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Pharos the Egyptian and the Gothic Other as Excess

by Shruti Jain & Kaushik Tekur Venkata

Guy Boothby's *Pharos the Egyptian*, published in 1889, employs the category of the Gothic to discuss various anxieties plaguing the late Victorian society. It deals with issues such as the Gothic Other's 'magical' capabilities, revenge, disease, and the colonial extraction of wealth, among others. The novel overwhelms the binary between the rational European self and the Gothic colonial other by presenting the Egyptian Pharos not as an opposite but as an excess of the European self. Pharos is as rational as he is Gothic and in this excess of being both, he destabilizes the hierarchy and binary at once. We argue that the Gothic Other is terrifying not just in its 'Otherness' but also in its similarity. The familiarity it exhibits with the European worldview is a major cause for concern for the European self, leading to a deeply disturbing sense of anxiety.

The Imperial Gothic:

Imperialism sustained itself through a discourse of rationality and Enlightenment. Citing Leela Gandhi, Andrew Smith and William Hughes elaborate the exclusionary nature of the Cartesian worldview that othered 'material and historical alterity' in the process of constructing the self (2). This cartesian idea of subjecthood excluded other living forms, within Europe and outside. Cartesian rationality by way of defining itself, defines its boundaries and hints at what lies outside the boundary of the self. Since Cartesian subjecthood is the 'thinking self', what it defines as its other and what lies outside its boundaries of the self is by definition

unthinking- that which lies outside the realm of the rational and consequently becomes the incomprehensible: "The Enlightenment, therefore, produces its own doubles" (3).

Since the other has by definition been constructed as the incomprehensible, its existence and ways of functioning possess the potential to engender perplexity and bewilderment. When the European self comes into contact with the ontological other, it hesitates to acknowledge forms of existences that lie outside the boundaries of the self. Leela Gandhi argues that the Cartesian self while confronting the "mysterious and the incalculable" responds to the threat by reducing the diversity of Nature and what lies outside to "the familiar contents of our minds" (36). Discussing the consequence of this reductionist confrontation, she writes: "This opens up the possibility of ordering or taming the wild profusion of things formally, according to the structure of the subject's emancipatory rationality, and similarly to the terms of a mathematical demonstration" (36).

This other - gendered, racialized, classed, disabled, queered - was understood alongside the category of the Gothic. The Gothic enables the possibility of a new way of engaging with that which is othered by the Cartesian self. Discussing the relationship of Gothic to Enlightenment, Andrew Smith writes, "The challenges posed to post-Enlightenment claims to certainty are developed within the Gothic as both an aesthetic feature (its fascination with narrative fragmentation), an ontology and, paradoxically, a kind of epistemology." (*Gothic Radicalism* 1,2) Gothic presents the means of exploring a self that is not the Cartesian thinking self and is under the supposed influence of desire, fear, or even madness.[1]

The increased resistance from the Othered presented a political and epistemological threat to the Eurocentric white male cartesian self. By refusing to fit into the 'order' that they were thought to be a part of, they threaten the validity of the cartesian understanding. Their

[1] Scholars like Mary Douglass have argued that the Gothic genre (and ontology) in fact does act as a 'conserving genre' - the abhumanness contributes to constructing and edifying the 'fully human'.

existence, then, pushes the cartesian self to consider the possibility of an alternate form of being and knowing that is agential. This alternate ontology works with the Gothic to embody European uncertainties and anxieties. The Imperial Gothic, while ‘ordering’, categorizing, and defining the Other, also engaged with the fears - imagined and felt - that arose out of the interaction between the European white male self and the Gothic Other.

Gothic Literature

Fin de Siècle fiction, like the other discursive and artistic practices of the time, engaged with contemporary anxieties in different ways. Scholars have studied the different aspects of these anxieties such as imperial uncertainties, anxieties about the self, financial insecurity, ‘deviant’ sexuality, spiritual decay, and the decline of morals, among others, in relation to Fin de Siècle fiction. (Arata 1996; Brantlinger 1990; DeLamotte 1990; Houston 2005; Luckhurst 2012) ‘Gothic’ as an aesthetic category had multiple roles to play in this interaction with Fin de Siècle anxieties.

