

**Research Article**

## Experience of a Gulf migrant through the Eyes of 'Goat Days' by Benyamin

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### ABSTRACT

The emergence of a large and prosperous Indian Diaspora across the globe obscures the fact that the majority of them face various hardships and violence in the journey from home to host land. The Indian Diaspora in the Gulf is unique because of its transitory nature and lack of diasporic community formation. Thus, most of them use various resources available to survive and thrive, such as imagination and faith in the case of Najeeb, the protagonist of *Goat Days* written by Benny Daniel. This article, therefore, seeks to explore the human experience of migration to Gulf countries by analysing the literary narrative *Goat Days*. The author's writing has converted the text into the universal tale of loneliness, exploitation and alienation. Najeeb is forced to live a 'goat's life' where he transforms 'goats' into an imagined community through his imagination for survival. Furthermore, *Goat Days* is different from the Indian Diasporic literature from West in terms of being realistic, humane and does not emphasise on identity and cultural conflict. The article attempts to understand the processes of migration, displacement, slavery, loneliness, violence, nostalgia, alienation, distress and hope among the Indian migrants in the Gulf.

**Keywords:** Migration, Diasporic literature, Memories and nostalgia, Displacement, Violence, Alienation, Imagination

### INTRODUCTION

There are approximately 30 million overseas Indians spread across the globe (Ministry of External Affairs, 2016). The history of human beings has been marked

by physical movement of people across geographical locations due to several reasons ranging from natural calamities to social, economic, and political exigencies. The globalisation in recent decades has resulted in unprecedented movement of labour across markets around the world. Thus, migration of people from one country to another has become a common phenomenon (Azeez and Begum, 2009). International migration has significant social, political, and economic impact on both home and host land (Brian, 2009). Migration is one of the most important factors shaping the world we live in today. It contributes to the development of both sending as well as receiving countries (Azeez and Begum, 2009). The discovery of oil in 1973 in Persian Gulf led to the oil boom in countries located in the region. These oil exporting countries of the region were constrained by labour shortages. Therefore, they evolved development plans to attract both skilled and unskilled labour. Most of the workers to undertake this labour came from countries like India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh and South East Asian countries (Kumaraswamy, 2012).

According to the estimates of the Ministry of External Affairs of India, there are approximately four million Indians in the Persian Gulf region. The 70 per cent of Indians in the Gulf are engaged as semi-skilled and un-skilled workers and rest 20–30 per cent comprises of professionals and other white-collar workers (Ministry of External Affairs, 2016). The statistics do not take into account the personal experiences of the individuals who are human beings in flesh and blood and have emotions which are not reflected in the statistics of migration. The individuals are alive and have thoughts and emotions which are not reflected in the statistics of migration. Thus, the article seeks to explore this often glossed-over human experience of migration to Gulf countries by analysing the fictional account of a migrant worker's experience depicted by Benny Daniel in his book *Goat Days*. The story of the protagonist Najeeb in *Goat Days* is the universal tale of loneliness, exploitation and alienation faced by migrants across the globe and history. The article attempts to understand the processes of migration, aspirations, disappointment, violence, adaptation, adjustment and the use of various resources available to diaspora in an alien land. It explores the conditions of loneliness, displacement, alienation, distress and hope among the Indian migrants in Gulf. It, further, seeks to explore the use of imagination for construction of imagined community for survival by the protagonist Najeeb.

The *Goat Days* is a literary narrative 'from below' by a migrant which deals with people who are subjugated and subjected to the exploitative division of labour (Waheed, 2012). This is the first novel emerging from Gulf region by an Indian author about the migrant labourers' predicaments. It deals with experiences of migrants in realistic and humane ways and does not emphasise on issues of identity and cultural conflict, which is predominantly the subject of Indian Diasporic

literature emerging from west and Caribbean. Thus, the reader gets glimpses of the dreams which are built upon limited life possibilities, followed by disillusionment (Taskeen and Mohsin, 2015). The *Goat Days* provides us a glimpse into the life of Najeeb who desires to work in the Gulf and earn enough money for his wife and the unseen child back home. He does achieve his dream of migrating to Gulf but finds himself in a grim and absurd situation, that is followed by a series of incidents. He is forced to live like a slave herding goats in the middle of the desert in Saudi Arabia. He is haunted by the loneliness, nostalgia, and memories of the lush, green landscape of his village and loving family. The only solace he has is the companionship of the goats that metamorphoses into his sense of community and loved ones and his faith in God keeps him going. Despite all the hardships he does not lose hope and contrives a hazardous scheme to escape the desert prison. In the end, he is successful in escaping the hell. Benjamin's wry and tender story transforms this strange and bitter comedy of Najeeb's life in the desert into a universal tale of loneliness and alienation.

