

# Impermanence as Form: Taping, Transgressing, and Metaphorical Mothering in Deepak Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People*

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## Introduction

This essay situates the hyperreal worlds of *pravasis* and the experimental narrative form of Deepak Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People* within the framework of petro-coloniality. It argues that the novel exposes the precarity, affective labor, and subaltern vulnerabilities of South Asian immigrant workers, while its metaphoric structures generate both an aesthetic and an epistemic register for their absences embedded in the petro-culture of the Gulf. Although prior scholarship has examined the novel's immigrant subjectivities and offered political and cultural readings, critique on narrative analysis grounded in close reading of its fragmented and experimental form remains limited. Apart from Alraddadi's work, which highlights how the novel exposes the limits of established postcolonial frameworks such as Bhabha's hybridity and fluidity, there has been little engagement with the text in relation to emerging conversations on petro-coloniality. Building on this gap, the essay examines the precarious existence and structural absence of *pravasis* in petro-colonial Gulf spaces through the novel's distinctive narrative strategies and aesthetic choices. While it considers the text in its totality, it offers close readings of three key stories, "Birds," "Le Musée," and "Glossary," in order to develop the triadic framework of taping, transgressing, and metaphorical mothering that guides the article's formal analysis. Through this framework, the essay demonstrates how a holistic understanding of *pravasis*' precarity, their affective responses to petro-colonial conditions, and the novel's own transgressive formal strategies become possible.

The essay focuses on the sense of impermanence that shapes *Temporary People* in three interconnected ways. First, in a world where disfigurement and dismemberment have become the norm, impermanence appears through the taping of bodies, dreams, and relationships, binding together what is always on the verge of coming apart. Second, metaphorical narration demonstrates the instability produced by impermanence, as it becomes the dominant mode for narrating what remains unsayable within the petro-colonial landscape. Third, the world of temporary people persists through acts of transgression: they stretch their bodies to the edges of corporeal possibility while also transgressing the narrative form. These modes of impermanence lead directly into the broader structures that make such a world possible. As coloniality in all its forms depends on hegemonic

systems, petrodollar-driven capitalist expansion in the Gulf underwrites this hegemony. In turn, this hegemonic order thrives on the abundance of fossil fuels and petroleum production in the region. The violence generated by petro-colonial forces—relentless construction, continuous reshaping of the environment, and systemic exploitation—consumes landscapes, laboring bodies, and dreams. Within this setting, *pravasis* inhabit a petro-colonial space<sup>1</sup>—where oil dictates the terms of life, place, and personhood.

## Oil and Alienation

*Temporary People* makes visible the *pravasis* who occupy multiple identities, subjectivities, and positionalities, including

Temporary. People.

Illegal. People.

Ephemeral. People.

Gone. People.

Deported. People.

More. Arriving. (Unnikrishnan 23-24)

In Chapter nine, “Nalinakshi,” an octogenarian mother offers a prophetic reflection on her son Hari, anticipating that he will become a *pravasi*—a wanderer. While *pravasi* denotes “foreigner, outsider, immigrant” (Unnikrishnan 186), the narrative underscores that living as a *pravasi* ultimately reveals a deeper condition. As Nalinakshi urges the narrator to tell her son, “it’s always meant: absence” (Unnikrishnan 187). The text foregrounds this haunting sense of absence, weaving it into both its aesthetic and narrative form. Deeper hidden energies and urges responding to this absence, both in the lives of *pravasis* and narrative form, which this article reads as a triadic set of ‘taping,’ ‘transgressing’ and ‘metaphorical mothering,’ make most of the narrative action and conflict.

The novel *Temporary People* is set in the fictional yet hyperreal landscapes of Abu Dhabi and Dubai—cities that have rapidly transformed from sprawling deserts into fast-forward urban spaces following the discovery of oil. This transformation, driven by the machinery of petro-capitalism, has drawn successive waves of economic migrants through the *kafala* system—a contractual labor arrangement facilitated by a *kafeel* (sponsor), typically an individual of Arab descent, a company, or through sponsored visas (Longva 20; Qadri 79). Told through twenty-eight interconnected stories, divided into three books, the narrative structure is fragmented and metaphorical. The first book, *Limbs*, foregrounds the physicality of migrant labor—the bodily energies of men and women that fuel the construction of the new cityscape. This is followed by *Tongue, Flesh*, which delves into the unspoken desires, silenced voices, and internalized struggles of these bodies. The final section, *Veel*—a Malayalam word meaning “home” or “belonging”—evokes the

emotional undercurrents of longing, memory, and displacement that simmer in the minds and bodies of the workers.

