Akash finds the markets of Basra flooded with foreign goods he realizes that these companies are there only to curb, crush and subjugate their nationalism. He at once remembers role of East India Company in India during British rule and Mahatma Gandhi's struggle against it..

‘Basra's market was full of foreign goods. I had found here that Iraq did not manufacture anything of its own. It was surviving only on the basis of the strength of its vast oil production...I thought it was good that Iraq's markets were flooded with foreign goods but later on I realized that Iraqis were leading their lives under foreign influence. Whereas in India long time back Mahatma Gandhi had launched the massive

Khadi movement about discarding foreign goods under the slogan of 'Be Indian, buy Indian'. Suddenly a thought crossed my mind that Britishers had also initially arrived in India similarly in the garb of East India Company to establish their business ties but later on in the guise of trade and commerce, the East India Company had established the vast British Empire throughout India and the Indians had become slaves...' (81).

In Basra, Akash and his friends often go to bazaar on every *Jumma*. There they see hoard of *hoors*- posh butterflies of Basra. He comes to know that these posh women are infact Iraqi war widows who dominate all the government offices of Iraq. Iraqi officials and most of the visitors often visit these Iraqi war widows who are forced to take up the profession of prostitution. Here Akash meets a beautiful *hoor* named Gulnar and is instantly infatuated with her. He soon develops intimate relationship with her and visits her quite often. The character of Gulnar paints the miserable picture of the Iraqi war widows in war torn Iraq. After some days, when Akash again visits Gulnar she says that due to US Iraq war the inflow of tourists in Iraq has decreased considerably which has led to slump in flesh market.

Slowly and steadily war widows like me were forced to compromise in these conditions and took to prostitution. Gulnar further disclosed that war widows were forcibly sent to please high army officials, this had left them with no choice but to become an object of entertainment in this flesh market. (66).

Though Akash is married to Bushra yet his married life is not happy. After some time, a son is born out of their union. Soon there are rumours of the outbreak of the US Iraq war. Akash and all able bodied males in Iraq are forcibly recruited into Iraqi Army as per the dictates of the Saddam Hussein's regime. We come to know that in the war torn Iraq which is full of war widows, there is dearth of men in army that is why Saddam Hussein's regime forcibly recruits young boys in army to take arms against USA. One-day Akash's friend Abu-Majid was sitting dejected in a corner so Akash asked him about the reason of his dejection. Abu-Majid replied melancholically that his sole son was being forcibly recruited in army:

'I found Abu Majid was sitting dejected in a corner. So, I asked, "What is the matter dear friend?" Abu Majid replied in mixed Hindi, Arabic and English, his voice choked with emotions "My sole son is getting forcibly recruited in Iraqi army, tomorrow".

"It is a compulsion here, which cannot be avoided. Whenever a child fails after 10th class he is forcibly recruited in army." (31).

Here we witness the new war tactics of Saddam Hussein. Such is the shortage of men in Iraqi army that the dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein forcibly recruits almost all able-bodied young, adult and old males into army to fight the US army. Umar discloses the horror of war and miserable predicament of Iraqi women. Umar's father who is a professor of language in Basra University philosophizes on the imperialistic attitude of the mighty western countries especially USA

who always have an axe to grind and they subjugate and dominate the third world countries like Iraq:

Then my father continued, "Let me tell you another thing son, Generations change and races get transformed in war. So much so, clans and communities get changed. To tell you the truth though I am Iraqi but I do not know the nationality of my father...Revolt is a serious crime in Iraq. Those who revolt are considered to be bitter enemies of Iraq. They are instantly killed." I had realized that Iraq-Iran war; every Iraqi child had forsaken his childhood and played with guns instead of toys at tender age. (84- 85).

Umar also comments on the quest of his nationality and impact of the futile war on the current and coming generations in this passage. Later on Umar acts as a savior to the protagonist Akash when he listens to his tale of woe. He feels sad when he comes to know about the cruel *Khatma* episode, unhappy marriage of Akash with Bushra and his miserable plight in Iraq. Umar disclosed to Akash that his mission was to kill US army general in *Fidayeen* attack. It is quite evident that it was not possible for the Iraqi citizens to revolt against Saddam Hussein and raise a voice of dissent because he was very brutal and cruel at times especially during war. Saddam Hussein forcibly crushed the ethno nationalistic spirit in his citizens and used them as human shields and human bombs for his own selfish ends. But still most of the Iraqis felt that it was better to be ruled by cruel dictator rather than by outsiders like USA. The nationalistic zeal of the Iraqi citizens motivated them to fight Saddam Hussein and US forces at the same time. That is why when Umar executes his suicide mission plan so perfectly that it paves a way for the liberation of Akash. Thereafter, Akash is taken to USA and he is kept captive in a dungeon under strict observation of a psychiatrist cum US army doctor named Julia. After eight years, the US general asks Akash if he would like to be recruited in US army. Unfortunately, the US Iraq war is not over, it is still going on. The US army general realizes that Akash is a very fine interpreter is well versed in Arabic and English language and he also knows very well acquainted with the towns, routes and streets of Iraq. Therefore he might be of great use to US army fighting there. We find that Akash readily agrees to get recruited in US army under compulsion as he did in Basra. Once again his identity and ethno nationalism is crushed by US army officials when he is baptized into a Christian. He is renamed as Mr. Smith. We also see a strange description of a woman character named Julia. Julia works in US army hospital as a psychologist in USA. Her job is to treat the depressed US soldiers who come back from war front. Thereafter, she monitors and observes Akash in a dungeon from evening to night. Through the character of Julia we witness the apathy of US soldiers. Akash develops a beautiful relationship with Julia and realizes that she is a fine human being in spite of being US army officer. So, we witness the sprinkle of human touch in such incidents that gives strength to Akash and motivate him to move

forward and face difficulties. After some days, Akash alias Salim alias Mr. Smith lands in Basra with his fellow US commandos, in search of his freedom. When he goes to meet Bushra after such a long time she rejects him. When Akash alias Mr. Smith lands in Basra with a team of US commandos, he comes to know that one of the commando is a woman named Aliza. Aliza tells him that she got recruited in US army when her husband was killed in Iraq in US Iraq war. We come to know that Aliza joined US army with a strong streak of hatred for Iraqis and with a zeal of nationalism for her country. But slowly she also realized that USA was indulging in arm-twisting technique to subjugate lesser-developed states. This is the reason that she gets disillusioned with the war.