#### **GULF MIGRATION FROM INDIA**

The slavery and colonialism mark the two significant chapters in modern world history which led to unprecedented mass migrations, followed by globalisation. Indian labourers had played a significant role in extension and support of the British Empire and its imperial project. Thus, millions of Indians migrated to the British colonies all over the world between 1830 and 1920 as indentured, *kangani* and free or passage migrants, an influx that was systematised and managed jointly by imperial, Indian and colonial governments (Waheed, 2012). Indian Diaspora populations from West Indies and South Africa to Mauritius and Fiji are a living testament of British Indian 'coolie' recruitment (Waheed, 2012).

There is little knowledge about the history of twentieth century slavery and indentured labour in the Gulf region prior to the 1970s oil boom. The discovery of oil was instrumental in establishing Arab Gulf States which were supervised, monitored and protected by the British Empire in its own power struggles against Ottoman and German interests in the earlier part of the 20th century (Kamrava, 2005). In recent times, the American economic and political interests have played a significant role in reshaping the political map of the Gulf States and particularly Saudi Arabia (Edwards, 2014). The Gulf States received astonishing number of immigrant labourers seeking jobs and a better life, after the oil boom in the 1970s. It is reported that the 'labour migration to the petroleum-rich states of the Arabian Peninsula comprises the third-largest transnational migration flow in the contemporary world' (Gardner *et al.*, 2013; p.2).

The discovery of oil in 1973 in the Gulf region and massive investment programme in oil exploration and infrastructure development by the oil producing Arab countries

resulted in an increased demand for labour (Azeez and Begum, 2009). The oil producing countries opened their borders for the workers to emigrate from other countries. This process resulted in a massive emigration of workers from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and other South Asian nations to Gulf countries. The migratory trends in India saw a major shift after the 1970s. It is estimated that 95 per cent of Indian migrant labourers are concentrated in six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in the Middle East, namely Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and Kuwait. Saudi Arabia has, in fact, become a primary destination and has attracted large numbers of Indian migrant labourers (Shihada, 2016).

The 'Gulf boom' had a major impact on the southern state of India, that is Kerala in terms of emigration towards Gulf region. The majority of Indian migrant labourers in the Gulf hail from Kerala. Thereby, millions of unemployed Malayali youths found various job opportunities in the Gulf countries. The large number of emigrants to Gulf countries from Kerala resulted in a paradigm shift in the socio-economic conditions of certain districts of Kerala. It is worth noting that Kerala state received Rs. 18,465 crores of remittances from Gulf during 1999–2004 (Basheer, 2011). The remittances from Gulf countries contribute approximately to 22 per cent of the state's income. The remittances by the emigrants changed the social, economic, and cultural contours of Kerala and turned it into a 'money order economy' (Basheer, 2011). Thereafter, a 'Gulf visa' was the most sought-after dowry for a long time. Moreover, psychiatrists even coined the term 'Gulf wife syndrome' to refer to the depression in women who were separated from their husbands in Gulf for a long time (Basheer, 2011). The boom in software industry after the 1990s motivated the computer and IT professionals to migrate towards USA, Europe and South Asian countries along with Gulf countries (Azeez and Begum, 2009).

The major push factors for migration were the poverty, unemployment, low wages and poor standards of living in India. Meanwhile, the job prospects in oil industries, infrastructure development and higher wages pulled the migrants towards Gulf to encash the novel opportunities. A significant number of the migrants have returned and settled down in their native places as they are not permitted to have permanent residency in Gulf countries. Thus, the returnees are either self-employed using their learnt skills to generate employment locally or seekers of various jobs available here. There are perceptible changes in the consumption pattern, investment pattern, life style, religion and education in the Kerala. Therefore, some parts of the state have become replica of the Gulf countries economically and culturally (Azeez and Begum, 2009).

