

Recollecting the Predicaments of Early Kerala Diaspora in Gulf ‘Masara’: A Review on Benyamin’s Novel *Goat Days*

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Abstract

If we walk on the roads of suburbs in the villages of Kerala, the spectacular rise of mansions would make us think of the prosperity achieved by the state. The uniqueness of culture, the spread of education, civilized citizens, and so called good sense of people have opaque yet not well serene backyard stories of catastrophe. The contemporary youth, as happens everywhere in the world, conveniently subsided the haunting memories of their fathers’ or grand fathers’ sweating down under the burning suns in deserts. Today these ultra new gen societies entertain the label of NRI and enjoy their life to the fullest devoid of responsibilities in the family, commitment to the society even respect to their elders and love and affection to their young ones. The status quo necessitates a revisit to Benyamin’s novel *Goat Days* (2008), from a perspective of recollecting the predicaments of Kerala Diaspora in Gulf countries from the time immemorial. Many a people from this region had gone to gulf countries in search of a better livelihood beginning from the time of ‘Gulf Boom’. A huge numbers of them had swum to the other shore of the sea of life, but still a considerable of them lost at the sea. Some of them eternally disappeared under the veil of memories. Thus the present paper tries to unveil the atrocities faced by the migrants of Kerala, especially the protagonist, Najeeb Muhammad of the novel *Goat Days* in search of a better living in the Gulf countries.

KEYWORDS: Diaspora, Gulf Boom, Masara, Predicament, Homeland.

Standard living is wished by all human. Poverty and other natural or manmade calamities usually blur this. The 1970’s was an era that extensively kindled the flame of going abroad in the minds of Keralites to fulfill many dreams of their life. Historically the epoch, in relation with Keralites’ migration to gulf countries, has been termed as the ‘Gulf Boom’. At least a single member from every family of Kerala, especially from *Malabar*, went abroad to upkeep a livelihood. Many of them maintained a job there at least to meet their dawn to dusk. A few of them, by the eternal providence became rich in their homeland. A considerable number lost forever without any mark of their living on the earth. Nobody went to seek or enquire about them. Their kith and kin believed them as pushed in to the quiet oblivion. Most of them went to the Gulf not to make up an additional income to maintain an investment, but to prevent the hunger of their families. To fulfill many of their dreams otherwise will be sunken in the panic of life. They summoned the pay of travelling and visa by collecting money from their friends and neighbors as debts. Most often they sold a piece of land they inherited from their parents or sold jewelry their wives possessed as their fixed assets. Abandoning their family, homeland and all beautiful colors of life they went in search of a sunny future. Benyamin describes such a circumstance that Najeeb Muhammed, the protagonist of the novel *Goat Days* confronted. “I finally fixed up the total by mortgaging the house and the little gold Sainu had as jewellery, and by collecting small amounts from other sand miners and by borrowing from everyone I knew. Yes, ‘fix up’ best describes it” (37). Najeeb was a poor sand miner living at Karuvatta village of

Alappuzha district in Kerala. Out of his wife's (Sainu) insistence, he decided to go to *Riyadh*. As everyone does, Najeeb too fell in clutch of a profound dream of having enough money to enjoy his life. He says: "Meanwhile, I dreamt a host of dreams. Perhaps the same stock dreams that the 1.4 million Malayalis in the Gulf had when they were in Kerala- gold watch, fridge, TV, car, AC, tape recorder, VCP, a heavy gold chain. I shared them with Sainu as we slept together at night" (Benyamin 38). The dream replicates the posh vanity of the Gulf Malayalis. Though they were in utter poverty, the people at their home wanted them to be in feathers of glee. People of Kerala made themselves believe that a person who has been in Gulf should not do any unskilled labor at home. They wanted them see in gleaming attire, no political party or religious organizations left them free from endowments. No family members acknowledge their worth until they could bestow them materials they brought from abroad. Unlike the wives of other Gulf Malayalis, Najeeb's wife, Sainu, was affectionate and caring her husband. She was a sheer solace for him. But losing the home and all homely flavors is a hazardous memory for all migrants. Najeeb says But one sorrow remained. My son? Daughter? I would not be there for the birth. I wouldn't be able to massage Sainu during her big pain. As if to make up for that, I kissed Sainu's growing belly. My Nabeel, my Safia-names I had chosen to call my child; my *kunji*, my *chakki* - pet names I had for them. Oh my son...my daughter...Your *uppah* will not be near to see you come into this earth with wide eyes. But, whenever I return, I will bring enough presents for you, okay? (39).

