

Have Nots' Helplessness in Haves' Land: An Existential Approach to Benjamin's Diasporic Novel *Goat Days* (Aadujeevitham)

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Introduction

The ambiguity and the abstract nature of the term diaspora is defined by Martin Bauman as, expressing notions of hybridity, heterogeneity, identity, fragmentation and (re)construction, double consciousness, fractures of memory, ambivalence, roots and routes, discrepant cosmopolitanism, multi-locationality and so forth. One cannot assure that these common characteristics of diaspora are available in all the works of diasporic writers, but usually some will be there. As Susan Koshy says in his book *The Making of a Neo Diaspora*, the recent interest in diaspora exceeds academy and become a major preoccupation of politicians, policy makers and the public. Benjamin's novel *Goat Days* is a revelation about the lamentations of labour migrants in Gulf countries from India, who reached there with the dreams of better employment and monetary avenues. Haves have notes but have nots have no notes. This paper explores the problems faced by have nots at the hands of haves who have notes in their hands. The paper brings out the lamentations of the protagonist Najeeb Muhammad (have not), in the land of Arabs (haves). It also discloses the pitiable condition of Indian labourers or migrants in economically booming nations.

Diaspora Literature

The immigrants who have access to education and literacy register their everyday experiences and plights in their works. In general, diaspora literature discusses the problems the migrants face in the new land. Amitav Gosh points out that "It is the imaginary relationship between the Indian diaspora and India that has been the most creative site for theoretical reflection in literature".

Based on the theme of writing, diaspora writers can be divided into two types: writers whose works focus on their home country and writers whose works talk about the settled country. The first type of writers locates their work in their home country in order to criticise it or to portray their home country and its culture to the foreign readers or use their work as a tool to remember their home country. The second type of writers locates their works in the settled countries to reflect the changes they undergo or to tear the mask of multicultural nations, by portraying its discrimination towards them, or to show their developed condition in the settled countries.

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. *Goat Days* echoes with reflections of similar brutality that was experienced by innumerable blacks during the Trans Atlantic slave trade in the west. Though legally the institution of slavery was abolished, yet human trade in form of labour migration continued. In the era of British territorial expansion it was practiced in form of indentured labour, however, currently it is practiced as the 'Kafala'

Benyamin and His Diasporic Novel Goat Days

Benny Benjamin is an Immigrant Novelist, a native of Kulanada, in Kerala. Born in the year 1971, with the birth name Benny Daniel, he writes under the pseudonym 'Benyamin' which he himself calls as a mask. He moved to the Kingdom of Bahrain in 1992 and has been living there ever since as an engineer. Benyamin's first story "Satru" was published in 1999. His short story collections include *Euthanasia (Mercy Killing)*, *Penmarattam (Ladies Sex)* and *EMSum Penkuttiyum (EMS and the Girl)*. Benyamin's other novels were *Abeesagin* (a name from the Old Testament), *Pravaccakanmarude Randam Pustakam (The Second Book of Prophets)*, *Akkapporinte Irupatu Nasrani Varshangal (Twenty Years of Christian Quarrels)* and *ManjaVeyil Maranangal (Yellow Lights of Death)*. He has also written notes like "Irunda Vanasthalikal" ("Dark Forest Places") and "Anubhavam, Ormma, Yaathra" ("Experience, Memories & Travel"). Many awards and honours that he was credited show how he influenced the literary world within a few years of his literary career. It includes Abu Dhabi Malayali Samajam Short story Award for *Euthanasia (Mercy Killing)*, Abu Dhabi Sakthi Award, 2009 Kerala SahityaAkademi Award winner, 2012 Man Asian Literary Prize long list and 2013 DSC Prize for South Asian Literature short list for *Goat Days*.