According to K.T. Balabhaskaran, CEO of Norika-Roots, a wing of Kerala Government's Non-Resident Keralite Affairs Department, there are roughly 2.5 million Keralites presently working in the Gulf (Basheer, 2011). A significant number

of these are unskilled or semi-skilled workers employed as manual labourers and construction workers. The wages they receive are miserably low and living conditions are pathetic. Abu Iringattiri, the Malayalam novelist and short-story writer who lives in Saudi Arabia, points out that the monthly wages of a construction worker averages Rs. 7,000–10,000 only (Basheer, 2011). He further adds, that despite the low wages, poor working conditions and long working hours, Malayalis still rush to Gulf countries. The wages in West Asia, in real terms, have declined over the years and for various manual jobs the wages are at par with those back at home. Still, the economic migration to West Asian countries continues unabated. Thousands of migrants and aspirants get cheated by unauthorised recruiters and middlemen. The Gulf worker is always at the mercy of the sponsor as a job visa depends on a 'sponsor'. Many Gulf workers point out that the migrants who enter the region with a 'visitor visa' and then 'go missing', cannot expect and hope for decent treatment or prompt payment of wages from their employers (Basheer, 2011).

The migrant labourers spend years separated from their families where they work in extremely low-paid jobs and dehumanising living conditions. The legal framework that 'regulates both the ownership of businesses and the employment of non-citizen labour is known as the Kafala' (Kymlicka and Pfössl, 2014). Within the Kafala system, a foreigner can work in the GCC countries only with local sponsorship (Kafil). Therefore, it is a binding system which ties workers living and working in the host country on the permission of their sponsor and forbids them to seek alternative employment. Thus, it denies migrant labourers the right to get transferred from abusive sponsors or employers. Those who oppose or complain about poor working conditions and abuse risk losing their jobs, criminalisation and deportation (Waheed, 2012). According to the laws of Kafala, the worker's passports are held by their sponsors. This further limit their travel out of the country. Therefore, Kafala fosters and facilitates exploitation, slavery, miserable living conditions and low wages for migrant workers (Waheed, 2012). Rajan (2014) argues that there are a large number of undocumented migrant labourers 'due to the malpractices of the employers such as refusal to release the passport or denial of consent to switch jobs'. Migrant labourers are facing further exploitation and humiliation at the hands of sponsors, following the global financial crisis, reduction of jobs and wage manipulation.

There are a significant number of cases of deceit and fraud by the recruiters and middlemen operating within India in consort with agents in the Gulf region. Basheer (2011) cites a case of a person named M. K. Harish of Malappuram, who was recruited by an agent from Kerala as cafeteria assistant for a company at Kuwait in 2006. But he was taken to Iraq instead of Kuwait and was put in a fortified factory on the Iran–Iraq border. He later learnt that the factory sent cooked food

to American soldiers in Iraq. He had to work in two shifts every day and there was only half a day off on Friday. The passport was kept in the custody of his sponsor. He was never allowed to step out of the factory premises continuously for 16 months and had no access to phone. The sponsor paid him his wages regularly, but it was almost one-fourth of what was promised earlier. Mr. Harish recalls, that, fortunately he fell seriously ill and was sent back home (Basheer, 2011).

Shiny Jokos is a media person who has worked for more than 5 years in the Gulf. During this period, she interviewed several housemaids who had been exploited, battered or sexually abused by their employers. She points out, 'women manual workers, especially housemaids, are the worst exploited Gulf workers'. Further, she adds that many poor women recruited as housemaids end up in sex rackets, many of which are run by Indian agents. She points out that the housemaids particularly from Tamil and Telugu speaking areas face worst harassment as they are relatively uneducated and are not aware of how to seek help (Basheer, 2011).