Thematically, *Temporary People* weaves a world that depends on the “limbs” of laborers, explores the “tongue” and “flesh” of their hidden emotional lives, and finally, gestures toward “Veed”—a fragile, often unattainable sense of home. Everything and everyone in this world are in flux. “Limbs” operate through constant and consistent labor into taping and making them workable, presentable all the time. Metaphors help bring out the hidden and affective internal world that often does not find language to express. And “Veed” is an affective act of transgressing, a longing that this article argues as transgressing memory. Both in transient lives and narrative aesthetic, home becomes an affective transgression. Lives become mythical and transgressive: people vanish without notice, break without repair, or swallow their passports and dissolve into an extension of their passports. Their identities are reduced to labels—“guest,” “expat,” “foreigner,” and “temporary”—which paradoxically become their only permanent condition.

Critical scholarship on *Temporary People* explores the transient worlds of *pravasis* through multiple theoretical lenses. Priya Menon reads these lives through Jacques Derrida’s concept of the specter, suggesting that migrants are simultaneously visible and invisible (Menon 186). Birje Jose extends this idea by pairing the spectral absence of migrants in national and narrative discourse with the elusiveness of oil in modern life. Oil, he notes, saturates contemporary existence yet remains largely invisible in cultural and narrative forms (Jose 282). Jose also reads the novel through Mbembe’s framework of necropolitics, which renders the migrants’ precarity starkly visible. In a related vein, Grace Mariam Raju highlights the “hegemonic presence of oil” in Malayalam petrofiction, a category in which *Temporary People* can be considered representative (170), reinforcing how petrocultures shape both the conditions of migrant labor and the aesthetics used to narrate them. Alraddadi (2023) argues that dominant postcolonial frameworks such as Bhabha’s fluidity, hybridity, and ambivalence fail to capture the experiences of these migrants, since such concepts usually contextualize South-North exile or diasporic conditions rather than South-South migrations. In this context, she contends, Deepak Unnikrishnan’s *Temporary People* highlights a different migrant experience, “including those positioned outside of the narrative itself” (*Temporary People* 68). She further maintains that literary narratives must redefine the relationship between humans and increasingly postcapitalist cultures (68-69). Unlike Alraddadi, who interrogates existing postcolonial theories in relation to *Temporary People*, Karinkurayil approaches the text through the broader category of the novel itself. He finds it intriguing that the text introduces both a new narrative aesthetic and a sense of “temporariness” within the form. Because *Temporary People* resists easy categorization—swaying between novel and short-story collection—Karinkurayil argues that it signals a “crisis in the [narrative] structure itself,” generating an aesthetic and affect that has yet to be clearly named or theorized (201-

202). This structural instability resonates with the novel's language, which abounds in pidgin, Arabic-Malayalam hybrid phrasing, and expressions drawn from diverse South Asian linguistic contexts (Abdurahman and Roy, 3027).

Taken together, these studies offer valuable insights into the political, cultural, and narrative stakes of *Temporary People*. Yet despite their breadth, this body of scholarship approaches the novel primarily through thematic or theoretical frameworks and does not fully engage with its complex textual and formal world. Even Karinkurayil's important intervention on its novel form stops short of examining how the text's fragmented structure, its transgressive narrative experimentation, and its recurring imagery of taping, patching, disassembling, and recomposing bodies operate as sustained formal strategies. No study has yet provided a reading of how the novel's narrative form—its discontinuities, textual seams, and linguistic pidgin—functions metaphorically to embody the precarious lives of Gulf migrants. This article addresses that gap by offering a formal reading that centers taping and transgressing, and metaphorical mothering as a consistent condition in the transient world of *pravasis* and as a key narrative aesthetic. One might argue that just as migrant lives search for coherence or tape themselves together, as they transgress against an unrelenting onslaught of disfigurement and dismemberment, the narrative itself searches for structure. This is the basis of the analysis that this article advances.