Aliza got away by saying, "I like you but you must understand since the day I have joined army, the womanly instincts have been totally subdued in me. I am now a woman minus woman. My body has become used to the intake of numerous hormones." (150)

We are shocked to learn that the US army officers and policy makers exploits their own citizens in such a way that they become living vegetables like Aliza. People like Aliza are used and misused by US officials for their own selfish ends in the name of war. Thereafter Mr. Smith thought of a plan to get out of the war zone in Basra. He requested Aliza to help him and asked her to shoot bullets on his legs so that he may be hospitalized and finally sent to India. Akash was treated in US hospital and then he was finally dispatched to India. Akash returned to his roots and went to Haridwar to cleanse his soul and to discard the trouble some memories of Basra. His Ethno Nationalism finally goaded him to reach him native land, a place where he found solace. Akash's strong sense of Ethno nationalism motivates him to complete his journey from Basra to India. In fact, USA had been using arm-twisting technique to subjugate Iraq and indulge in oil politics. French economist and business representatives had clearly mentioned in 1918 that the country that had total controlled on the oil wells of the world would have complete control over the world and would become super power. Even US President George Bush Senior also admitted that if the vast oil wealth of the world came under the direct control of Saddam Hussein then all the developed countries would face a grave danger. This shows the negative nationalism of USA, which poses a great threat to the territorial, and ethno nationalism of Iraq.

George Bush Senior often used to say, "If the vast oil wealth of the world comes under the direct control of Saddam Hussein, then the lifestyle, jobs, security and sovereignty of our ally countries would be at stake forever and we would all face a grave danger. (Grosby,16)

Moreover former American Minister Lawrence Karbe's statement was also very amusing- in which he said,

"If Kuwait was engaged in production of carrots then we would not have given a damn to it, but unfortunately Kuwait also produces a great deal of oil. That is why we are interested in it." Saddam at once retorted, "Yes it is hundred percent correct. French business representative

Henry Baranje had clearly stated in 1918 that whosoever had total control on oil wells, would exercise complete control over the world- if we seize the heavy crude oil then we shall reign over seas and oceans of the world, if we seize pure hi-refined oil then we shall control the skies of the world and dominance on best quality oil shall make us lords of lands on this earth. Moreover, whatever money we get by selling oil barrels, would be enough to govern the affairs of the world easily.'(112-113).

This was the reason that Saddam Hussein hated US President George Bush Senior to the core and considered him as his sworn enemy. Saddam Hussein never let any opportunity to insult George Bush Senior. His personal animosity with him was also one of the reasons of the outbreak of U.S Iraq war:

Hostility between Iran and Iraq has long been a staple of regional politics. Early twentieth century added further tension that is the discovery of oil in the southern regions of the both countries most readily accessed to a large extent through Shat al Arab waterway through which both Euphrates and Tigris rivers flow into the Persian Gulf. (Malone, 22).

The boundary of the two countries which were relative to Shat al Arab waterway was much in dispute between Iraq and Iran. US exploited this situation and in 1979 and used a satellite photograph taken by NASA and published it in Washington Post newspaper in which it was mentioned that this area had world's maximum oil reserves. So, there was Iraq and Iran war due to this discovery. Unfortunately, Iraq and Iran fought for eight years and more than hundred thousand people were killed (mostly males). Such was the miserable plight of two countries that they came to be known as countries of war widows. USSR supplied weapons to Iran and USA to Iraq. In this way both USSR and USA manage to keep their arms and ammunition factories running in full swing. In 1988, USA asked the both countries to give oil-drilling rights to US companies as Iran and Iraq had virtually no funds available to do so. Unfortunately, when the US companies reached his disputed border area, drilled, they found that it had minimum oil reserves. Thereafter, USA indulged in face saving exercise by publishing an apology in the same Washington Post newspaper that NASA had made an error while clicking the photograph of the disputed region.

Therefore, the concept of Nationalism has proved to be a set of beliefs about the nation for example in case of Iraq, India, Iran and USA as depicted in *Basra Streets*. All these nations contain different views about their character and different political manifestations. Some may view their nation as standing for individual liberty, while other may be willing to sacrifice that liberty for security. Some may welcome immigration, and support policies that make it easy for them to become citizens; while others may be hostile to immigration. It has also been exemplified through various incidents in Basra Streets that nationalism often asserts that other nations are implacable enemies to one's own nation; it injects hatred of what is perceived to be foreign, whether another nation, an

immigrant, or a person who may practice another religion or speak a different language. Nationalism is not a homogenous but a heterogeneous concept made up of heterogeneous social setup. For the Iraqi citizens in the petro fiction *Basra Streets*. Nationalism is historically determined phenomenon based on past understanding and collective consciousness for them. Nationalism is also a spirit or consciousness that they developed during the imperialistic period when they resisted the designs of the US imperialistic rulers. All the six factors which help to explain the concept of Nationalism and Nation explicitly viz geography, religion, language, history, culture and literature are beautifully portrayed in the neo-colonial world of *Basra Streets*.

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