Mr. Balabhaskaran (CEO of Norka-Roots) points out that, the Government of India took serious note of the exploitation of Indian workers especially women in the Gulf region. Thus, it banned the recruitment of women below the age of 30 years as overseas housemaids. Despite the ban there are many women who are eager to migrate for various reasons. Therefore, to beat the age bar, young women are now being recruited as home nurses or beauticians. They often end up as bonded labourers or are trapped in sex rackets (Basheer, 2011). Nevertheless, despite all the risks, as in Benyamin's novel, there are many 'Najeebs' who continue to borrow money or pawn the family jewels to get to the Arabian sands. The south Indians still perceive Gulf as a lucrative destination despite the shrinking opportunities. Najeeb is one among the many who had pinned their hopes on the Gulf for the betterment of their lives. What follows is the story of dreams shattered, and the perseverance of the individual to survive, hope and faith.

### **EXPERIENCE OF GOAT DAYS**

The author Benny Daniel has been working in Bahrain since 1992 and writing in Malayalam for more than past 10 years and writes with the pen name Benyamin. He created a sensation with the publication of his first book, *Aadujeevitham* in 2008 which became a bestseller. The book was originally written in Malayalam and won the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award in 2009. Moreover, the book appeared in the long list of Man Asian Literary Prize in 2012, short list of the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in 2013, and won the Padmaprabha Literary Award in 2015. The book was later translated into Hindi and Tamil too. The book was translated from Malayalam to English as *Goat Days* by Joseph Koyippally in 2012 and was published by Penguin Books. Benyamin became an overnight sensation with the

translation of this hard-hitting story of Najeeb, a Malayali who went missing in West Asia. The novel is based on the real life of Najeeb and chronicles how he was forced into a modern version of slavery in an alien country.

The *Goat Days* is significant because it is a novel about South Asian Diaspora that is neither about nor written by a diasporic author from 'the West'; further it is not a novel about the elites. Hence, it is primarily not concerned with themes of identity, longing and belonging and the politics of culture such as is the case with those novels that focus on the Indian Diaspora's journey to the 'West' (Europe, United States.). Benyamin explains that usually we only hear stories of success in the Gulf but after meeting the real-life Najeeb, he wanted to talk about many who lead lives of suffering and pain. He feels that the media often dismisses the stories about such men to 'single-column news' that breezily states that a man believed to be missing was found in the desert (Nagarajan, 2012). The fact that there is usually no effort on the part of the media to investigate why and how that man reached there remains unsaid. Benyamin decided to meet the man who had endured so much and never lost hope that someday he would gain freedom. He admits that a story based on Najeeb's life was the last thing on his mind. 'But when I heard his tale, I knew this was the story I was waiting to tell the world and I knew this had to be told', emphasises Benyamin (Nagarajan, 2012).

The reluctant Najeeb who wanted to forget his past had to be persuaded to recount his story and travails. Although the Malayali Diaspora is one of the largest and oldest in the Gulf, literary works based on their lives are not quite the subject of a best seller. Agreeing that life in Bahrain may have sharpened his sensitivity to the many lives of Malayalis there, Benyamin says: 'Their money is the strong backbone of the economic growth of Kerala. Yet, their struggle, issues, feelings, emotional upheavals ... have never been given the space or importance in our popular discourse. As a writer from this disappointed community I have to focus on them. I have to raise their issues through my writing'. Thus, Benyamin through his writings raises the issues of the Malayali Diaspora in the Gulf. His writings individualise and personalise the sufferings of migrants which might get lost in the statistics of migration.

The protagonist Najeeb was held captive as a slave labourer on a goat farm (*Masara*) in a faraway desert in Saudi Arabia. Continuously, for more than three years, he was forced to do arduous work and was denied sufficient food and water to wash. He was trapped inside an open space, that is desert which had a vast stretch of sand. The story contains the elements of despair, longing, isolation, hope and faith in God. The supervisor of the farm keeps a constant vigil on Najeeb through a pair of binoculars, controls him with a gun and frequently beats him with a belt to terrorise him. One night, he escapes with his friend Hakeem and gets lost in the desert for days. His friend Hakeem dies of thirst and fatigue, but

Najeeb miraculously survives and manages to find his way to a city where he gets himself arrested by the police to get deported. He spends several months in jail before being put on a plane to Kerala by the Saudi authorities. The story is one of loneliness, isolation and melancholy but has elements of faith, hope, optimism and liberation.