The story "Birds"—the second in the *Limbs* section—centers on the "Sticker" or "Tape People," a crew tasked with taping together the broken limbs and bodies of fallen workers. Among the ten-member crew led by Khalid, Anna Varghese stands out as the only female sticker operating across the construction zones of Hamdan Street, Electra, Salaam, and Khalifa. Originally from India, Anna arrived in the Gulf on a work visa, hoping to secure a nursing position in a hospital. Instead, she found herself working with the Tape People Crew, a role she has held for over thirty years. With decades of nocturnal adhesive labor experience, Anna has become a respected and seasoned figure in this surreal profession. Her reputation is built not only on her taping skill but also on her uncanny ability to find and tend to fallen men, in places others often overlook. While taping broken limbs, she listens to the stories, dreams, and confessions of the injured men, offering them not just physical repair but emotional solace. Anna evolves from an adhesive Sticker into an affective maternal figure and ultimately transgresses memory and motherhood, through the metaphorical structure of the narrative where she develops wings and flies.

Anna's taping in *Temporary People* can be read through alienation and disposability that the hegemony of oil introduced into the world where Anna works. Anna's workplace is embedded within a petro-colonial landscape—an environment where the material presence of oil not only drives economic activity but also reinforces a hegemonic power structure rooted in imperial and colonial legacies. The discovery and exploitation of petroleum have consolidated hierarchical systems,

maintained locally by Arab elites and globally by a fossil-fuel-driven capitalist and neoliberal order that renders migrant labor expendable (Doğan 85-88). This logic of disposability, applied to non-Arab migrant workers, is vividly rendered where “[t]he city was a board game and labor its pieces, there to make buildings bigger, streets longer, the economy richer. Then to leave. After” (Unnikrishnan 19). The metaphor of labor as game pieces encapsulates the mechanized, dehumanizing logic of petro-capitalism, whereby migrant bodies are instrumentalized for infrastructural growth and then discarded once their utility is exhausted. And in this condition of dismemberment, labor needs a constant state of ‘taping’ themselves or being tended by Tape Crew.

As the petro-colonial structure of power becomes more entrenched, it not only does reconfigure the physical environment but also reshapes the social and psychological realities of those who labor within it. In *The Nutmeg’s Curse: Parables for A Planet in Crisis* (2021), Amitav Ghosh argues that the shift to a fossil-fuel economy established a distinctive and enduring power structure. He notes:

THE MATERIAL CHARACTERISTICS of oil make it even more potent than coal in its ability to reinforce structures of power. For the ruling classes, coal had one great drawback, which was that it had to be extracted by large numbers of miners, working in conditions that ensured their radicalization; this was why miners were at the forefront of world’s labor movements through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries ... In short, fossil fuels have from the start been enmeshed with human lives in ways that tend to reinforce the power of the ruling classes. This dynamic is perfectly expressed by the dual meaning of the English word “power,” which combines the idea of energy, “as in a force of nature,” with ‘power’ as in a relation between humans, an authority, a structure of domination (102, capitalization by author).

Oil has the capacity to complicate both the personal and the geopolitical, as suggested by the line in “Bird”: “Oil had just begun to dictate terms. And Anna was young, too” (Unnikrishnan 8). The parallel emergence of oil and the youthful migrant labor force reveals how these energies become entangled, with oil ultimately asserting itself as the dominant and victorious force. This problematizes the rise of a hegemonic order shaped by extraction and capital, a process that Alraddadi identifies as the emergence of “oil capitalism” in the Arab world following the discovery of oil (Alraddadi, *Cities of Salt* 22).