The fiction of the mid 18th century took to a not-so-popular way of engaging with the fears of the society. The ancient regime, with its barons, monks and castles was seen as a threat to the growing middle classes (Hoeveler, 10-27). The Gothic landscape with an evil villain attacking a fragile lady who needs saving, worked as a template with which different yet related fears over decades could be written and discussed. Being an aesthetic of fear and anxiety about the unknown and evil, Gothic offered a way of engaging with the many ‘specters’ of Imperialism.

Gothic tales offer the possibility of debating many aspects of the dominant culture. Ambiguities, fears, ambivalences, agential actions of those considered weak, different physical and metaphysical existences, ways of life, and so on. Those that have been inadequately dealt with or written off inside the discourse of rationality find their apt place in the Gothic.

Pharos the Egyptian

Pharos the Egyptian is the tale of an English man's encounter with an Egyptian magician. The English man, Cyril Forrester, is on a mission to save a woman, Fraulein Valerie de Vocxqal, from the clutches of her magician-guardian, Pharos. Pharos, on the other hand, wants to reclaim the mummy of his supposed ancestor, Ptahmes. In this knightly adventure, Forrester follows Pharos across Europe and Africa. In this sensational Gothic tale of a mummy's curse and a magician's ploy, the Englishman becomes the vector through whom the European world contracts the Plague. The novel raises and discusses questions of agency, stability, epistemology, and justice, among others, through the material transactions (theft of the mummy) between England and Egypt.

We argue that Pharos' refusal to stick to European notions of the Gothic Other causes anxiety to the Empire. The Cartesian ideas of the individual with a body and a mind, and the idea that the Gothic is under the influence of desires and whims, unlike the cartesian self, are disturbed by Pharos' way of knowing and being. The narrative voice pushes the reader to demonize Pharos for being the embodiment of evil and empathize with Forrester instead. Scholars have read the novel against this narrative voice to understand the anxiety stemming from the Gothic Other, and the politics of the Empire (Bulfin, 2011; Dobson 2018; Hoberman, 2011; Macfarlane, 2010).

Gothic Ontology

The Cartesian self is conceived of as "the rational self...implanted in each human bodily machine" (Cottingham 15). The individual, as seen in this context, is supposed to be an integral whole that is sacred and undivided. This individual must aspire for absolute control of the

rational mind over the passions of the body. This hierarchy of mind over passions is integral to the imperial Gothic, as discussed earlier. Any individual thought to be deviating from this cartesian self and hierarchy was understood as lowly. As an extension, any individual projected as not adhering to this self, was connoted to be base. Women, sexually 'deviant', animals, impassioned European Others, and many more 'beings' were thought to be imperfect in this framework. This discipline over conceptions of the mind, body, and the individual was essential for the imperial Gothic.

In the novel, Pharos is presented to us as someone who is whimsical, evil, and impassioned. For a character of this nature, the Gothic category is deemed fit. These attributes make him a Gothic figure, just like Dracula, Frankenstein, Manfred, and many more. Scholars working on this novel have taken this notion of the Gothic Other as a given - a vengeful, evil individual, even though they unpack the politics of it, in the social context. Ailise Bulfin, for instance, argues that the political changes between England and Egypt in the late Victorian Period led to fictional expressions of concerns surrounding the 'Egyptian question' 'in the form of the *supernatural invader'* (412; emphasis added). She goes on to work with the binary set up by the gothic writers, saying that after 1882, "numerous tales positing the irruption of vengeful, supernatural, ancient Egyptian forces in civilised, rational, modern England began to appear" (412). Speaking of Dracula, Tony Bennett argues that the text deals with "aged and rotting, the primitive and the archaic, return(ing) from the colonial edge to haunt the metropolis (165)." He adds how later fiction too deals with a similar fear - the colonial other 'striking back'.

Pharos, along with these attributes, also possesses qualities that further add to his Gothic nature. Pharos is later revealed to us as Ptahmes himself."I, whom thou hast known as Pharos, am none other than Ptahmes, son of Netruhôtep, Prophet of the North and South…" (Boothby 239).