The experience of Najeeb is analysed from the perspectives of memory and nostalgia, longing, displacement and deterritorialization, violence and imagination. Imagination is the faculty or action of forming new ideas, or images or concepts of external objects not present to the senses. It is the capability of individual or groups of forming unique images in the mind, which are not observable through the senses. It can furthermore be defined as a reflection of experience with one's individuality. There is an inherent relation between memory and imagination, thus the authority to imagine things is dependent on the mental faculty of remembering the past experiences. Memory thus plays a central role in imagination. Therefore, imagination for Diaspora is not merely an abstract reminiscence but has potential to transcend the experiential realities. This transcendence can lead to construction of imaginary homelands (Rushdie, 1991), families or imagined communities (Anderson, 1983).

*Goat days* is a novel of multiple journeys: from Kerala to the Gulf, from Riyadh to rural Saudi Arabia and from dreams of economic betterment to impoverished disillusionment. But at the heart of *Goat Days* is the journey Najeeb makes from slavery to freedom, including a perilous desert trek. The novel is about the many perils Najeeb faces in his struggle for emancipation (Waheed, 2012). The novel begins with Najeeb rejoicing in the freedom he enjoys in Sumesi prison in the hope of liberation from what he had endured in the desert. He chooses the hardships of imprisonment over the suffering endured to survive and live in the goat farm. His experiences as a goat-herd are narrated in flashback, along with his prayers to be selected for repatriation. In case his *arbab* visits to the prison and reclaims him before he's selected, he'll have to go back to the farm. However, the terrible misery of Najeeb's experiences in Saudi Arabia cannot be diluted, and they make a grotesque travesty of the Gulf prosperity and the modernity we assume when we see its shiny urbanity (Waheed, 2012).

The protagonist Najeeb Muhammad is a thoroughly humble man and works as a diver in Kerala. He is a young man from Kerala who is recently married and has dreams of a better life and fortune, just like anyone else. 'Working in the Gulf' is his idea of success, like most of the young men in Kerala. When a friend from Karuvatta carelessly mentioned there was a visa for sale, he felt a yearning that he had never experienced before. He saves the money to get a passport and visa to work as a labourer in Saudi Arabia, leaving his mother and pregnant wife behind. Najeeb is able to secure passport, visa, and a job in Saudi Arabia through an agent.

He was willing to accept any assignment given to him. It's a common story in Kerala, but Najeeb's experiences are literally off the beaten track.

After a long wait in Bombay, on 4 April 1992, he arrived in Riyadh, the city of his dreams which eventually turns out to be a nightmare. After reaching the Riyadh airport, an Arab man picks him up and takes him out to the middle of the desert. The journey ended in a dark desert, from expectation to despair. He is kept in a *masara* (goat farm) which has few tents, goats, camels, sand, and a fellow worker whose appearance is so unkempt and filthy that Najeeb is initially terrified of him. Though, shockingly Najeeb realises that the image of scary man is his future. He encounters the *arbab*, whose stink was a mixed smell of bone powder and dung from the goat farm. The stink becomes part of Najeeb's life. In the *masara*, he was initiated into the life of the shepherd, herding the goats. As Najeeb knows only Malayalam, he is unable to make sense of anything spoken to him but learns to understand the instructions of *arbab*.

He is kept in isolation, tortured, beaten, and starved and his duty was to take care of the goats every day. The *masara* was a vast open prison of desert in which Najeeb finds himself under the constant surveillance by the *arbab*. The emptiness of Najeeb's experiences reflects the dreariness of the desert that powerfully suffocates those entrapped within. The desert dissolves the distinction between the public and private. It compels him to give up his ideology and break free of his habits to adapt himself to the harsh realities of the desert. The desert has depth and breadth like a sea and the camel is the ship of the desert which can traverse it (Veenalekshmi, 2014). Najeeb describes the 'camel as the personification of detachment' (Daniel, 2012; 79) and himself as being with no sense of time. The open enclosure becomes the site of remembrance that he associates with the stench which becomes a part of him. There is an intense feeling of isolation and unbearable pain. He does not think about his dear ones or home but had become an alien who thought neither about the past nor the future and only thinks about surviving the day. Najeeb actually starts believing that he is a goat because he is cut off from any kind of human interaction and civilisation. He always dreams of his escape and that is the essence of the novel.