While *Temporary People* does not overtly depict oil as a character or force, its presence is implicit in the assertive, invisible structures that govern the lives of guest workers. These structures regulate not only their labor and mobility but also the very spaces they inhabit, shaped and sustained by the logic of oil.<sup>2</sup> This power is not confined to the Gulf; it is part of what Ghosh terms the “petrodollar system,” a global network of economic and political dominance rooted in fossil fuel extraction and consumption (Ghosh, *Nutmeg Curse* 106-107). As the materiality of petroleum manifests through various energies and actions (Ghosh, *Great Derangement* 74), it has increasingly been

recognized as a significant driver of narrative—giving rise to the genre of *petrofiction*.<sup>3</sup> In this genre, oil may not always appear overtly or assertively—as is the case in “Birds,” where Anna works with the Stick People Crew—but it remains a powerful, structuring force that underpins colonial and neo-colonial systems of power. Alraddadi (2022) explores this “oil encounter” in literary terms by extending Ghosh’s notion of the “unspeakable” into a framework for new modes of reading postcolonial texts. She argues that Lazarus’s concept of the “postcolonial unconscious” can inspire critical approaches to works that resist established traditions and analytic systems (24). Alraddadi situates this argument within her postcolonial materialist reading of Abdulrahman Munif’s petrofiction *Cities of Salt*, positioning her intervention in conversation with Arab modernists who expressed anxieties about fragmentation and human alienation in the wake of the oil encounter (26). For Alraddadi, the power structure produced by petroleum’s extractive logic does not cultivate the conditions necessary for labor solidarity or collective resistance; instead, it produces forms of alienation, dispersal, and psychic fragmentation.

This alienation, injected into both lived experience and narrative form by the oil encounter, is rendered through fragmentation. *Taping*, in turn, emerges as a natural human response to these conditions. The fragmentation is so pervasive that conventional critique and narrative structures fail to account for it; the subjects of this world exist in states of *permanent impermanence*. This burden of dismemberment manifests both physically and symbolically in *Temporary People*, particularly in the recurring image of falling bodies in “Birds,” where workers plummet from high-rise buildings under construction. These scenes of bodily disintegration mirror the larger violences of alienation and the subsequent impulse toward taping, a human reflexive response seeking wholeness in the event of fragmentation.

To illustrate this condition, the novel presents a haunting scene: “When workers fall—severing limbs—the pain is acute but endured. What lingers more deeply is the loneliness and anxiety of falling, the psychological weight of being unseen. Pedestrians walk around the fallen. Some stare. The affluent return with cameras. Drivers swerve to avoid the bodies. But it doesn’t matter where laborers fall—the public remains indifferent” (Unnikrishnan 10-11). This pervasive indifference extends the novel’s logic of alienation, turning bodily disintegration into a routine spectacle, which resonates with Menon’s argument of *pravasis* as spectral figures, “non-presence presences” (186). Even male worker’s bodies, often presumed to be resilient, are rendered disposable within this precarious condition. In such an environment, Judith Butler’s argument becomes urgent: corporeal vulnerability is not a universal condition but one that is differentially distributed, intensified for women, racialized minorities, and sexual minorities. The petro-colonial city emerges as a space where bodies are mechanized, terraformed, and ultimately abandoned. The falling body here becomes both a literal and symbolic extension of the novel’s portraying of alienation and the compulsion to “tape” oneself together in the face of relentless fragmentation.

## Precarity and Metaphorical Mothering

As oil introduces fragmentation into bodies, land, and narrative, this fractured condition produces incessant reactionary practices—forms of taping, adhesion, and affective patchwork that attempt to hold life together. Yet the effects of this fragmentation are not evenly distributed. Non-Arab migrants experience more acute forms of precarity than those of Arab descent, producing a differentiated landscape of vulnerability. Within this socio-cultural asymmetry, *pravasis* develop response mechanisms that mirror the logic of taping. This article argues, through close reading, that this precarity-response mechanism can be understood as a mode of metaphorical mothering. In *Temporary People*, mothering becomes not simply a familial or biological category but an affective, imaginative, and structural response to fragmentation. The story “Birds” foregrounds the caring and affective side of mothering, while “Le Musée” explores the other end of this metaphor: a petro-capitalist birthing industry in which bodies themselves are manufactured.

The “Le Musée” introduces Sabeen, a girl searching for her father who disappeared into the UAE desert while working for one of the produce firms. She describes him with stark brevity: “About Father, little to tell. When he lived, he worked as a scientist for a government-owned company that manufactured people in the Gulf, one of the first produce firms to do it right on petrol-infested soil” (Unnikrishnan 63). As Alraddadi argues, the oil encounter metamorphoses the realism of fiction and demands new aesthetic strategies to represent petro-modern realities (26-27). These oil-driven “produce firms,” which generate “cerebral customized” bodies, “ready-made villages,” and even ready-made nations when rebel groups later attempt to seize the formulas, literalize the petro-colonial desire to engineer populations and landscapes.

