

An Existential Study of Overflowing and Over-barren Rivers in Benjamin's *Goat Days*

^aA. Suresh Kumar, ^bN. Bindu

^aResearch Scholar (Part-Time), Presidency College (Autonomous), Chennai 600 005, India

^bResearch Guide and Supervisor Assistant Professor, PG and Research Department of English, Presidency College (Autonomous), Chennai 600005, India

Abstract

The overflowing and perennial rivers of Kerala run as preservers of prosperous life and strike a marked contrast with the over-barren river of the Saudi Desert in Benjamin's *Goat Days*. Najeeb and Hakeem from Kerala migrate to the Gulf in search of economic prosperity. They have romantic notions of the Gulf. But, they are catapulted as slavish shepherds in two different huge goat farms. Everything, particularly the waterlessness of the desert, turns deadly hostile to Najeeb. In Kerala, Najeeb's life and profession was bound to the river water. In the Saudi Desert, the scarcity of water ails and misshapes him. Najeeb's inhuman Arab boss subjects him to indescribable sufferings and denies him water even for the indispensable purposes. Najeeb can water the goats and the camels but he cannot water himself. Of all the horrors of the desert, Najeeb is most mortified to experience the rarity of water. He literally becomes a fish out of water and is dying of thirst and his own unwashed body and unclean hair. He is underfed, under-watered and unpaid. He longs for his watery homeland. Najeeb and Hakeem set out to escape under the guidance of Ibrahim. The three men lose track. They are lost in the desert and wander without any clue of the directions. During the exodus, the barrenness of the desert sucks the life of Hakeem. The waterless desert almost drains out the life of Najeeb and he is nearly dead. However, he revives his half-dead life thanks to the nursing by Ibrahim who feeds him with water drawn from a fountain amidst an oasis. Benjamin highlights the lifelessness of the life of migrant labourers particularly through the absence of water in the desert. He illustrates the issues of existence and egression through the presence and absence of waters in the landscapes of India and the Saudi Desert. The present study extracts the existential issues of waters as delineated by Benjamin in his *Goat Days*.

KEYWORDS: Existential, overflowing, over-barren, waterlessness, barrenness and egression

Benjamin's *Goat Days* [GD] vividly describes the sufferings of the migrant Indian labourers in the Gulf from the perspectives of the availability and non-availability of waters. The focus on water and water related issues makes the novel an existential work. According to Peet, "Existentialism recurrently deals with the emotional life, the feelings, moods, and affects through which people are involved in the world" (36, 2011). The present article extracts the emotional life and feelings of the major characters of GD with reference to water. Najeeb and Hakeem migrate to the Gulf hoping to earn more money. In Riyadh airport, a dirty and smelly Arab came to receive them. He was the arbab (saviour- employer). The smell of dirt caused by

his unwashed body provides a precursor to the filthy smell of the unclean goat farm (masara). The stench prefaces the life of dirtiness in that part of the desert.

Najeeb and Hakeem were tricked to work as shepherds in different goat farms. In the goat farm, Najeeb saw a dirty and stinking shepherd. He named him scary figure because “he had matted hair like that of a savage who had been living in forest for years... He had on the dirtiest of Arab clothes. Also that horrible stink that can drive anyone away”(GD 61). Ironically, at the end, Najeeb and Hakeem also emerged as scary figures. Such was the horrible nature of the filthy, crowded, sandy and waterless goat farms which Benjamin pictures in words to dramatize the tragedy of water scarcity. The rarity of water is exposed melodramatically. Najeeb defecated in the open and carried a bucket of water so that he could wash himself. But, “Before the first drop of water fell on my backside, I felt a lash on my back. [The arbab] 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” (GD 78). The arbab made it clear that water should not be spent for cleanliness.