Ptahmes died long ago and was ‘mummified’ after his death. This presents to the European self an unfamiliar form of being. Ptahmes, now an object - the dead mummy, is portrayed as a ‘speaking’ figure in the form of Pharos. Ptahmes’ mind exists in two different bodily forms - the mummy and Pharos. This particular form of “dual existence” is different from the familiar form of Cartesian duality.

Bulfin and Dobson both refer to the possibility of a different body for Ptahmes in Pharos, although in passing. Susanne Duesterberg too acknowledges this, before moving on to discuss the subversion of Victorian gender roles: “Pharos, an ancient omnipotent Egyptian, appears in modern London to take revenge for the mis-treatment of his own mummy by the British” (385). They do not explore the implications of this exception, even though they note that this is a rare fictional case where a mummy is not re-animated, but possibly exists in a different body or is even ‘reincarnated’.

Talking about the impact of museumization on the ‘objects’, Ruth Hoberman argues that the museum gothic[2] forces the nature of acquisition of artifacts into consideration. Consequently, the signification of the objects is also disturbed: “museum gothic evokes the museum’s institutional history as expropriator, often by violence, of other people’s objects, an expropriation that destabilizes these objects’ meaning by removing them from their initial context” (79).

The Pharos, who exists in the liminal space between life and death, is the ‘object’[3] (in this case, the mummy) that refuses to be defined by the English man. The Mummy here, by objecting to be the object and by critiquing the practices of the Empire, works as the artifact that resists categorization and reduction into a single body that fits the Cartesian mind/body

[2] Hoberman describes ‘the museum gothic’ as “stories that endow museum-displayed objects with supernatural power (1).”

[3] Drawing from W.J.T. Mitchell, Jane Bennett argues that the ‘object’ is how a thing appears to a subject - with a name, certain features, utilities and connotations. A ‘thing’ on the other hand, is how it exists in a ‘never objectifiable depth’ - independent of the conceptual and physical meddling of the subject (2).

dualism. By drawing attention to the nature of museumization and speaking against the European conception of the 'object', Pharos comes to embody the 'museum gothic'.

> "Oh, mighty Egypt! hast thou fallen so far from thy high estate that even the bodies of thy kings and priests may no longer rest within their tombs, but are ravished from thee to be *gaped at* in alien lands" (Boothby 43; emphasis added).

Drawing from Edwina Taborsky, Hobberman argues that, "each museum object juggles three differing meanings: one derived from its original context, one created by the curator, and one brought to bear by the visitor. This epistemological instability leads easily to museum gothic, a genre in which the silent, decontextualized object is haunted by the narrative of its past" (93). There is a tussle between different narratives here - that of Pharos which refers back to the 'object's' (mummy's) history and Forrester's that speaks of the mummy in England, as something to be 'gaped at'. The visitor's narrative, if Forrester had one, would further add to the tussle of signification. This tussle leads to an instability in the mummy's meaning.

Boothby's mummy differs from Hobberman's idea of a 'talking artifact' in that the mummy doesn't talk as an *object* but as a *subject* instead. Here the uncanny is not the object being animated or a spectral haunting but the object taking on a corporeal presence. This corporeal presence, or presences rather - as Ptahmes and Pharos - is a deviation from the cartesian dualism. Here, in the form of a Gothic, we have a triple existence - one mind that seems eternal (in the sense of being freed from the confines of space and time), a body (identified as Ptahmes) that was killed long ago, and a body (identified as Pharos) that now confronts the English man, Forrester. This triple existence, characterized by a fluidity and disregard for the cartesian sacred 'individual' (as in the 'indivi'sible 'dual'). Not only is the Gothic self here divisible but also in excess of the 'dual' aspect of the cartesian European self.

Boothby's mummy, then, characterizes a Gothic ontology that differs significantly from the cartesian self. The difference is not in terms of a binary opposition, but an excess. Boothby's

mummy doesn't come in the form of a bodiless specter nor does it exist in a single body as an evil other.[4] It exists on most occasions as a sacred single body, the Pharos. But it also exists as Ptahmes, the mummified corpse. This excess is acknowledged by Forrester on several occasions throughout the novel.