Just as precarity is unevenly distributed, metaphorical mothering also manifests differentially. For *pravasis* like Anna, mothering carries the resonance of affective labor—care work as a survival practice in an environment where social ties are fragile and constantly threatened. But “mothering” also extends metaphorically to homeland imaginaries: a longing for the stability, coherence, and belonging denied to migrants in the Gulf. Nalinakshi’s reflection on “absence,” the defining condition of *pravasis*’ life, deepens this connection between memories of motherland and mothering as a response mechanism (Unnikrishnan 187). Throughout the novel, the narrative repeatedly returns to visions of home—rivers, houses, landscapes—as if attempting to tape together its own fractured structure through memory. In Book Three, extended recollections of the narrator’s mother and her relationship to land become a narrative adhesive, holding together what oil has separated.

Yet the novel also presents a darker, more unsettling form of metaphorical mothering: the petro-state’s technological reproduction of humans. Sabeen’s father, the scientist who births bodies out of

“petrol-infested soil,” embodies the perverse maternal logic of the petro-colony, where creation is subsumed under extraction. The government’s desire—and later the rebels’ sustained efforts—to possess and control this technology reveal the internalized impermanence of migrant life. The production of bodies becomes a means of stabilizing a population that otherwise remains transient, precarious, and terrifyingly disposable.

This attempt to engineer customized labor for the petro-colonial order can be read alongside Judith Butler’s interrogation of the very definition of the “human” under conditions of structural violence. Butler famously asks: *Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives?* These questions resonate sharply within the Gulf’s labor regime, where corporeal vulnerability is organized through rigid social hierarchies. As Butler writes, “The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and flesh expose us to others, but also to touch, to violence . . . Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension” (26). In *Temporary People*, this public dimension of the body becomes a site of coercive exposure. For Anna in “Birds,” relationality—often associated with care—becomes the very source of trauma. As a temporary worker, her body is perpetually extended into the public sphere, subjected to surveillance, precarity, and the possibility of falling, literally and metaphorically. Her vulnerability is not a metaphysical condition but a manufactured one, produced by the petro-state’s systemic devaluation of migrant life. Anna’s precarity—rooted in her corporeal vulnerability and the constant relational trauma she witnesses—extends the novel’s broader contextualizing on who “counts” within petro-capitalism. Where bodies are routinely rendered disposable, Anna’s labor becomes a form of metaphorical mothering that refuses the logic of erasure. Drawing on two feminist frameworks helps clarify this role. First, Sara Ruddick’s notion of mothering as an epistemological practice illuminates how Anna develops relational knowledge through acts of listening, tending, and recording—skills that allow her to understand the depth of the fragmentation around her (4-5). Second, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s theory of affective labor helps articulate how her emotional presence, attentiveness, and capacity to absorb others’ pain become the very “product” the petro-capitalist workplace extracts from her (96). In this sense, Anna’s work becomes an extension of affective labor in the petro-capitalist world: care becomes infrastructural, and affect becomes the adhesive binding a broken world. This metaphorical mothering, an epistemic praxis, makes her understand the depth of fragmentation around her. She resists the idea of bringing her children into the Gulf—her workplace—recognizing that “she didn’t want her children turning into in-betweens” (Unnikrishnan 20). She believes they should “know the land, not the mother,” equating her own corporeal vulnerability with the violated land she inhabits. Though she often weeps and feels overwhelmed, her spirit of healing and listening remains intact. It is

this affective labor—this metaphorical mothering—that allows her to endure, to remain alive in a space designed to erase.

