

Diasporic Life in Benyamin's *Goat Days*

Elizabeth Johnson, MA English, St Peter's College Kolenchery, Ernakulam, Kerala.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.5055855

ORCID: 0000-0003-1639-8730

Abstract

Through this work Goat Days, author Benyamin deciphers the gulf experience of keralite migrant labours. Writer tries to bring out the glaring disparity between the hopes nurtured in the malayali society by the Gulf returnees and the stark realities of their brutal existence in the Gulf countries. This paper also giving details about how the migrants are affecting by factors such as language barrier, cultural shock, identity crisis. Paper exposed the existential crisis that hid behind the bedecked facade of employment benefits in these metropolises.

Keywords: Migration, Identity Crisis.

Introduction

Migration is a process of social, cultural, and psychological changes were an individual leaves one geographical area and settles down in a new geographical area. The reason behind migration can be for the economic betterment and welfare. *Goat Days* is one such migration novel. People have reached a successful point in society have managed to do so only through sheer hard work and effort. But still there are some people who are passing through some gruesome realities. One of the best examples for diasporic life is, *Goat Days*. It is a translation of the famous Malayalam novel Aadujeevitham penned by renowned writer Benyamin, translated into English by Professor Joseph Koyipally. It comes under the genre of diasporic literature. The major themes of migration are slavery, confinement, violence, suppression etc. Many people from our country like India moving to abroad in search of better jobs and for better prospects.

By moving abroad one can have an opportunity to better use of skill. Moving abroad can give a person an ample confidence. Working overseas gives us a chance to grow personally. Experiencing a new culture will make us take an inward journey which will help us to understand ourselves more and our wants and needs. Through the various difficulties that we encounter in outside country will help to make us a better individual as well as a better professional. Moreover, which allows people to grow more than they are in the current circumstances and helps them to build strong working relationships through amazing and memorable new experiences. Every journey has its own pros and cons. This particular novel *Goat Days* unfold the mysterious life hidden in the outside countries. The graphic and insightful description of the diasporic life is expressed throughout the novel. This paper delves the anguished state of Najeeb Muhammad, the protagonist of the novel. Najeeb's tale of woe demystified the life of migrants in gulf countries. Depiction of mysterious life of the protagonist in this novel is heart wrenching. Najeeb is standing as a proxy of all the migrants who move on to the outside country from their own native land.

Najeeb Muhammad, the protagonist of the novel, a young man from Arattupuzha in Haripad, Kerala state. Najeeb's dream was to work in the Persian Gulf state and earn enough money. But he achieves his dream through a series of incidents a slave like existence herding goats in the middle of the Saudi desert. The novel explores the fundamental truth of leaving home and of the miseries in the new circumstance. Common problems found in migrants are alienation, homelessness, nostalgia, but the writer, Benyamin through this novel unfolding is the harsh realities of slavery and the further psychic temperament of Najeeb. Penguin Books of India's introduction describes the novel as "the strange and harsh comedy of Najeeb's life in the desert" and "a universal tale of loneliness and alienation". Through migration people have to face many challenges, the biggest challenges we have to face is language

Be Eco-Friendly

ISBN-978-93-91115-01-2

barrier, second one is culture, personal life, working life and so on. Language barrier is one of the foremost things that we have to face in an outside country. Learning a new language is a little bit challenging. These are the similar things the protagonist suffered in deserted land. Novel succeeded in portraying existential crisis through the protagonist. In end of the novel we will come to know that he got liberated from the alienated land. “This is the chilling account of extreme subjugation of body and mind, a journey into darkness that could easily lead to defeat or self-annihilation but for the existence of that third entity, the spirit. No one prepared us for this” - Shreekumar Varma, *The Hindu*.