The arbab forced Najeeb to drink raw goat milk without having a bath, brushing his teeth or completing the morning rituals. Najeeb was hesitant but hunger made him drink the milk. He thought of his hygienic days in Kerala. “Had it been at home, I wouldn’t even drink coffee without first ducking into the river –even when it rained. But that day, for the first time, I violated all my hygiene rules. I had drunk milk without brushing my teeth. Hunger for one and half days forced me to ignore my habits” (GD 68). He felt bad about violating his principles of personal cleanliness. The scary figure offered Najeeb khubus to eat. Najeeb did not touch the food as he was still unclean. He again became nostalgic of Kerala where “it was almost as if I lived in a river. Without water, nothing happened in my life. Cleanliness had been my ideology...But the breaking of all my habits began that day, didn’t it? The harshest for me was this ban on sanitation” (GD 78). Thus, starvation drove him to give up his principles of personal hygiene and he ate the khubus. He laments “[I] couldn’t bother about cleanliness anymore... I had four large khubus and gulped down two mugs of water” (GD 81). When Najeeb became thirsty he would drink water from the tank secretly. But, the tank water was not potable. One day it upset his stomach which ran many times and he had to defecate openly. “To avoid being beaten by the arbab for trying to clean myself with water, I began cleaning my behind with stones”(GD 93). It was a great indigenous way of cleaning oneself. Deprivation of watery cleansing process led Najeeb to develop skin disorders which he reveals saying, “My skin felt irritated and inflamed as I hadn’t washed for many days. Hiding from the arbab, I washed my hands and face in the water for the goats. My armpits and pubic area, untouched by water, felt filthy” (GD 94). Restrictions on using water reduced Najeeb’s values as a sensitive human being. When a ewe delivered a ram Najeeb assisted it and got his hands stained with the placenta. He wiped his hands with the dress he was wearing. Still his hands were dirty and stinking. When he tried to wash them with water the arbab severely beat and reproached him. Thus the problems caused by water scarcity are presented from the existentialist views. Existentialism is a “philosophy which emphasizes the individual’s alienation with others” (Matterson 75, 2003). Najeeb had been alienated from his watery homeland and that alienation ailed his existence in the desert.

The focus on the infertility of the desert alludes to water scarcity. Najeeb found that the goats were taken out only as a physical exercise and not for grazing. The desert had no grass at all. What geographer Husain observes on the deserts in general is applicable here. In the desert, “land has become so degraded that it is

worthless agriculturally” (Husain 403, 2011). Najeeb lists out the menu of daily meal. The menu card reveals that water was treated as a delicacy.

Early morning diet: Fresh, breast-warm raw [goat] milk, (Only if one felt like it)

Breakfast: Khubus, plain water

Lunch: Khubus, plain water

Evening drink: Fresh, breast-warm raw [goat] milk, (Only if one felt like it)

Dinner: Khubus, plain water (*GD* 84)

Consumption of water violating the schedule was severely dealt with. Najeeb’s labour in the goat farm drained his energy and pained him extremely. He felt that the pain of dirtiness was more unbearable than the pain of labour. “More than the pain, it was the irritation of not being able to bathe myself clean after work that bothered me...It was the uneasiness of sleeping in the same dress one wore in the sun, sweating and moving among stinking goats, and being strewn with their urine and dung. My dress stuck to my armpits and in between the legs; to say nothing about my sweat-soaked shoes” (*GD* 87). Added to these troubles of water scarcity, the available water was not potable and it was often allergic to Najeeb. His throat was parched continually and when he drank the lukewarm tank water it burned his throat. His ailments were mainly related to his itching and irritating skin which was unwashed ever since he was pressed into the goat farm as a shepherd. His dermatological diseases were peculiar agonies. “My skin felt irritated and inflamed as I hadn’t washed for many days. Hiding from the arbab, I washed my hands and face in the water for the goats. My armpits and pubic area, untouched by water, felt filthy” (*GD* 94). Filthiness and stench harassed Najeeb but he could not avoid becoming filthier than ever as he never washed himself wholesomely for want of water. He was stinking. The arbab did not have the practice of bathing and he imposed this unhealthy practice on the migrant labourers.

Thirst, parching throat, dry lips, desiccated tongue and dehydrated body are suggestive of slow death. The ever scorching sun, shrivelled ground and sterile backdrop indicate the withering of life. The other difficulties add to the complications of heat and dryness. Even if one goat went missing the arbab would shoot Najeeb dead. Hence, Najeeb had to keep running from the desert to the farm numerous times and fatigue forced him to drink water often. The inhuman arbab deprived the unfortunate shepherd even the minimum water for bare survival. Najeeb resents, “when I stopped to have some water, the arbab hit me hard, snatched the cup of water from me and flung it away. I rushed back into the desert again, thirsty, panting, my tongue parched” (*GD* 118). Later, Najeeb used to wonder how he survived “for such a long time in that scorching heat without even a drop of water” (*GD* 119). Najeeb recalls how the arbab reacted when he fainted because of dehydration. “The arbab came and sat near me and dripped some water into my mouth. ‘Water...water...’ I mumbled over and over again. Even in my half-conscious state I heard the arbab saying you people are profligates, profligates who do not know how to use water carefully. Then I lost consciousness” (*GD* 119). The arbab left the place without giving him water anymore.