For Sabeen's father, however, corporeal precarity leads to his disappearance altogether. His act of "tinkering" with the human body—developing laborers who might live beyond eight or ten years, who might age, form attachments, dream of old age, or organize in collectives and leadership circles (Unnikrishnan 78-79)—transgresses the petro-colonial order's strict definition of who "counts as labor." In a system premised on impermanence, bodies engineered for longevity and self-determination pose an existential threat. The state's violent response to this transgression reveals its investment in maintaining a laboring population incapable of imagining futures outside exploitation. To introduce permanence—as Sabeen's father attempts in his metaphorical mothering experiment—is to disrupt the very foundations of petro-capitalist governance. His disappearance thus marks the limit of permissible humanity within the Gulf's labor economy: workers may be born of oil, but they must not exceed the lifespan or aspirations assigned to them.

The dual violences inflicted on land and body in *Temporary People* share a common genealogy in colonial and capitalist regimes that consolidate power through the control of resources and the mechanization of life. Silvia Federici's account of primitive accumulation clarifies this history: as Europe transitioned from feudalism to capitalism, both the body and the land were reconceptualized as extractable, mechanistic resources. Drawing on mechanical philosophy—advanced by thinkers such as Descartes, Hobbes, and Bacon—this intellectual shift enabled ruling classes to pursue domination beginning with the human body. As Federici writes, "Control over the human nature [was] the first, the most indispensable step" (166). In this philosophical framework, the body and nature were rendered regular, predictable, and machinic— "the human body and not the steam engine, and not even the clock, was the first machine developed by capitalism" (176). This genealogy resonates with the petro-colonial landscape of *Temporary People*, where the Gulf's "petrol-infested soil" is mobilized to manufacture short-term labourers and where migrant women like Anna are folded into the machinery of affective production. Metaphorical mothering thus surfaces not merely as an individual act of care but as a structural response to an economy that mechanizes both bodies and land.

Crucially, this framework of metaphorical mothering also extends to the novel's narrative form. Just as characters improvise forms of adhesion and care in the face of fragmentation, the narrative itself adopts a taped, mosaic-like structure—moving across stories, memories, reflections, and reports without claiming totality. The oscillation between homeland and Gulf, between bodily dismemberment and affective stitching-together, mirrors the very logic of taping. In this sense, metaphorical mothering becomes more of an organizing aesthetic, revealing how the text negotiates precarity at the level of form as much as content. Whether narrativized through care labor, homeland longing, or the dystopian manufacture of human life,

metaphorical mothering becomes a crucial analytic tool for understanding how *Temporary People* navigates fragmentation, impermanence, and petro-colonial violence.

### Transgressing Memory and Form

In the final scene of “Bird,” Anna’s metamorphosis—her body sprouting wings as a red-eyed pigeon with clipped wings and iron lockets urges her to leap—marks one of the novel’s clearest enactments of transgressing. Her metaphorical transgression in that final scene is a departure from the corporeal and affective routines that have structured her life under petro-capitalism. Anna’s body, shaped by decades of adhesive labor and intimate caretaking, carries the sediment of collective memory. Yet this body is also a relational space, constituted by the very networks of dispossession that have defined her migrant existence. As she flaps her wings, she sees others with wings “falling past her, falling with her, dropping like rocks,” (Unnikrishnan 22) each struggling to navigate their own precarious flight. The scene’s dreamlike layering, in which Anna speaks to the dying Iqbal, recalls Nandan’s bird, and oscillates between memory and metamorphosis, collapses the boundary between her metaphorical mothering as affective labor and her transgression of that role. In this moment, Anna remembers Iqbal, a dying migrant laborer she once patched and listened to, and his account of Nandan, a fellow worker who kept a pigeon locked in a heavy iron cage and never allowed it to fly. In taking flight, she transgresses not only the memory of listening, taping, and mothering but also the mechanized rhythms of care work that have defined her life within a petro-colonial order. She also transgresses the narrative realism that appears valid when she was taping and tending to fallen bodies. Her movement away from the Gulf’s towering skyline breaks, even if momentarily, the repetitive cycles of fragmentation and adhesive labor. As she rises, the narrator observes that she “faintly caught sight of many bird heads peering down at her. Their beaks were moving. ‘Fly,’ they seemed to be mouthing. ‘Fly!’” (Unnikrishnan 22).