Brain Keely in his article “International Migration”: The human face of Globalization Discourse analyses how diaspora becomes a new form of slavery. He examines how a number of indentured labourers in different parts of the world are suffering nothing less than the fate of slaves. When Najeeb reach at the King Khalid International Airport and get trapped and is taken away by a rich Arabab. Animal Farm supervisor brought him to his Farm and are forced to live as slave. There were no laws to organise immigrant worker’s duties. His life was like a puppet in the hands of an Arabab. Where Arabab can forced to do him back breaking jobs, if he violated his rules and regulations he can beat or can kill him and no one can question the Arabab. Here we can cite that Najeeb became under the control of his brutal master due to lack of proper communication. If he had a proper communication skill he could avoid the misunderstanding and the communication gap in between them. Language barrier made his life such a huge disaster. So language is inevitable while anyone is planning to move on to outside country. Najeeb leads such a pathetic condition in his new land.

Language made a biggest villain in his migration. Lack of knowledge about the outside country and the norms, too brought his life into such a downfall. Najeeb’s master would not bother whether the slaves knows the work or not, but he is expected to do it without any ignorance. Even though the given duties are strange to Najeeb, he is tamed by his master and is forced to do the works. Najeeb says, “The Arabab cared only about my work, not my discomforts” (Benyamin 94). He is willing to do whatever his Arabab told him to do yet the Arabab trying to make Najeeb an obedient servant. Arabab is not giving any importance or dignity that a man has to be given. Thus Najeeb’s individuality is totally effaced in the Masara, where we can witness he become a part of slave. The Arabab never cares about the health or basic needs of Najeeb. He is not treated as a human being nor does he have even the minimum facilities necessary for a man to survive. In between all these sufferings, the only reward is the “Khubub” he eats twice a day.

Najeeb felt loneliness and his only friends are the sheep. Arabab always controlled Najeeb with his guns and binoculars. Najeeb’s life in the masara becomes a big challenge for him. Arabab was such a cruel person, tough like a thunder.

The restriction and repression that is imposed upon him using the gun and binoculars limits Najeeb from a chance to escape. Thus his life become meaningless and is left without any freedom or choice. He obeys the Arabab like a faithful and fearful dog, he works from dawn till dusk deprived of any rest and without only minimum food. Unknown language or place, in fact the chance of escape was beyond his imagination.

Apart from the physical atrocities, the psychological effect of this life in masara is equally unavoidable. As a social being, man always wishes for the company of another man. The extreme isolation would surely create a mental pressure on an individual. Solitary confinement can lead to several psychological problems like depression and suicidal tendencies. Najeeb experiences all these kind of mental pressure in desert. Desert, a place of endlessness, his circumstances are not better than that of an individual under solitary confinement.

Loneliness, isolation and melancholy are the other key concepts of solitary confinement, the three wrappers that cover Najeebs’ life in the masara. He says how he has felt when he realised “the scary figure” has gone

from the masara. Even though he did not know that man's name or native place, he felt the anguish of intense loneliness when the acquaintance has escaped. One day two men came to his masara for some jobs, he says "One day when the winter was coming to an end, two men came to shear the sheep... filled with the joy of meeting people after a long time, I followed them around like a puppy" (142). Those people never talk or even smile at him, but he feels the presence of a third person has the ability to bring positive energy and thoughts to his mind. These experiences of Najeeb show how painful it is for human beings to be alone, especially when the person is forcefully detached from their heaven and dumped into the desert, the place of solitary confinement. "My thoughts were not of my home country, home, sainu, umma, my unborn son/ daughter, my sorrows and anxieties or my fate, as one would imagine... They only delayed the process of realization that we have lost out to circumstances and there is no going back"(95).

He also says how the masara and goats replaced all his memories. His ideology and concept of the world itself change. From this outlook a new crisis develop that is, Identity crisis. Which means one who is searching for his true identity. Here Najeeb, the protagonist dumped into an alienated land and lost all his dear ones. Now he has only a blurred memory about his land and he is sparing his each day by recollecting his cherished thoughts. He is not sure that whether he could have redemption from this hell or not. This is what we call true identity crisis. Losing all his belongings more than that is his true personality. Rather than a human he called himself an animal of course he is saying himself more than that would be suitable for him. Dreadful circumstance forcefully shed all his true identity.

