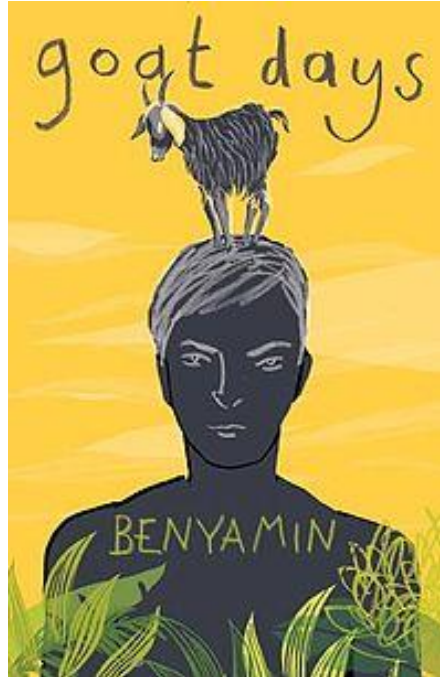


Life in the Prison as a New Kind of Freedom in *Goat Days*

Dr. V. Rajasekaran, Ph.D.
Jasmine Jose, M.A.



Abstract

The objective of this paper is to portray how being imprisoned has become a kind of opportunity to enjoy a new kind of freedom for Najeeb, the protagonist of the novel *Goat Days* written by Benyamin, a leading Malayalam novelist. The treatment of some immigrant labourers in the hands of *arababs* is really harsh and cruel, and the present paper explores how the redemption of Najeeb from the arabab's custody to prison becomes a journey from the bondage of slavery to freedom. The paper also gives vivid details of the mental agony of immigrant labourers.

Keywords: Imprisonment, Harsh cruel treatment, Immigrant labourers, freedom

Introduction

“The closest thing to hell on earth is prison. It's the worst experience I've ever had in my life, besides death.” Duane Chapman.



Benyamin

Courtesy: <http://onlinestore.dcbooks.com/authors>

The word “freedom” by itself can bring an image of prison in the listener’s mind. The general idea of a prison is a place where there is no freedom. Therefore, prison as a source of freedom would be puzzling, ambiguous as well as paradoxical. The present paper is an attempt to study the concept of freedom in the view of Najeeb, the protagonist of *Goat Days*. The novel describes the pathetic conditions of immigrants in terms of the physical as well as the psychological state of mind and how slavery is still prevalent in different forms.

In a thesis entitled “Beyond the Sob Stories: Delusions and Realities Behind the Lives of Malayalee (Indians from Kerala) Expatriates in the Middle East”, Miss Aida Thenu analyses how economically under-privileged immigrants are constantly exploited and physically threatened in the hands of the Arabs. In a study by Yazmin Thattil, titled “Crafting One’s Own Aesthetics: A Study of the Diaspora Fiction of Uma Parameswaran and Shyam Selvadurai”, there is a discussion on the concept of “home” and “exile”, both of which are fundamental to any study in the field of diaspora studies.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:9 September 2015

Dr. V. Rajasekaran, Ph.D. and Jasmine Jose, M.A.

Life in the Prison as a New Kind of Freedom in *Goat Days*

In an article titled “Goat Days: A Study in Existentialism” written by Jasmine Fernandez, the critic analyses how Najeeb is in an existential crisis because he is alien to the land and he is new to the profession of a shepherd, tending goats in a desert land. Thus she analyses the modern element of existential crisis in the postcolonial scenario. The present paper analyses how the dormant seeds of slavery are still cultivated in the Gulf countries, in the guise of jobs and how insecure and uncertain are the lives of the workers in these countries, as portrayed in the novel *Goat Days*.

Goat Days: An Overview

Goat Days (2012) is a novel written by Benyamin in Malayalam as “Aadujeevitham” and translated into English by Dr. Joseph Koyipally as *Goat Days* in 2012. The novel is from the real life excerpt of a young immigrant who has faced a lot of bitter experiences as a part of his diasporic life. The novel explores the fundamental truth of leaving home and of the despair in the new world. In an interview to *Vanitha*, a Malayalam magazine, the author has discussed how his own experiences as an expatriate have helped him to write the novel from a personal level. Unlike many common problems of migrants like alienation, nostalgia, homelessness, and so on, Benyamin discloses the harsh realities of slavery and the further psychic disposition of Najeeb, the protagonist of the novel. Najeeb represents the innocent and exploited immigrants and narrates the story - an extract from his life in a sardonic tone. The setting of the story is in an isolated desert in Saudi Arabia, where Najeeb is forced to be a slave and a shepherd.