*Temporary People* advances its narrative plot through a deeply experimental narrative form. Critics have read this formal restlessness in multiple ways: Karinkurayil interprets it as a “crisis of form,” while Alraddadi sees it as a sign of the limits of established postcolonial concepts such as ambivalence. Other scholars read its mythic, gothic, and exaggerated characterizations through the lens of magical realism (Jose 283; Fatima 25). This article, however, approaches the novel through the conceptual frame of transgressing—where novel transgresses plot structure, linguistic registers, and the spatial and thematic rootedness of its characters. The forms of transgressing are already visible in the two stories previously examined: in “Birds,” Anna’s metamorphosis into a bird literalizes a transgression of bodily reality; in “Le Musée,” Sabeen’s father transgresses biological reproduction by attempting to birth humans not through the maternal body, but out of “petrol-infested soil.”

Book Two's Chapter "Glossary" amplifies this narrative form and aesthetic through a striking scene in which language itself transgresses. The narrative recounts how, in 1991, "an ENGLISH-SPEAKING teen ... waiting to cross the street ... watched his tongue abandon him by jumping out of his mouth and running away" (Unnikrishnan 115; capitalization by author). The tongue quickly sprouts limbs, a face, and "fountain-pen blue hair," transforming into a creature that releases every noun the teenage boy has ever accumulated. These "damaged nouns" spill into the street, causing chaos and "killing" all verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, leaving the boy linguistically vulnerable, clutching only a few remaining words "clinging to his tonsils" (116). Later, even the last of these—*Yabba Dabba Do*, tied to his memory of his grandfather—is lost. As he is treated by paramedics, the boy witnesses other English-speaking teens chasing their own escaped tongues, a surreal display of linguistic precarity. Much like the metaphorical mothering and adhesive narrative practices explored earlier, this scene dramatizes how transgressing exposes vulnerability while also provoking acts of desperate adhesion. The boy's attempt to hold on to his remaining words mirrors the novel's broader effort to "tape together" memory, identity, and language amid conditions designed to fragment them. Through such transgressions—of body, of biology, of language, of narrative logic—*Temporary People* foregrounds the instability of representation itself and the fragility of the subjects it seeks to portray.

This transgressive mode helps illuminate the novel's central thematic preoccupation with erasure and absence—what Unnikrishnan himself cites as the motivating force behind *Temporary People*. As Unnikrishnan himself explains in an interview, "[w]hen I started reading history and reportage, I realized that my experience of home wasn't being documented. That made me mad because something was being erased. I started to write and sort of figure things out" (Wimbish 2017). The same formal restlessness that shapes the narrative also reflects the desires of immigrant lives to transgress the limits imposed upon their bodies, memories, and futures. Through this lens, the novel's experimental form deepens a presence-absence reading of *pravasi* experience: migrant workers are absent from the places in which they are physically present (their workplaces in the Gulf), and present in the places from which they remain absent (their homelands, carried through memory). Their emotional and narrative worlds hinge on this oscillation.

Within this dual existence, much is damaged or destroyed: nouns spill into the street, verbs and adjectives are "killed," linguistic structure transgresses. The wreckage of grammar mirrors the wreckage of migrant life. The transgressing language is what makes the narrative reality possible in the first place. Unnikrishnan also attests to this foundational realism in the settings of Dubai where language and immense possibilities of linguistic pidginizing become a reality. He responds in an interview: "*Temporary People* is primarily a book about language. It plays with language because it's very hard to talk about a city like Abu Dhabi without doing that. When I think about Abu Dhabi

I think about all its related languages—Hindi, Malayalam, English, Arabic, and other languages too—and how people have to figure out a way to communicate with whoever is listening to them” (Wimbish 2017). The question then arises: How does one give form to such a reality of erasure, such precarity? Magic realism is often cited as the dominant narrative form of *Temporary People*. However, as Kumkum Sangari argues in *The Politics of the Possible*, García Márquez’s magical realism is a “mode of perception grounded in the political and historical formation not merely of Columbia but of Latin America” (McKeon 900). This narrative technique weaves the Buendía family’s story through the rooted soil of Macondo, where a stable geography—physical or mythic—anchors the text’s magical realities. But *Temporary People* does not fertilize in similar mythic and colonial rootedness. Its reality is built on oil-soaked ground, a petro-colonial condition that turns the world above in constant upheaval where both landscape and life are repeatedly remade, dismantled, and reassembled. In such a setting, there is no stable “Macondo” to hold the narrative’s magic; there is only continual rupture. Thus, for Unnikrishnan, transgressing itself becomes the narrative form, where belonging, linguistic register, and memory are kept in chaotic impermanence all the time. The text tapes together fragments, transgresses the boundaries of the real, and complicates the permanence of place, language, and identity. Like its characters—who must continuously reassemble themselves to survive—the narrative transgresses the limits of representation in order to speak the unspeakable conditions of migrant life.