Benyamin's novel, *Aadujeevitham* was first published in 2008, and won the Kerala SahityaAkademi Award in 2009. He wrote the novel originally for *Matrubhumi* Magazine. Translated into English as *Goat Days* by Joseph Koyippally in 2012, it was received with great acclaim by a wider readership, and reached the long list of the prestigious Man Asian Literary Prize in 2012. The story focuses on the hardships of Najeeb Muhammad's life. The story is based on true events. The book is divided into four parts—Prison, Desert, Escape, and Refuge, with forty three chapters and an author's note. From the beginning itself the narrative points to the hard experiences the narrator had endured till that moment. The novel begins and ends in Sumesi prison. The second part begins in a rural village in Kerala, the native place of the protagonist Najeeb. He and Hakeem goes to Gulf with a lot of dreams, but get abducted by an *arbab*, originally an animal farm owner. He made them slaves in his *masaras* in desert where they were forced to live a life like goats but in a more pitiable condition than them. With the help of a Somalian Ibrahim Khadiri, they escape from there after more than three years. Get lost in desert for days. Hakeem dies out of thirst and Ibrahim disappears in the end. Somehow

with the help of a rich Arab, Najeeb reaches the Malabar Restaurant run by Kunjikka, a refuge for Malayalis in Batha market. From there he got another victim like him, Hameed who also escaped from his *arbab's* house. They together with much difficulty get themselves arrested in a hope to reach Kerala with the help of Embassies. But before the arrival of the officers Hameed was dragged away by his master. Najeeb's *arbab* also came there, but spared him for he was not really under his visa. This was the real shock to Najeeb that he realized that what he had endured was the fate of some other man. From there, he was deported to India as a part of a government project to deport unauthorized residents to the countries of their origin.

Haves and Have Nots

The concept of "haves and have nots" appears in the writings of Marx. He believed that there were two types of people that existed historically. The "haves" were called "capitalists" because they had all the money". The capitalists would then force the "have nots," whom he called as the "proletariats (working class)," to work for them. This situation was unfair in the distribution of wealth within a society that would cause problems. Problems emerge when capitalists pay the working classes very low wages while keeping the profits for themselves. In this manner the rich would become richer and the poor would become poorer. This situation would lead to the working class becoming frustrated and helpless. This novel portrays the pathetic situation of Najeeb, The have not, in the hands of Arabs, the haves.

Have Nots' Helplessness in the Land of Haves

After translation to English, Benyamin's Malayalam novel *Aadujeevitham*, acquired enormous critical acclaim. *Goat Days* makes the peripheral voices of labour migrants audible across globe. It diligently explores the diasporic elements of the protagonist's journey. The novel is an eye opener for people across globe who desire to migrate to foreign lands in search of better monetary conditions. The poverty and lack of employment in our country must be eradicated to avoid the drain of Indian workforce to other economically booming nations. *Goat Days* navigates across barriers of time and space to bring to light the desolation and helplessness of the people who have been trapped in the nexus of this contemporary labour trade. The following points explains the helplessness of have nots in the land of haves.

Haves' Visa; a Via to Make Slaves or Have Nots

Najeeb's homeland did not offer him any monetary elevation or job opportunities, so he convinced himself for this migration. Under this modern-day inhuman institution of slavery millions of people are exploited and tormented, their passports are confiscated by their masters and they are forced into rigorous servitude. Najeeb dreamt of travelling to Gulf like many of his fellow Malayalis. After getting married he decided to revise his economic condition. He thought, "Can one go hungry?" (35), and pledged to travel to Gulf

to undertake better livelihood opportunities for his family. He mortgaged his house, his wife's jewellery, borrowed money and boarded the "Jayanti Janata" (39), train from Kayamkulam to Bombay. He began his journey without knowing the truth that Haves' visa is a via to make slaves.

Under the Custody of the Custodian of His Dreams

The Gulf dream has sown the seeds of dreams of an ideal land in him and his travel companion Hakeem's mind. But everything turns upside down when they are taken from the airport to be slaves. Najeeb and Hakeem are forcibly transported to a goat shed in an unfamiliar desert landscape by a stinking local Arab. Najeeb's distress and perplexed mindset is revealed in his words, "From that moment, like the maniyani fly, an unknown fear began to envelop my mind, An irrational doubt began to grip me, a feeling that this journey was not leading me to the Gulf life that I had been dreaming about and craving for"(52).

Like Pinnocchio, a character from children's fiction, Najeeb and Hakeem are driven and lured to the 'Land of Toys' here Riyadh, the land of dreams, which indeed is a farce. The inhospitable treatment that the narrator receives at the hands of the man who abducted him from the airport, locally known as 'arbab' was extremely frustrating. In desperate agony Najeeb surrenders all hope of any generosity from his arbab. The word 'arbab' is a Persian word meaning "master" or "owner".