The Arab employer, who is locally known as *arbab*, a word that ironically translates to 'saviour', is a vicious man who subjects his workers to horrific living conditions. He is insensitive to the fact that he is dealing with human beings and treats them worse than his animals. Najeeb lives in a crude tent, eats stale bread and water and takes care of the goats. The basic amenities like bathwater and clean clothes were considered unnecessary. Thus, it is very difficult to imagine what it feels like to be trapped in the desert, forbidden from bathing, washing after defecating or drinking water more than thrice a day. Or what it is to live in perpetual fear of a captor who can mete out lashes, further confinement and even death, at will (Waheed, 2012).

Thus, for Najeeb, the time stops. He loses track of time and for years he survives these harsh conditions and regular beatings.

The only constant companions of Najeeb during his confinement are the goats, thus, he says, 'I had become a goat' (Daniel, 2012). As Najeeb's dehumanising time on the farm passes, he in turn humanises the goats by learning to identify each and every one of them. The goats of the farm become his saviour in these harsh conditions. He starts identifying them as his community in imagination. They become everything and everybody for him, his friends, son, relatives, neighbours and even lover. He reminisces about the various persons of his community who were closely associated with his day to day life in Kerala. He gives each goat a name of the character from his real life, which matched with certain attributes of the goat and the person, he says:

Apart from Pochakkari Ramani, I gave a name to each goat in the masara that I recognized to help me scold them and to make cuddling easier. People from my locality like Arabu Rabuthar, Maryamaimuna, Indipokkar, Niandu Raghavan, Parippu Vijayan, Chakki, Ammini, Kausu, Raufat, Pinki, Ammu, Razia and Thahira, and public figures like Jagathy, Mohanlal, and even EMS himself were a part of my masara. Each of them was dear to me in one way or another. Have you ever looked carefully at a goat's face? It is quite similar to a human's. I named the goats not only by looking at their faces but also relating their names to some character traits, their gait, the sounds they made, by incidents that reminded me of them. Just as how one gets a nickname back home .... So, there were many strange and personal reasons for each name I gave to the goats. The logic of the names might be lost on others, but they made perfect sense to me (Daniel, 2012; 162–163).

For Najeeb, the goats became the physical extensions of his internal longings for home. As he narrates the colourful stories behind the names of family members, past loves and town-dwellers an entire Malayali world comes alive. Thus temporarily, he is able to subdue his nostalgia, 'an acute craving' that 'takes the form of a crazy urge to rush home, like a wild boar rushing wildly through sugarcane fields when it's been shot' (146). The story-telling itself becomes the means of Najeeb's survival, since he has been abandoned violently into the midst of multiple isolations. He is isolated from language, geography and people, other than his *arbab*. He is even isolated from water. And so, to hold on to his humanity and sanity, Najeeb makes the strange and unfamiliar surroundings of his isolation recognisable.

When a goat kid is born, he names him Nabeel, the name which he had thought for his son and identifies him as his son. A moment comes in the story when the *arbab* castrates the goat kid, an event that is very painful for Najeeb. He makes every effort to protect the kid as he deeply associated him with his son but could

not save him. The castration of Nabeel makes him feel the loss of his manliness and virility. The episode hints at the nuances of emotions, feelings, and attachments created by Najeeb with the goats in the farm. These emotions, feelings, and attachments towards the goats are in many ways significant. He transcends the bitterness of his life in *masara* through his constant companionship with the goats. The title of the book itself associates the goats with Najeeb's life.