There begins the journey of Gulf Malayali without knowing what job is expecting him, for which *Arbab?*, in which place? Who will be his companions, a kind of total chaos? Najeeb landed in Riyadh on 4 April 1992. After a severe waiting for his sponsor, one came at last when the night has just fallen on the earth. Najeeb, who knew not what to speak, in which language? Went with his *Arbab*, a stranger in his posture and attitude. For the first time he obeyed the *Arbab* and got into the back side of his vehicle and kept mum for a long time where the vehicle past the warmth of human closeness and got into the dense, fearful stench of *Masara*. Najeeb lost his mother tongue forever. He became a stranger. His identity as a free man slowly began to lose. How much terrible is to live in a circumstance in which nobody is there to hear us, at least share our tidings. Whenever one loses the opportunity to speak or understand a language he becomes slave. Najeeb couldn't presume where the *arbab* was taking him. But he felt the danger in following him. The place was not one which Najeeb thought of Gulf, the *arbab* was not one who Najeeb heard of having the culture of Arabia. He realized the trap in which he has been appalled. But there was no way to escape from this horror of dark lone desert. He decided to submit before the might of his *arbab*. This had been the last resort of so many poor migrants who lost their way in the desert for decades and decades. Najeeb tasted the first block against his dreams. He says:

I waited for the *Arbab* to return. Fear had really taken possession of me now, a feeling that I had entered into a dangerous situation. It was as though Hakeem had been imprisoned by the *Arbab* and that was my turn next. I would run before that, escape from this danger. But where to? All around there was only a vast expanse of nothing. Since I was unfamiliar with the terrain, if tried to run, not knowing the direction, or the way out, I would die wandering in this desert (57).

Masara, (Cattle farm in county side) is a symbol of oppression and confinement. In every migrant's heart, there is a *masara*, the *masara* of mental or physical agony. Najeeb was an employee in such a *masara* in which only goats and camels were the inhabitants. Unlike his own village in Kerala, he could here only the bleats of goats and groan of camels.

There were many more goats than I had expected. The fence encircled a large area that was divided in two many segments, and in each segment there were hundreds of goats. Beyond the fence, the desert stretched out as far as the eye could see, touching the horizon. There was not even the shadow of a tree to block the sight (64).

Even in the masara he was not free to do his job according to wish. The Arbab had already decided every chore. Missing one of them was considered a severe crime. The duty of the employee was to obey the Arbab. No questions, no suggestions, wearing a *thobe*, the dress of a typical Saudi Arab man, a long sleeved and extending to the ankle, usually made out of cotton and a pair of boots, one has to enter masara and work hard from the dawn to dusk. "It was my initiation to the stench, the first step to becoming another scary figure. Although I could foresee my dark future, I obeyed the directions of the Arbab, so grateful was I for the *khubus* he had given me a while ago" (70). Arbabs considered their employees meager than the goats and camels. They never considered employees health, emotions, thoughts and even their basic needs. If they have used anything which is designed only for cattle or used without his permission the employee would be prosecuted. Water, which makes a creature live at least was the most prohibited stuff for them. It can be used only to drink, that was even at the time of utter necessity. No bath, no cleaning, not even the water can be taken to clean one's backside after droppings. Najeeb describes such a situation as:

Before the first drop of water fell on my backside, I felt a lash on my back. I cringed at the impact of that sudden smack. I turned around in shock. It was the arbab, his eyes burning with rage. I didn't understand. What was my mistake? Any slip-up in my work? Did I commit some blunder? The arbab snatched the bucket of water from me and then he scolded me loudly. Lashed at me with the belt. When I tried to defend myself, he hit me more ferociously. I fell down. The arbab took the bucket and went inside the tent (77).

The dreams and hopes that drove this poor, fate less ones are shattered. They had to bury them under the hot dunes of sands. They were born to suffer, but still some thoughts of an every dog's day helped them tolerate every spit on face, every lash on back, and everything they were destined to endure. They longed for at least a merciful look from their arbabs, for a kind word or a deed of love, but the futility of longing made them hate the life and thereby stoic in nature. The physical needs were not less the same. Najeeb says about the food menu in masara:

I understood what my menu for the days to come would be.

Early morning drink: fresh, breast-warm raw milk (only if one felt like it)

Breakfast: *khubus*, plain water

Lunch: *khubus*, plain water

Evening drink: fresh, breast-warm raw milk (only if one felt like it)

Dinner: *khubus*, plain water.

And plain lukewarm water from the iron tank to drink in between meals (only when very necessary) (84).

One had to lay on the sand in the desert of diabolic snakes and other poisonous creatures. These poor feathers destined to lay on without having a wink of sleep, but lost in the memories of good days in their homeland. A mere thought of their native village, from the dark lonely desert made them sob “pressing and bowing their weeping face upon their palms” (Murukan Babu 4). Najeeb thought of rivers of his village, the hot steaming food his wife prepares for him. Slipping to fancy arose in him a longing to his homeland. Eventually he felt the pain of loss along with the futility in longing. Only when one stands far away from his kith and kin and the warm closeness of acquaintances knows the epistemology of loss. This is evident from Najeeb’s words. He says:

I was alone. My bag was my pillow. It had the scent of pickle. Suddenly, I recalled the people at home, Ummah, Sainu, our son (daughter) who grew inside her. They must be troubled not having heard of my safe arrival. I felt miserable. My heart felt like it was about to burst. How will I convey to them that I had reached? That I am fine? (Benyamin 85).