Najeeb's agony did not affect his arbab as he was least bothered about Najeeb's thirst and hunger. Najeeb questioned the tradition of Arabian hospitality and expressed his diminishing hope questioning, "Is this the legendary Arab hospitality that I have heard about? What kind of arbab are you, my arbab? Don't deceive me. In you rest my future. In you rest my dreams. In you rest my hopes" (59). Najeeb tells "the one who walks in front of me is the custodian of all my dreams, the visible god who would fulfil all my ambitions".

Have Nots Journey to Darkness

Najeeb had left home for making money in Gulf, but very soon he learned that his aspirations were nothing more than a mirage. They were taken in an old vehicle. He remembers that the unending jolts and the growl of the vehicle entwined composing a lullaby for his fatigued ears and he fell asleep. And it was only when the arbab shook him that he awoke to eye-piercing darkness. The arbab growled like an angry wildcat. The darkness represents the darkness that have nots is going to face in the haves' land.

Have Nots' Sympathy for Have Nots

Only the have nots can understand the pathetic situation of other have nots. As Najeeb reaches in the Masara, he finds a scary figure. He had matted hair like that of a savage who had been living in forest for years. His beard touched his belly. He was a slave of the arbab. He began to speak to Najeeb in Hindi. There

was pity in those words, and also sadness, resentment etc. And Najeeb writes, “Today I understand he was lamenting my fate and wailing” (61).

Have Nots’ Tears Before Haves’ Cheers

“All the grief he had been retraining gushed forth as tears. He howled loudly in front of the arbab”.(65) It was the over flow of the sorrow and hunger that filled the have nots mind. The tears of the have nots fell on the foot of the haves who was in cheers. He expected pity on him by seeing him cry. But the arbab angrily pushed him out of the tent. The tears of have nots fall only outside the tents of haves’ cheers.

Have Nots’ Hunger Wins Over His Habits

The arbab told him that he should eat. If he was in his home he wouldn’t even drink coffee without first ducking into the river. He would not eat without brushing his teeth and doing his morning rituals. But that day, for the first time, he violated all his hygienic rules. He had drunk milk without brushing his teeth. Hunger for one and a half days forced him to ignore his habits. Hunger will win over the habits in the case of have nots.

Have Not’s Initiation to be Haves’ Slave

The arbab gave him a thobe- the dress of the typical Saudi Arab man, a long, white, shirt like garment, loose fitting, long sleeved and extending to the ankle, usually made out of cotton and a pair of shoes, then the arbab came over and handed him a long stick and he understood that it was his initiation to become another scary figure. Haves give gift to have nots to make them slaves.

Have Nots Under Haves’ Surveillance

Najeeb was introduced to the hostility of his arbab when he displayed his authority over Najeeb by means of his binoculars and double barrelled gun. Arbab used his binoculars to captivate the labourers who tried to flee from his vicinity, and the gun was used to kill them if they tried to raise their voice. Have nots always live under the surveillance of haves.

Have Nots’ Sighs in Signs

Najeeb was unable to communicate with his arbab or the “scary figure” (81), because they spoke languages he did not know. The “scary figure” was a weird looking man who like Najeeb served the arbab. This lack of communication fuelled Najeeb’s adversity. Though by means of non-verbal gestures he tried to communicate, yet he failed to fetch his master’s generosity. He philosophizes on one occasion saying that, “After all, compassion doesn’t require any language” (61). Haves fail to read the sighs in the signs of have nots.

Have Nots’ Lives Have No Value

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

arbab 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. The 'usefulness' versus 'uselessness' 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.

Have Nots' Have No Sanitation

There were restrictions on sanitation due to shortage of water. He cleaned himself with stones after defecation. Najeeb angrily asserts that, "I had never faced such a predicament in my life.... The harshest for me was this ban on sanitation" (78). He was being physically reprimanded by these regulations. It was in wake of these bitter circumstances that Najeeb pondered over the look of the camels living in the shed. He says, "I would like to describe the camel as the personification of detachment" (79).