The desert once received a spell of rain. Najeeb was jubilant to walk into the outpour of rain. “It had started raining. When the first drop fell on me, I writhed like I had been stabbed. By my calculation, it had been eight or ten months since a drop of water touched my skin” (*GD* 132). However, as the rain became heavier Najeeb began to shiver and ran to the arbab’s tent. He was amazed to notice that the arbab was afraid of rain and had crouched to the corner like a coward. “More than anything else in the world, the arbab feared water, I felt...The arbab seemed to fear water

falling on his body, as if it were the touch of a jinni. As the rain droplets blew into the tent, the arbab retreated even farther into the corner. I thought the arbab had probably not had a bath even once in his life” (*GD* 133). The arbab invited Najeeb to enter the tent and made him sit on the cot. He was praying for the rain to stop. Najeeb took the arbab’s gun. For a moment, he thought of killing the arbab and running away from there. At that time he heard that the arbab thanked the Almighty for having sent Najeeb as a saviour to his tent. He confessed that if Najeeb had not been there he would have died of his fear of rain water. Najeeb did not want to kill a coward like the arbab and left the tent. He removed his wet sheet around his body and boldly walked into the rain. For some time, his body pulsated with pain but he endured it and the rain drops turned pleasant to him. “After that each drop refreshed me, I enjoyed that rain. Like lambs that can sense the coming of rain, I leapt around. And thus, after a very long time, the rain washed me clean, dirt quietly trickled down my body” (*GD* 134). The arbab’s disgust with water is made obvious. When the rain eased the arbab drove away in his vehicle. Najeeb went out to the other masara to meet Hakeem. He was shocked to see that Hakeem too had become a scary figure. Hakeem’s handsomeness was gone and he had become dark, skinny, dishevelled and ugly. Najeeb realized that he too had become a scary figure. From the existentialist point of view the existence of the two migrants was inauthentic and indicated the loss of being and becoming.

The rain water, moreover, revived Najeeb’s hopes of life.”This was within two days of the rain. It was as if all the scents of life had been living dormant beneath that brown surface, straining to hear the music of resurrection: cactuses, creepers, rock fungi, touch-me-nots, bushes with shiny leaves”(*GD* 145). The geographical fact is that “in some deserts there are cactus plants, and various species of flowering plant which have a very short life cycle. They spring up quickly after a shower of rain, and go through their complete life cycle in a few days, before dying down and leaving seeds to lie dormant until the next rain”(Rojoshky 68, 2004). Whatever it is the growth of the little plants predicted to Najeeb that the windy and scorching days of his life would soon pass and he would get his freedom soon.

The horrors of waterlessness deepen Najeeb’s sufferings. In the cold season, even the scarcely available water turned hostile to him. “I could not even touch the water...I learned that even cold water could burn skin...Blisters appeared on my left palm” (*GD* 139). The cold water was not only unusable but also harmful to the users. The summer season grew more and more intolerable. He had to drink the water meant for the goats. “I just had time to drink two mugs of water-water that had been literally boiling in the rusty iron tank” (*GD* 152). At the peak of the horrible days in the non-productive desert, Najeeb visualized that the desert might have once contained overflowing rivers which but were superimposed or engulfed by the sandy mounds. “I also won’t believe that there is no water in the desert. I am certain that there was a river flowing silently under the sandy plain I lay on. I slept on that flow, like on a raft” (*GD* 153). Even the guess of a barren river enlivened his hopes. However, the reality remained bitter. Najeeb had become a collection of dirt and embodiment of ugliness and unhealthy body. He recalls, “I got a wild itch from the unwashed hair and beard sometimes. I already had blisters from the dirty hair in my armpits and pubic area and had become revolting to look at” (*GD* 160). The narrative prompts the readers to visualize how Najeeb looked untidy and unclean because of depravity of water. The presence and absence of water makes almost all the differences in the life of the natives and the migrant labourers in the desert. At the peak of waterlessness, Najeeb cried, “Oh, how piteous I looked! I rated myself as the god of impurity” (*GD*

183). The tragedy of dirtiness and stench reached another phase with his declaration on his impurity. Najeeb inescapably suffered from self-pity of dirtiness.

Najeeb, Hakeem and Ibrahim set out to escape and Ibrahim knew the desert somehow. When they left the masara they thought that they had won their freedom. But, their ugly appearance and foul smell betrayed that they were djinns. So, they had to run unseen under the coverage of darkness, sand dunes and hills. As they kept running they lost the way. Hakeem and Najeeb became very thirsty and were badly in need of water to survive. As the heat increased their bodies wilted. They prayed the Almighty for water. There was not even a drop of water. Najeeb was hopeless, “after a day spent without a drop of water to moisten the tongue... I broke down” (GD 208).