Forrester says, "The truth of the matter is, the face of the disgraced Magician was none other than your own. You were Ptahmes." (140) Pharos is quite aware of the situation and the emotions Forrester is filled with: "I simply say that what you think you saw must have been the effect of the *fright* you received in the Pyramid" (141; emphasis added). This fright is a result of the unfamiliarity of the Pharos' way of being and more importantly understanding the possibility of him being two bodies at once, an excess - the dead Ptahmes and Pharos.

Gothic Epistemology

The Gothic Other, conceived as knowing and being through and with emotions, is presented as incapable of thinking through situations and ideas rationally. This sets the Gothic Other in opposition to the cartesian self which is thought of as capable of "...developing habits of thought and behavior whereby the passions can be controlled and appropriately channeled…(and) become not the slaves but the masters of... passions…" (Cottingham 16). Through the 18th and 19th centuries, more attributes were added to the notion of 'Gothic': "...a mode of revealing the unconscious; connections with the primitive, the barbaric, the tabooed…" (Punter 4) In all of these connotations too, the rational finds no place. All attributes are in opposition to the civilized rational English male self.

Critics of *Pharos the Egyptian* too have not problematized this aspect of how the Gothic functions within the text itself. Bulfin still speaks of the Pharos as a 'vengeful', 'supernatural

[4] For a detailed and complex discussion about the Gothic Body in fin de siècle, see Hurley.

invader' - even though she tries to locate this character in the historical context, explaining the anxiety of the Englishman that creates this figure. She goes on to say that Pharos is an "extreme instance of the degenerate of fin de siècle pseudo-science" (426). Macfarlane too associates the reanimated mummy with vengeance (8). Similarly Eleanor Dobson says in her essay that she reads the novel in the light of theories of degeneration and hysteria. The essay establishes that in fin de siècle, mummies were thought of along the same lines of criminals and 'lunatics': "mummies...might be considered physically degenerate, noting their animalistic qualities in keeping with descriptions of criminals and those considered mentally unwell…" (398). Macfarlane refers to this quality of Pharos in passing, in her essay on the epistemological anxieties that the Empire has to deal with in the context of confrontations with 'reanimated mummies'(18). While vengeance in most of these discussions has been aligned with lunacy and irrationality, the Pharos' character shows that vengeance cannot necessarily be conflated with irrationality. His vengeance is in fact rooted in being wronged by Forrester.

However, Pharos refuses to adhere to the binary of the European rationality and the Gothic lunacy. Pharos' rhetoric in the novel, when read closely, is evidently not merely motivated by uncontrollable emotions and an absence of rationality. Forrester begins his horrific encounter with this supposed inhuman monster by narrating how on one fateful night, at Cleopatra's Needle, Pharos not only refused to help a dying man, but laughed at his misery. Forrester constructs prejudices in his own mind and consequently within the reader's mind without ample proof for the monstrosity that he accuses Pharos of. Later in the novel when he does confront Pharos about the incident, Pharos exposes how his denial to help the dying man was in fact more justified than Forrester's emotionally driven desire to save him. Firstly, Pharos denies having laughed at the man, thereby raising suspicion about the reliability of Forrester's account. Further, he proceeds to exhibit complete knowledge of the dying man's state of living. "He was starving; he was without hope. Had he lived over that night, death, under any

circumstances, would only have been only a matter of a few days with him (41).” This knowledge that Pharos had and the capacity to make informed rational choices based on this knowledge, proves that it was in fact Forrester who was acting on impulse and misplaced sympathy. In an attempt to throw light on Pharos’ villainy, Forrester ends up exposing his own epistemological limitations when compared to Pharos. In the same chapter, Pharos explains to Forrester why he deserves to take the mummy from Forrester. Scholars have read Pharos’ stealing of the mummy as a form of colonial vengeance. However, he does not just steal the mummy for merely the sake of vengeance. What is read as vengeance here, is also a response and an alternative to the limitations of colonial justice systems. Later in the novel, Pharos explains the “theft”. He remarks to Forrester that “it is not your property” (80). He questions Forrester’s self-proclaimed moral high ground by asking him: "And pray by what right did your father rifle the dead man's tomb? And since you are such a stickler for what is equitable, perhaps you will show me his justification for carrying away the body from the country in which it had been laid to rest and conveying it to England to be stared at in the light of curiosity. (79)” He does not just expose the loopholes in Forrester’s rational and moral stands but proposes a bargain. He offers to monetarily compensate Forrester in exchange for the mummy. Pharos emerges not as a lunatic, vile inhuman monster, but a more rational, moral, and benevolent man than Forrester himself. Unlike the European man, Forrester who misunderstood Pharos’ rationale and was unnecessarily quick to demonize him, Pharos does not just take time to explain himself but also moves past Forrester’s prejudices and offers a bargain.