Have Nots' Killed by Haves

An arbab can kill him or beat him and no one would question the arbab; Najeeb lived in such a pathetic condition. When 'the scary figure', another immigrant labourer, tried to escape from the masara, he was killed and buried in the desert by the arbab. 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 talk voice. Even though the given duties were strange to Najeeb, he was tamed by his master and is forced to do the works. Najeeb says, "The arbab 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 arbab persecutes him as if to discipline him to be an obedient servant.

Have Nots' Loneliness in the Land of Haves

Najeeb lived isolated from other people in a 'masara' a place he understood to be a goat shed. He verbalizes his plight by saying that, "I lived on an alien planet inhabited by some goats, my arbab and me" (125). To him all human company was forbidden, and he could only interact with the goats around him. He gradually develops a strong familial bond with the goats. He assigned human characteristics to these goats who shared his loneliness. He scolded the goats, cuddled them and adored them like his family. In an incident in the novel Najeeb embraced the sheep to shield him from extreme cold and confessed that, "I spent the winter as a sheep among the sheep" (140). Later when his arbab locks him in a masara, he survives by consuming "unhusked wheat" that belonged to the goats. The protagonist is an alienated character amidst the harsh desert environment. He calls himself an "orphan's corpse", when he cannot withhold his anguish. Even the enticing serenity of the desert sunset cannot fetch him any solace, on the contrary it arouses in him extreme sorrow and longing. He vents his agony saying that, "One of the greatest sorrows in the

world is to not have someone to share a beautiful sight” (159). He is a lonely man who has no control over his life. He surrendered all hopes of freeing himself and agreed to stay with animals as one of them.

Have Not's Choiceless Helplessness

The humiliating conditions and the beatings he receives, subject to the mood of the arbab, are terrible. He is left without any choice and cannot help obeying the arbab. 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 arbab'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 arbab, 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 arbab under similar condition. So, his life becomes apparently meaningless and is left without any freedom of choice. He obeys the arbab like a faithful and fearful dog and like a machine.

Unquestionable Haves and Voiceless Have Nots

Whatever is done by the arbab is to be accepted because he belongs to the haves and whatever is done to the have nots is to be accepted voicelessly and blindly because they are have nots. Once when Najeeb was physically too weak, he went near the arbab crying and begging him, to be taken to some hospital; it was not only that he didn't not pay any attention but also the very next day asked him to milk the goats. In another instance, Najeeb talks about the reaction of arbab 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 was not only the arbab but the desert, the physical space, also drained away their energy. The indifferent desert crushed and gobbled the slaves. The long weary journey of escape, through the desert without any water or food pushes Hakeem into the hands of death.

Have Nots in the Iron Bars of Freedom

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. The novel opens in a prison raising, at the outset, questions that will be resolved later. An aura of dismay and intrigue is generated by the narrator when he says, "Why is it that even misfortune hesitates to visit us when we need it desperately" (5). The narrator, Najeeb Muhammad along with his companion Hameed tries to enrol themselves voluntarily into the prison. He gives the description of a large country prison called "Sumesi" prison. The prison blocks were divided on grounds of nationality, "One block for each nationality - Arabs, Pakistanis, Sudanese, Ethiopians, Bangladeshis, Filipinos, Moroccans, Sri Lankans and then, finally, Indians. Most of the Indians were

surely Malayalis. Naturally we were taken to the Indian block” (11). The catastrophic life that Najeeb had escaped converted the prison into nothing less than a sanctuary where he could recuperate. He justifies his act of voluntary prison enrolment by dropping a clue regarding his horrifying past for the reader, “Can you imagine how much suffering I must have endured to voluntarily choose imprisonment!” (12).

Conclusion

The author emphatically asserts that Najeeb’s catastrophic journey cannot be tampered with, or redesigned for securing popularity or critical acclaim. He says, “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 just Najeeb’s story, it is real life. A goat’s life” (255). Authenticity of narration and explicit portrayal of Najeeb’s fiasco in Gulf lent this troubling study of Indian labour migrants an extraordinary literary charisma. This novel also provides an insight into the lives of many suppressed people who suffer in countries other than their homeland and throws light on the have nots’ helplessness in haves’ land in a realistic way.

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