After some initial teething troubles to adjust with the new circumstances and slowly could imagine the reality of their fate, they would automatically melt in whatever comes before them. As the Palasthine poet Mahmood Darwesh observed the grim, broken, and shattered dreams of Palasthine citizens in his poem “In Memoriam”. He asks:

“Where should birds fly,

After the last sky?”

Najeeb started melting into the circumstances. He became indifferent toward everything once attracted and made considerable reflexes in his mind. Gradually his thoughts and imaginations grew off his home. Missions of his setting comfortable independent life at home went loose. Hopes were tamed under the powerful current of stoicism. He says:

Can you imagine what I had been thinking about that night as I lay down? About going to the masara early in the morning and milking the goats; controlling the goats as the scary figure did and coming out with a vessel full of milk; the arbab’s face lighting up when he saw me with the milk; and single-handedly herding the goats of a masara and bringing them back (95).

Now that the goats became his friends and companions, he started feeding and herding them outside masara and taking them back. He identified himself with goats. A human confined inside the four walls of barbed wires. He named some of the goats the names of his native village women. “I named the three head goats in the masara Lalitha, Ragini and Padmini” (116). When a goat gave birth to a baby, Najeeb called the baby goat Nabeel, the name which he has reserved to call his own child. Goats in each masara knew Najeeb. They loved and affectionately rubbed the parts of their body with that of Najeeb. Nabeel had a special place in Najeeb’s eye, for it was Najeeb’s son here. But to the pain of Najeeb, Nabeel has been soon undergone for castration by the arbab and was labeled to the slaughter house.

Too much closeness and nearness would nurture in a person the attitudes and behavior of that habitat. In the case of Najeeb too, the same has happened. Living with the goats has peeled in

him all the humanness. He became a goat and his life a goat's life. "There was only one animal in that masara without smell, and that was me" (129). The arbab treated him and goats alike. For arbab both these creatures were the inhabitants of masara. Nobody was there and never would come to question him. Nobody dared to argue with arbab for the rights of goats and Najeeb. Nobody was there to kindle revolt against his might. "You couldn't ask the arbab anything. You could only just listen to whatever he says. You must obey whether you understand his words or not. That is what I had been doing so far. Therefore, I was afraid to ask the arbab anything. I quietly followed him" (111). Najeeb's days were, literally, confined in masara then desert then once again masara and went on repeating the same. He shared his sorrows, agonies and grieves to goats. Occasionally the arbab lashed him with his belt and scolded him severely. Najeeb has already endured a lot from his arbab and these lashes and rages couldn't make any difference in his perseverance.

Najeeb ate only dried khubus and drank plain water. Hair on his head and beard grew beyond the shape. His dress ragged, smelt bad and erupted severe stench of goats and masara. A total deformity crept in to his body. An intense surge for sex budded inside him. The long suppressed carnal desire unstoppably wagged hood outside.

In those days when I had only goats for company, there was an occasion when I shared with them not only my sorrows and pains, but also my body. One night, as I lay down, I could not sleep. I didn't know why, but I was covered in sweat. I had an insatiable desire, a passion building up inside me like a desert storm. For some time, I had been impotent. I did not think I would have the urge to be sexually active again. But it happened. What had lain dormant for so long suddenly woke up. All my efforts to satiate it only made me crave it even more. Seductive nude female figures began to slither in front of my eyes. I thawed in that emotional surge. I needed a body to lie close to. I needed a cave to run into. I became mad. In the intensity of that madness, I got up and rushed out. When I opened my tired eyes in the morning, I was in the masara. With Pochakkari Ramani lying close to me (168).

Hardships in masara continued and their intensity grew doubly doubled. The attitude of arbab worsened day by day. Najeeb was haunted and daunted by ferocious and horrible dreams of masara. His longing for home and family kindled an inextinguishable flame of escape from that atrocity.

It was a lie when I said I had not been thinking about my homeland and home. An outright lie. My every thought was occupied by fantasies of my homeland. I had only buried them underneath the cinders of my circumstances. I could see them come ablaze as soon as the wind of a chance blew. I felt my heart ache. A draining heartache. I cried. I hugged and gave *Marymaimuna* who was nearby a kiss. I am leaving, girl, leaving you. I am going. Don't you have many *Aravu Ravuthars* and *Moori Vsus* here to keep you company? I don't have anyone. My Sainu and I don't have anyone. I need her. And she needs me (179).

Today, if you walk on the roads of suburbs and villages in Kerala, you may come across many multi storied, well furnished mansions, inside them many people, leading calm, quiet and peaceful days, on the road young lads and lasses, extravagantly attired, perfumed, without performing any of personal or societal responsibilities, enjoying the life to the fullest. A culture

built and developed on the graves of many untold, quietly buried, oblivious stories of diaspora in Gulf masara.

Work-Cited

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