Eric Erickson was the German-American developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst known for his theory on psychological development of human being. In his article, "what is an identity crisis? How identity grows out from personal conflict"? Defines that the basic notion of identity is a personal sense as well as quality of identity of personal sameness and permanence of some shared world representation. In the novel *Goat Days*, Najeeb's identity that he had before coming to masara and he one he has formed after becoming a part of masara is the result of his personal sense and also influenced by his shared world representation. In a passage of "A Turn in the South", V.S Naipaul states identity crisis as a result of "losing one's history and one's past identity in the complex world of the present"(qtd in sen,18).

Najeeb suffers from identity crisis as he has lost his past identity, back at home in the complex situation of his present life in masara. He has lost each and every aspect of his life at home and has to adopt a new life there among the goats. Thus he starts to identify himself as a goat. In the absence of any human being other than the arbab, he identifies himself with goats. His longing for his family is ruminating by the herding of goats. He calls different goats by the names of his friends and family members. Najeeb asserts, people from my localities like Aravu Ravuthar, Marymaimuna, Indipokkar, Raghavan, Parippu Vijiayan, Chakki, Ammini, kausu, Raufat, Pinki, Ammu, Razia, and Tharia and public figures like Jagathy, Mohanlal even EMS himself were a part of my masara... (161). He explores all these identities because he could no longer able to relate to his past identity like a person with different ideology of life. Thus in the novel Najeeb is facing an identity crisis because he couldn't hold his identities of the past. In the book "*Sociology*", James Flucher and John Scott speak about the relationship of socialization and identity construction.

Individuals are social animals and defines socialization as the process through which an individual of certain society discovers on how to be good citizen of that society. It is through this process that individuals get habitual of their traditions and custom as well as their specific talents and capabilities. Individuals get a sense of social identity and able to perceive an image of self as a human being through the process of socialisation. An individual's behaviour and manners are also defined by the people whom they come in contact in difference situation. Socialization is an important for a human being. So the absence of it may result in identity crisis and people may transform into other being.

In the absence of a proper society to communicate, Najeeb feels alienated and would feel happy and relieved whenever he sees any other man except arbab. Thus even a ray of hope to communicate with a proper

society fills Najeeb with joy and the absence of socialisation leads him to identity crisis. Although Najeeb tries to change himself according to the society in which he is living and begins to identify with a goat completely and faces existential crisis.

At this present situation we can relate identity crisis of an Indian American poet Agha Shahid Ali. He wrote a poem “*Postcard from Kashmir*”. In this poem the speaker who is an immigrant in a western country, receives a post card from his home land. The image on the postcard takes him to back to the good old days in Kashmir. The poem may be termed as a diasporic one because Ali wrote this and many other poems away from his mother land, India and his native home Kashmir from America. This poem has elements of loss of homeland and one’s national identity and also being away for so long has almost faded away one’s memories regarding home.

The long standing friction between India and Pakistan for the possession of Kashmir has caused immense political conflicts and chaos in the region. The dispute itself has been reason for many Kashmiris to migrant far away from their home land to some distant places. This why Agha Shahid Ali identified himself more as an American than an Indian or a Kashmiri because he had become distanced from all the conflicts and bloodshed related to his homeland.

This loss of ones homeland in the poem can be seen from different point of views. In literary nomenclature, essence of loss is indeed a complex phenomenon and its thematic interpretations are embedded with psychological, emotional, artistic, social and realistic undertones. The sense of loss originates from a situation of doubt or when “a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” as said by John Keats.

Identity crisis is one of the major problems that everyone faces at some stage of life. It varies from person to person depending on the context and situation in which a person is placed. Here Najeeb, the protagonist faced identity crisis in his traumatic conditions.

This novel, *Goat Days* explores the problems happening due to migrated from native land to alienated land. Najeeb, the protagonist was in the middle of perilous situation in the desert. Thus, migration has become an important area to study due to its complex role in the contemporary society. It has influenced the socio-economic condition of both the country of origin and destination.