## Conclusion

*Temporary People* occupies an important place within both migrant fiction and petrofiction, yet it stands apart for its narrative attention to South-South migration, which is often overshadowed by the dominant postcolonial narratives of exile in a South-North frame. In this particular narrative terrain, Unnikrishnan’s work opens up challenging but generative analytical possibilities by foregrounding forms of precarity unique to *pravasis* in the petro-capitalist Gulf. The novel portrays how everyday life is shaped by the demands of a linguistic landscape that requires constant linguistic jugglery, as well as by the accelerated tempo of existence produced by oil-driven development. These are the pressures that inscribe themselves deeply onto migrant bodies, and narrative, through its distinctive structure, gives form and meaning to their stories.

This article has approached the novel through three central aims: to trace the precarious conditions of the *pravasis*; to situate their subjectivities within a petro-colonial order; and to offer a holistic reading through attention to the text’s formal strategies. What emerges from this analysis is a narrative aesthetic rooted in responsiveness, where erasure, fragmentation, and the relentless excesses of oil capitalism are responded to through taping and metaphorical

mothering. These strategies of responding attempt to bring both *pravasis* and *narrative* towards structure and immigrant world-making, those are in chaos and impermanence all the time. Through its formal experimentation and its attention to the lived textures of South-South migration, the novel articulates how precarious subjects continually remake themselves against the forces that seek to unmake them.

## Notes

1. Petro-colonialism, or petro-coloniality, refers to a neo-colonial condition predominantly affecting postcolonial nations, characterized by enduring structures of dependency, exploitation, and extraction rooted in colonial logics. While Gulf states materially rely on fossil fuels, this dependency is deeply entangled with the neoliberal capitalist systems and political configurations of the Global North. These ties facilitate and sustain extractive regimes within their own territories. In many respects, the petro-colonial condition in the Middle East can be seen as a continuation of imperial legacies, particularly those established under British colonial rule. In contemporary academic discourse, petro-coloniality is often examined through the lenses of resource extraction, ecological degradation, and climate crisis. Within literary studies, the genre of petrofiction critically engages with these dynamics, offering nuanced insights into the cultural, environmental, and political dimensions of oil-driven modernity.

2. The ways in which oil penetrates social structures and generates its own distinct logic are powerfully illustrated in Abdul Rahman Munif's *Cities of Salt*, originally written in Arabic and later translated into English. Amitav Ghosh's 1992 review, "Oil Encounter," offers an insightful reading of Munif's work, highlighting how oil economies reshape societies in profound and often violent ways. To extend this analysis beyond the Persian Gulf—particularly considering this article's argument that the logic of oil mirrors the dynamics of neoliberal capitalism in the Global North—Imre Szeman's essay, "How to Know about Oil: Energy Epistemologies and Political Futures," published in the *Journal of Canadian Studies* (2013), provides a compelling theoretical framework.

3. Coined by Amitav Ghosh in his review of Abdul Rahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* (1984), the term *petrofiction* refers to literature that interrogates the socio-political and environmental ramifications of oil economies. Works within this canon often depict how oil reshapes landscapes, displaces communities, and engenders new forms of violence and inequality. Some important work of petro fiction like Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* (1927) critiques the corruption and exploitation embedded in early American oil capitalism. Munif's *Cities of Salt* remains a foundational text, chronicling the upheaval of a fictional Arab town under the pressures of petroleum discovery and Western intervention. Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rain*

*Forest* (1990) and *Tropic of Orange* (1997) employ magical realism to expose the enmeshing of environmental degradation and global capitalism. Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010) foregrounds the human and ecological toll of oil conflict in the Niger Delta. These narratives, like *Temporary People*, illuminate the surreal and often violent transformations wrought by petro-capitalism.

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