

Diasporic Identity: Disparity and Dislocation in Benjamin's *Goat Days*



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ABSTRACT: The influence of literature in contemporary society cannot be underestimated. Each writer uses literature as a means of self-expression. Some books serve as a reflection of society, and offering the readers an insight into the world around them. *Goat Days* by Benjamin is one of such books. This paper discusses the social concerns and problems narrated in his novel *Goat Days*. This study focuses on the theme of migration, violence, alienation, homelessness and identity crisis. *Goat Days* is the translation of the famous Malayalam novel *Aadujeevitham* which is translated into English by Professor Joseph Koyipally. The protagonist of the novel symbolizes the aspirations of all Malayalees seeking a prosperous future that they believe can be found in the Gulf countries. The background of the novel set in the Oil Era in the Gulf countries, provides the fantasy of a stable future for every ordinary man.

KEYWORDS: migration, diasporic identity, violence, alienation, disparity, dislocation

The present cyber age witnesses the international migration involving more than 160 million people living outside their homeland with disparities and indifferent ill treatment inflicted upon them by corporate companies due to globalization. The growth of Indian diaspora across the world may give the impression of success, but so many people face challenges and dangers during their life journey in the new countries. The Indian diaspora in the Gulf stands out for its temporary nature and lack of strong community bonds. People like Najeeb in Benjamin's *Goat Days* depend on imagination and belief to not just survive but succeed in this society.

The increase of oil price in 1973 led to an investment program in oil producing Gulf countries and demand for labors in the region. As a result, these countries have allowed the immigration of workers from other nations due to the lack of local labor. The Gulf countries require various types of manpower for its development projects, including professionals like engineers, architects and doctors as well as skilled workers for enhancing governance structures, developing infrastructure like energy facilities, and boosting sectors like administration and agriculture. They also focus on improving social services like healthcare and education. The substantial oil revenues during the oil boom era have transformed the desert economy into one of the fastest growing regions globally. The migration from Kerala to Gulf countries has increased when there is a change in the economic status in the Gulf nations after the oil upsurge. The discovery of oil and lack of workers in the Gulf led to a labor migration into the area, and play a major role in attracting many laborers from India.

In the novel *Goat Days* by Benjamin, Najeeb Mohamad from Kerala is depicted as an abused migrant worker in Saudi Arabia. The author reveals that in Saudi Arabia, a place called Masara exists where many illegal migrants from Kerala are kept along with goats. These migrants, including Najeeb and his friend Hakeem, were trapped in the airport and taken to the Masara to work. They go through hunger and humiliation during their time in the Masara. The novel sheds light on the hardships faced by the migrants like Najeeb and Hakeem as they try to escape from their pathetic situation in the Gulf country. After three and a half years, Najeeb managed to escape with the help of a fellow worker, but sadly, Hakeem died on the way back to Kerala.

The author clearly describes the challenges faced by Najeeb in the harsh desert of the Gulf. Najeeb's story reflects the hardships and misunderstandings he encountered during his time in Saudi Arabia. This narrative goes beyond just one man's experience, shedding light on the struggles of millions of migrants seeking a better life for their families in the Gulf. Najeeb is frustrated by extreme poverty. He departs from his dear family to work in Saudi Arabia, with the sincere desire to earn sufficient fund to provide a better future for his mother, wife, and unborn child. The author examines the reasons for migration and its broader impacts at both national and international levels, offering a glimpse into the lives of oppressed individuals who suffer hardships in foreign lands in pursuit of a better future.

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Najeeb undergoes a series of identity shifts. Initially, securing a job in Riyadh offers him a sense of transformation from a Malayali to an Arab, which he finds fulfilling. However, his experience in the Masara leads to a complete change in his identity, as he is depicted as a shepherd, goat, and various other roles. Najeeb slowly give up his own identity, where life is seen only as a means of survival. In the novel, it is evident that Najeeb is compelled to break his usual hygiene practices such as bathing, brushing, and going to bed early. His routine included not even drinking coffee before bathing. He used to bathe two or three times a day. This disruption in his cleanliness habits impacts his sense of self, as hygiene has always been a significant aspect of his identity. The identification of prisoners was a traumatic experience for everyone, symbolizing their loss of freedom. Najeeb was afraid when he saw his sponsor, fearing being sent back to the desert with the goats and losing the identity for which he had worked hard to regain. This transformation in Najeeb reflects in his changed perception of life after living as a migrant worker in the Gulf. Now he values his Malayali identity and the importance of self-identity.

Najeeb's deep feeling of alienation is evident in his interactions with the goats on his farm. He gives names of people he knows to the goats, using this as a way to avoid his feeling of loneliness. He cares for a goat that is in labor, equating the process to the birth of his own son. When the baby goat is born, he sees it as a sign from Allah about his wife's impending delivery and their son Nabeel's birth, so he names the goat Nabeel. Despite facing physical punishment from the owner for tending to the goat, Najeeb views it as his duty as a father and continues to care for it lovingly.

He was naughty from the beginning. It was his habit to fight with he-goats bigger than him. Some goats would accommodate his friskiness, but some would strike him with horns. How many times he came to me bleeding! Unseen by the arbab, I would take water from the tank and clean his wounds and apply on them the medicine the Arbab had. Nabeel recognized and returned the special treatment I gave him (111).

There are so many examples of violence that occur in the novel. One such example includes Arbab kicking and hitting Najeeb with a belt and refusing food for assisting a goat in giving birth. Najeeb is also accused of various other offenses, such as returning late with the goats, wasting time, and using water to clean himself after the delivery. Additionally, he is blamed for allowing a newborn goat to drink its mother's milk. Najeeb's inability to communicate with Arbab due to the language barrier adds to his sense of frustration and helplessness. Living in a remote area far from urban centers further isolates him from his family. Despite attempting to write a letter, he struggles to fully express his suffering. The author compares Najeeb's experiences to those of animals like dogs and pigs, illustrating how he is subjected to dehumanization. For example, Najeeb becomes able to identify the scent of goats similar to how a dog would.

Benyamin explores the social and cultural effects of migration in his novel *Goat Days*. The protagonist, Najeeb Mohamad, immigrates to Saudi Arabia from India with the goal for earning money to support his family back home. However, his aspirations are shattered as a chain of unfortunate events forces him into a life of slavery in the harsh desert of Saudi Arabia. The novel highlights the harsh realities faced by many labor migrants in the country through Najeeb's story. The genuine style of storytelling and vivid depiction of Najeeb's struggles in the Gulf region is portrayed with a unique literary charm. The novel also highlights the experiences of the marginalized individuals who endure hardships in foreign lands.

Globalization paves way to international labor migration and has also lead to economic disparities between the countries as well as the individuals. The very title of the novel *Goat Days* symbolically implies the mechanical attitude of the migrants who hope for better futurity by looking at the one who goes off dreaming for more comforts and sophistication like the one who goes off before him. This thoughtless attitude forces them to give up their resources and individuality in their quest for identity. The novel *Goat Days* clearly depicts the plight of the diasporics in the host country. Their struggles and strains lead to nostalgia and finally reaching their homeland has become their dream and vision for futurity. This thought provoking novel has become an eye opener for thoughtless migrants.

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