Dislocation is a major part of migration. As a result of dislocation, the immigrants experience a kind of estrangement and separation that would further lead to alienation. It suggests a special condition of powerlessness. In *Goat Days*, Najeeb has gone through the same helpless conditions and traumatic situation in the desert. Thus the novel *Goat Days* has succeeded in giving a clear image of slavery of Indian nationals is forced into. This is highly intensive narrative. Each word is true. The real life story of Najeeb, the story has many migrated Indians in Gulf countries experience. It is for sure that every Kerala people will be able to relate with this book through himself, his family, friends, and they find out their own Najeeb. *Goat Days* has proved that the diasporic life is not as fantastic as it seems to be. There are tears behind their richness.

Therefore it is evident from this study that the Indian migrants are demoralised because they have little political influence in the host countries or hardly have any control over their own life in that country. As a result, the arbabs have taken this for granted and they make their more wretched. The aggressive attitude of the masters makes the life nastiest and impenetrable for the new comers. In addition to that, emancipation is a far dream, which demands extra ordinary vigour both psychically and psychologically. An ideal picture of foreign land is popular among the people of developing countries. It is cultivated by the popular media as well as the people who attained success through migration, but the other side is hidden because the people who have undergone these struggles often hide the actuality of situation to avoid further nuisances. Whereas Benyamin through his novel crushes this idealized or romanticized version of gulf and thereby makes evident that the migrant life is not as romantic as an ordinary man dreams.

The desire to earn more money makes Najeeb an immigrant. The immigration gives him alienation. Najeeb’s alienated circumstances made him to long for his family. The violence of the cruel arbab makes him

a suppressed creature in the foreign land. Because of slavery the suppression takes its full-fledged path on Najeeb through the brutality of the arbab.

The loss of one's social structure and culture can cause a grief reaction, as has been described by Eisenbruch. Migration involves the loss of the familiar, including language (especially colloquial and dialect), attitudes, values, social structures and support networks. Grieving for this loss can be viewed as a healthy reaction and a natural consequence of migration; however, if the symptoms cause significant distress or impairment and last for a specified period of time, psychiatric intervention may be warranted. Eisenbruch has defined cultural bereavement as "the experience of the uprooted person - or group - resulting from loss of social structures, cultural values and self-identity: the person - or group - continues to live in the past, is visited by supernatural forces from the past while asleep or awake, suffers feelings of guilt over abandoning culture and homeland, feels pain if memories of the past begin to fade, but finds constant images of the past (including traumatic images) intruding into daily life, yearns to complete obligations to the dead, and feels stricken by anxieties, morbid thoughts, and anger that mar the ability to get on with daily life".

The author Benyamin in one of his interviews with *The Hindu* said "Millions of Malayalis work in the Gulf. A sizeable number of them are manual labourers. Their wages are miserably low and living conditions are pathetic. I wanted to talk about the many who lead lives of suffering and pain. Many writers must have heard the story of Najeeb before. But it was my destiny to write the novel". According to Gramsci, cultural hegemony occurs when a group in the society assumes authority and thereby, controls the economic, political and social interests and decisions of another group. This shows the existence of subaltern groups in the society. This shows the cultural hegemony that diminishes Najeeb's status as the "other".

Finally, when Najeeb reaches the prison, he enjoys a kind of freedom there. Nobody wants to be in a prison, but Najeeb enjoys his life in the prison because he got trapped physically, mentally and emotionally in the masara, which is worse than the life in the prison. And he has a fair chance of being released from the prison, whereas in the masara, the chance to come out of the place is almost impossible, and also the fearful presence of uncertainty gives him a lot of psychological stress. He enjoys being in a prison as a new kind of freedom, because he has gone through conditions that are worse than those in a prison. As a result, the haggard journey from the desert to the prison becomes a journey from the bondage of slavery to freedom.