Najeeb, like many other youngsters in Kerala decides to go to a Gulf country for improving the quality of life and to meet the increasing demands of life. The Gulf dream which is similar to that of the American dream, has sown the seeds of dreams of an ideal land in his and his companion Hakeem's mind. But everything turns upside down when they are taken from the airport to be slaves. As the novel proceeds, Benyamin describes how he is constantly tortured and threatened to death by a merciless arabab in his work place. Finally Najeeb manages to escape from the masara with the help of Ibrahim Khadiri, a virtuous person, a godsend, who helps Najeeb and Hakeem to escape from the masara. The long weary journey through the desert takes the life of Hakeem. Finally Najeeb reaches the jail and from there to his homeland. The novel analyses things like the insecurity of life of an immigrant

and the pitiable conditions that are waiting for some of the immigrants at the hands of narrow-minded arababs.

Arababs' Treatment of Labourers as Slaves

Slavery had been legally abolished long before in different parts of the world in the nineteenth century, but the saddest thing is that it still continues in different forms in different places. Brian Keely in his article *International Migration: The Human Face of Globalisation 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. The element of uncertainty that is clouding over the life of an immigrant is depicted in *Goat Days* in a conspicuous manner.

When Najeeb and Hakeem reach the airport, they are kidnapped, entrapped and are forced to live as the slaves of some arababs. Since there are no laws to organize immigrant workers' duties, his life is like a puppet in the hands of an arabab. An arabab can kill him or beat him and no one would question the arabab; Najeeb lives in such a pathetic condition. When 'the scary figure', another immigrant labourer, tries to escape from the masara, he is killed and buried in the desert by the arabab. No one realises or values the life or the death of these immigrants.

No master would bother whether the slave knows the work or not, but he is expected to do it without any talking back. 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". (94) He is willing to adjust a lot to survive in a new situation, and yet the arabab persecutes him as if to discipline him to be an obedient servant. This can be seen as a tension between an individual who is flexible and willing to mould himself and the master who is not interested in the individual, except as a creature that works unconditionally, which would eventually lead to chronic depression and despair. Thus Najeeb's individuality is totally effaced in the masara, where we can witness and be a part of slavery.

The arabab cares little for the health or basic needs of his servant. He is not treated like a human being nor does he have even the minimum facilities necessary for a man to

survive. The arabab is an insular man who exploits Najeeb for the purpose of labour and the only reward is the 'khubub' he eats twice a day. The humiliating conditions and the beatings he receives, subject to the mood of the arabab, are terrible. He is left without any choice and cannot help obeying the arabab.

Animal Life

The title of the novel "Goat Days" itself suggests the animal-like life the protagonist has in the desert, which is completely controlled by the arabab's gun and binoculars. His life in the masara hence becomes a big challenge for him. The only human being he sees every day is the cruel arabab, who is tough like a thunder, and his only friends are the sheep.

The restriction and repression that is imposed upon him using the gun and binoculars limit him even from seeing Hakeem, who is also working for another arabab under similar condition. So, his life becomes apparently meaningless and is left without any freedom or choice. He obeys the arabab like a faithful and fearful dog and like a machine, he works from dawn till dusk deprived of any rest and with only minimum food. Without knowing the language or place, the chance of escape is very little.

Najeeb's Journey from Solitary Confinement to Freedom

The 'wantedness' versus 'unwantedness' of the individual is evident in the novel. His physical work is wanted to look after the sheep; whereas he is unwanted as an individual who talks, feels or who has emotions. He has to do the back-breaking work and is not supported with enough food for carrying out the works, or even water at least for washing. He shares about an incident when he has been sick but cared for by none. He thus says "Fatigue sunk in, and my running stomach made it worse. I complained to the scary figure and to the arabab, nevertheless, my work load was unaffected". (94) In another occasion he says when he is attacked by a furious goat, how he is not only neglected by the arabab but also scolded by him. His mental agony can be understood when he says:

"I saw fumes coming out of its nostrils. The next moment, it charged at me, and without giving me a chance to evade, hit me right on the chest... Then, when I opened my eyes, the arabab was in front of me. All that the arabab did

was pour some hot water on my face. Then he called me himar and shouted something. (117)

The wretched condition of his life is again emphasised when Najeeb describes an incident, when he has been dead tired and stops to drink some water, the arabab hits on him hard and has snatched the cup of water from him just to fling it away. He has been forced to return to work thirsty and panting. Once when he is physically too weak, he goes near the arabab crying and begs him, to be taken to some hospital; it is not only that he does not pay any attention but also the very next day asks him to milk the goats. In another instance, Najeeb talks about the reaction of arabab when he showed his injured hand, "I got a smack on my head as a reply". (120) Like this there are number of instances in the novel that show how he is unheard, unnoticed, exploited and persecuted in the work place. It is very well evident that he is yearning for both psychological and physical freedom.