When the escapees were looking for the path out they came across a river, completely drained and over-barren. “We came across the signs of a river that had drained into the desert long ago.... It was difficult to imagine a river once ran through these sands. But its lines were still distinct. I visualized how men in the past stood on its shore and drowned while trying to cross it. At the same shore where they died swallowing water, I suffered as my parched throat cried for a drop of water...I imagined the river slowly drying up and the living beings in it gradually perishing. I could hear the trees and shrubs on its banks lament for water” (GD 211). The river had gone deep under the sands and thus had become over-barren. Research in Geography reveals that desertification is a result of long-term degradation of dry lands. Such degradations may be brought about by the overuse of the land by men and his animals. Natural causes like climatic fluctuations can also lead to excessive sedimentation associated with sand dunes and sheets of torrents. Increase of livestock pressurizes desertification of the denuded land (Husain 404, 2011). The other geographical fact is that some rivers “flow into deserts, where they evaporate to leave salt flats or very saline lakes” (Rojoshky 208, 2004). The barrenness had extinguished most of the living things. The contrast between the overflowing rivers of Kerala and the over-barren river of the Saudi Desert signify life and lifelessness respectively in their own perspectives.

Hakeem’s thirst for water grew wildly and deadly. He began to moan for water and kept on asking for it. Najeeb was equally thirsty and lamented, “What remained distinct was the insatiable thirst. But there was no way to quench it. Even the last drop of spittle in my mouth had dried long ago” (GD 213). He regretted to have commenced the journey without taking some water in a bottle or some vessel. There was no water to soothe his inflamed throat. In absolute agony, he made a confessional prayer to the Almighty to save their souls. “Allah, how much water have I wasted back home! Now I am begging for a drop of it. I realize the greatness of my homeland. Is this, Allah, the punishment for that waste? Forgive me! Water. I realized how precious it is” (GD 214). The heat of the desert, scorching sun and thirst killed Hakeem. He died for want of a few drops of water. Fortunately, Ibrahim noticed lizards, followed them and reached an oasis. Najeeb rushed to the oasis and ran here and there to locate water. But, Ibrahim looked for the fountain calmly and located it. He cried aloud in ecstasy, “Allahu Akbar! Water! Water! Allahu Akbar!” (GD 224). Ibrahim and Najeeb drank enough water and ate dates from the palm trees. They washed off the fatigue from their bodies. The oasis saved them. Najeeb’s assumption of the hidden presence of water in the desert came true. Geographically, oasis is a fertile and vegetated area in the desert. In an oasis “the water table has come close enough to the surface for wells and springs or seepages to exist, thus making it suitable for human habitation”(Rojoshky 161, 2004).

Looking at the ways in which Benyamin treats the issues of waters in the two lands it can be concluded that water is at the centre of life on earth. Water is precious and has no replacement. The problems of the Indian migrant labourers are essentially water bound in the Saudi Desert. Most of the differences in the life of Najeeb and Hakeem in the desert are brought about by water and waterlessness. Availability of water nourishes the men who are used to use water appropriately. Non-availability of water can become deadly to such men. The first scary figure is first of all a victim of waterlessness. The death of Hakeem singularly testifies to the deadliness of waterlessness. Had he not migrated to the waterless land he would not have been trapped into death. The prolonged sufferings of the escapees during the exodus are made unforgettable. Najeeb is fortunate enough to escape the same onslaughts of the desert and the readers are made aware the preciousness of water by his account. This is how Benyamin's *Goat Days* illustrates the differences between India and the Saudi Desert through the overflowing river and the over-barren river in these two lands respectively.

Bibliography

Primary Source

Benyamin. *Goat Days*. Penguin Books: Haryana, 2012. Print

Secondary Sources

Habib, M.A.R. *Literary Criticism from Plato to the Present- An Introduction*. Wiley, New Delhi, 2011. Print

Hemley, Robin. *Turning Life into Fiction*. Graywolf Press: Minnesota, 2006. Print

Husain, Majid. *Human Geography*. Rawat Publications: New Delhi, 2011. Print

Lodha. R. M. *Dictionary of Geography*. Academic Publishers: New Delhi, 2012. Print

Matterson, S. *American Literature- The Essential Glossary*. OUP: New York, 2003. Print

Peet, Richard. *Modern Geographical Thought*. Rawat Publications: New Delhi, 2011. Print

Rojshky. H. *A Dictionary of Geography*. CBS Publishers: New Delhi, 2004. Print