However, Najeeb enjoys his identity of being a Malayali, which he cherishes during his prison life. But he is instilled with the fear of losing his identity once again which is evident through his reaction to the identification parade which occurs periodically in the prison. "After standing there for a long time, the arbab tapped on my shoulder once. Then, as if he didn't recognize me, he moved on to next one. I don't know what made the arbab who had come to catch me change his heart" (250). The identification parade was a horrific event for every prisoner as it is a mark of their slavery. Najeeb is terrified with the appearance of his sponsor as he is afraid of being trapped, once again in the desert with the goats. He also fears the loss of his identity which he has gained back. This shows the transition in Najeeb who once had cherished being a migrant labourer in the Gulf but, who is now adamant in holding back his identity as a Malayali. The life in the deserts of the Gulf has made him realise the importance of identity. Najeeb's journey back to Kerala can be considered as his resurrection from his life in the desert of the Arabic land. His acceptance "Mine was a goat's life" (253) portrays his ability to fall in terms with the reality of being the "other" in the unknown land. His journey to Kerala is the journey of his self-realisation which he cherishes. Through the above lines, Najeeb tries to express the feeling of alienation that a foreign land offers its migrants where they are simply reduced to the status of the other. While, his happiness in returning to his homeland signifies the sense of belonging and identification of the self. Thus, in short Najeeb's story proves that one's homeland always gives him the sense of affection.

Thus, Benyamin's novel *Goat Days* can be viewed as an example of Indian diasporic literature, which focuses on the miserable lives of the Gulf Malayalis. Through Najeeb, Benyamin portrays a tale of endurance

and the struggle of an individual. How many millions of Malayalis live in the Gulf? How many millions have lived and returned to the homeland! But how many of them have really experienced the severity of the desert? I didn't sugar-coat Najeeb's story or fluff it up to please the reader. Even without that, Najeeb's story deserves to be read. This is not Najeeb's story, it is real life. A goat's life. (255)

Thus it proved that working abroad is not an easier one that their dear ones in home country imagines. There are tears behind in their lushness. Finally novel proves that our heaven is our own homeland, neither can provide such kind of affection and tenderness.

References

1. Ali's, A.S. "*Post Card from Kashmir*". The Half- Inch Himalayas. Pennsylvania, U.S: Western University press, 1987. Print.
www.academia.edu/11642205/Crisis_of_National_Identity_in_Agha_Shahid_Alis_Postcard_from_Kashmir
2. Bhugra, Dinesh and Mathew A Becker, "Migration, cultural bereavement and cultural identity", World Psychiatry, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/article>.
3. Daniel, Benyamin. *Goat Days*. Trans. Joseph Koyipally. India: Penguin, 2012, print.
4. Trans. of *Aadujeevitham*. India: Green books, 2008. Print.
5. Erickson, Erik. *Childhood and Sociology*. New York: Norton, 1963. Print.
6. Wikipedia contributors. "Erik Erikson." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 11 May. 2021. Web. 3 Jun. 2021
7. *Goat Days*. Trafficked and enslaved one story from many, GCC, Migrant-Rights.org, 3 Dec.2014
8. Keely, Brian. *International Migration: the Human face of Globalization*. New Delhi: Academic foundation, 2009. Print.
9. Maria, James Dias, "Life of Najeeb in *Goat Days* as an exploration of identity crisis", www.academia.edu/7738428/Life_of_Najeeb_in_Goat_Days_as_an_exploration_of_identity_Crisis.
10. Narnolia, Nitesh and Mousam, "Migration and its Psychological impacts: A Study of Benyamins novel" *Goat Days*, Reaserch monograph series, GRFDT, grfdt.com/publication_details.aspx?Type=working%20papers&Table=7062.
11. Orthofer, M A, "complete review", *Goat Days*, 15 nov.2016, www.complete-review.com/reviews/indiareg/benyamin.htm
12. Sarkar, Saurav, crisis of national identity in Agha Sahid Ali's *Postcard card from Kashmir*", academia, www.academia.edu/11642205/Crisis_of_National_Identity_in_Agha_Shahid_Alis_Postcard_from_Kashmir.
13. V, Dr Rajasekaran and Jasmine Jose, Deromanticizing the diasporic life in Benyamin's *Goat Days*, Academia, www.academia.edu/32242228/Deromanticizing_the_Diasporic_Life_in_Benyamins_Goat_Days.