Psychological Effect

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, or has urges for social interactions. The extreme isolation would surely have a mental toll on an individual. Solitary confinement can lead to several psychological challenges including depression and suicidal tendencies. Even though Najeeb is not behind any bar, but in a desert, a place of endlessness, his circumstances are not better than that of an individual under solitary confinement. The only thing is that he is expected to work like a machine which needs very little fuel. There is no occasion to speak to another person, no one to help and no hope of escaping from gun-point and binocular.

Loneliness, Isolation and Melancholy

Loneliness, isolation and melancholy are the other key concepts of solitary confinement, the three wrappers that cover Najeeb's 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 had escaped. The melancholic mood that overcame him often has made him more helpless. It is evident when he expresses his happiness when two men come 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) These people do not even talk or smile at him, but just the presence of a third person has the ability to bring positive energy and thoughts to his mind. These experiences of Najeeb and Hakeem show how painful it is for human beings to be alone, especially when taken away from the midst of relatives and friends and dumped into the desert like small creatures from another world.

Loss of the Meaning of the Word *Freedom*

Consequently his idea of freedom reduces its scope and finally loses the original meaning itself. He puts it ironically how the new world has made his old familiar world an alien one: "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've lost out to circumstances and there is no going back". (95) He also says how the masara and goats replaced all his memories. Subsequently his ideologies and concept of the world itself change. As the French linguist Saussure emphasised that the meaning of a word is relational, Najeeb's idea of freedom is also purely relational. Thus his idea of freedom is just the freedom to talk, walk, to have good food and the chance to meet other people.

Haggard Emancipation

The haggard processes involved in the emancipation suggest the helplessness of the migrant in an alien land where he is not familiar even with the space or persons. On their way to the emancipation, even the indifferent desert crushes and gobbles them. It is not only the arabab but the desert, the physical space, also drains away their energy. The long weary journey through the desert without any water or food pushes Hakeem in to the hands of death.

Enjoying "Freedom" in Prison

Finally when Najeeb reaches the prison, he enjoys a kind of freedom there. This shows how his life of the past three years has subverted his idea of freedom and confinement: "I had desperately craved for this in the past three or four years – the chance to talk to someone". (15) So this life in the prison is a new kind of freedom he enjoys with Hameed. His days in jail also help him to realise that he is not the only one who has been a victim of this other side of the migration.

He says, “Everyone who ended up in the jail had a similar story like mine to tell—of pain, sorrow, suffering, tears, innocence, and helplessness”. (20) When he understands this fact, he feels a relief and psychologically enjoys the freedom he has gained in the prison. It is a kind of liberation for Najeeb, where his individual sorrow becomes a part of the collective experience.

Conclusion

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.

References

- Benyamin, *Goat Days*. Trans, Joseph Koyippally, India: Penguin, 2012. Print.
- Benjamin, Benny. Interview by Sreejith Peruntachan. “Benyaminte Attin Scoopu”. *Vanitha* 15 Sept. 2013. 29–34. Print.
- Fernandez, Jasmine. *Goat Days: A Study in Existentialism* IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science; 2014, Vol.19, 42–45. Web. 12 Jul. 2015.
- Keely, Brian. *International Migration: The Human Face of Globalisation*. New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2009. Print.
- Thenu, Aida “Beyond the Sob Stories: Delusions and Realities Behind the Lives of Malayalee Expatriates in The Middle East” Diss. Pondicherry University, 2013. Print.
- Yasmin Thattil, Mary. “A Synopsis of the Thesis Entitled Crafting One’s Own Aesthetics: A Study of the Diaspora Fiction of Uma Parameswaran and Shyam Selvadurai”, 2009; University of Madras, Web, 22 Jul. 2015.



Dr. V. Rajasekaran, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
School of Social Sciences and Languages
VIT University - Chennai Campus
Chennai 632014
Tamilnadu, India
rskaran2003@gmail.com



Jasmine Jose, M.A.
Research Scholar
School of Social Sciences and Languages
VIT University - Chennai Campus
Chennai, 632014
Tamilnadu, India
jasminejose278@gmail.com