The rhetoric of the civilizing mission upon which the whole Empire is built, is challenged by Pharos. Instead of Forrester being the white man whose burden it would be to better the barbaric colonial other, it is Pharos who helps Forrester see the folly in his arguments. His didacticism dismantles and inverts the Empire’s civilizing mission. After convincing

Forrester with tangible evidence that he did not commit the murder, Pharos tells Forrester how "unwise it is ever to permit one's feelings to outweigh one's judgment. (82)" Ironically, Pharos' knowledge of the city of Cairo and the history of Egypt exceeds any knowledge that the son of an Egyptologist inherited. The colonial mission's system of knowledge construction is proved inadequate in the face of the gothic other. The knowledge of space and history that this gothic other has is not oppositional but in excess of what the European self desires.

It is not just the knowledge that Pharos seems to have in abundance that causes the anxiety. It is that the Pharos' ways of knowing are not limited to the European ways. Pharos can use Valerie's vision to see what Forrester cannot. This form of extracting knowledge about the future is unknown to Forrester. This mystery of the process of knowledge acquisition induces anxiety in the European self that is driven by the idea of conquest, categorization, and knowledge production. Pharos has ways in which he can control and read people's minds. At several points through the novel, Forrester admits to being under Pharos' spell. This power that Pharos exerts over people is something that Forrester has no access to. Towards the end of the novel, upon learning of the plague, Valerie and Forrester decide to leave England. Without having to physically eavesdrop or spy, Pharos knew what they were talking about. Forrester admits that he had no idea how Pharos knew of what Valerie and himself were speaking about. Pharos, unlike the rest of Europe, is not only unaffected by the plague, but understands the plague. He knew how and when to inject Forrester with the plague. He also knew how to cure Valerie of the plague. His knowledge of and control over something as drastic as the plague scares Forrester. Forrester's limited Cartesian epistemology has no room for Pharos' excess. We see that for Pharos, as a Gothic Other, rationality and European means of articulation is as powerful a 'weapon' as his power to hypnotize. He is not just someone who works under the influence of 'feelings' (specifically, vengeance, as scholars have argued) but also someone who understands the 'scientific' way of reasoning and thinking.

It is this ability of Pharos to reason scientifically and argue eloquently, in a disarming way that also adds to Forrester's anxiety of confrontation with the Gothic Other in the text. At several points in the novel, when Forrester accuses or confronts Pharos, Pharos calmly explains himself eloquently. Upon hearing these explanations, Forrester loses his animosity towards Pharos and begins to be influenced by his reasons. The Gothic Other, can control both mind and body, reason and emotions, using them to his advantage. This is unlike the cartesian English man for whom emotions are merely hurdles, not components of the body that can be utilized for perception, and even weaponized for the sake of justice, if needed. In that sense, Gothic epistemology as seen in Pharos' case is an excess of the cartesian self. It not only exposes the limitations of Cartesian epistemology, but also demonstrates ways to overcome it. It is, hence, not by being a binary opposite that the Gothic Other's way of knowing and working threatens the cartesian self, but by being an extension, an excess. Pharos in his familiarity as the cartesian self, works as the uncanny, creating anxiety. His effective existence through the Gothic otherness further aggravates this anxiety.

It is essentially the interaction with this excess as a threat that makes Forrester the man he becomes towards the end of the novel. Having been in such close material and intellectual proximity with the Gothic other, he acts, at several points, in accordance with Pharos' wishes. In his encounter with Pharos, Forrester loses complete autonomy over himself. It is this influence of the other that "plagues" him. It is not only essential to expel Pharos out of the European landscape (through death) but also anybody like Forrester - influenced and convinced by the epistemology of the other.

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