The blossoming of cactus, creepers and rock fungi after the rain reinvigorates his desire for the persistence of life and to wrestle with the desert and wait patiently for the opportune moment. He realises it is impossible to wipe out life on this earth even in the most inhospitable conditions. Thus, he says, 'it was because of faith alone that I could be strong in spirit even when I was weak in body' (Daniel 2012; 153). When he manages to meet Hakeem, it is a reflection of his own image as 'dark, skinny, dishevelled, ugly' (Daniel 2012; 137). Then, with the help of Hakeem and a Somali named Ibrahim Khadri from a neighbouring farm, Najeeb escapes. The parting words with goats at the time of his escape are heart rending. The journey through the desert where dangers lurk around becomes allegorical to the journey of man in the world. The journey through the desert almost kills him, like it kills Hakeem, who dies of thirst in the desert. But, miraculously and fortunately he is able to reach Riyadh, where he surrenders himself to the police with the hope that he will be repatriated. In the Sumesi prison, the revelation dawns on him that he might have been kept illegally at the farm on someone else's visa. While boarding the plane back, he looks at his inmates and finds them similar to the herd of goats and he feels he was one of the goats and his was a goat's life.

He resists the dehumanising conditions of his confinement by forging new intimacies across the vast expanse of isolation and by virtue of his resolve to live and return home. The life in *masara* is like living on an alien planet. The construction of an imagined community with goats is a means of survival for Najeeb. He is alienated from human beings and self. Telling his story and having it heard, is part of Najeeb's liberation. It is a tale of emancipation weaved in with elements of hope, faith and optimism. This is also a journey from the bondage of slavery to freedom (Rajasekaran and Jose, 2015). The novel ends there. But, in real life, despite all the terrible things he had experienced earlier, Najeeb returns to Saudi Arabia to try his luck one more time.

The character of Najeeb is neither simple nor complex. He is somewhere in between. As he doesn't know the local language and cannot interact with anyone else, he starts speaking with goats, thinking of himself as one of them. The pathos, humour and irony, that is achieved through the writing at the same time is highly commendable. The dreams that are not fulfilled only makes one realize that there is something more which might be in one's destiny. Najeeb's journey of oppression, predicament, escape and hope touches the readers. The novel is intelligent, sensitive

and humane. *Goat Days*, thus provides a vivid account of slavery the Indian nationals are forced into in several instances when they find employment in the Gulf. Most of the Indian Diasporic writings across the globe deals primarily with issues of identity, politics of culture, assimilation, integration and alienation. But *Goat Days* is different, because, first it emerges from the migrants in the Gulf region, and second, it does not deal with usual diasporic issues that are found in writings by authors of Indian origin from other parts of the world. *Goat Days* is far more realistic, sensitive and focusses on the individual's predicaments, suffering, struggle, and liberation.

P.T. Kunhi Mohammed, filmmaker and TV anchor who has lived and worked in Kuwait for 12 years says, that, 'there are hundreds of Najeeb living sheep-like lives in Saudi Arabia, Muscat, Oman, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates and other Gulf countries'. Further he adds, that, 'Most of those who get cheated and exploited are those who lack job skills and have no valid documents' (Basheer, 2012). There are many who landed there on temporary visas and stayed on illegally. This illegality makes them highly susceptible to exploitation. *Goat Days* demonstrates the atrocious truth about Indian migration to the Gulf that the power dynamics between the powerful and the underprivileged remain as oppressive as ever. The dismantling of colonial mechanisms has been succeeded by the economic structure of neo-capitalism and neo-colonialism and it is as brutal as its predecessor. The *Goat Days* is unidimensional, but it is interesting to note that in the fictional 'I' of the protagonist, the author whose voice is prized and the voiceless are fused into one. Najeeb's experiences underscore the importance as well as futility of humanitarian work. The deceit that turns people into slaves is very much visible. Najeeb is easily bedazzled by glass beads and the promise of wealth.

## CONCLUSION

The story of Najeeb is the story of thousands of Indian migrants working in the Gulf in conditions of slavery. The story is the universal tale of human suffering which is created by the uneven distribution of resources and uneven class system. The novel also shifts the focus towards the plight of migrant labourers who face exploitation, violence and alienation in the global division of labour (Brian, 2009). It is the story of international division of labour which is skewed against the aspiring working class in which the Najeeb is located. It is the story of dreams, that remains unfulfilled due to various conditions that are not of his making and narrates how he has to live a slave like existence. The voices of migrant workers in the Gulf have appeared within human rights reports; their images gloss the covers of various books and magazines, exposing the distribution of wealth within oil kingdoms. But a literary narrative from below does not simply expose, it makes knowledge of brutality intimate (Waheed, 2012). Benyamin evocatively describes

the oil kingdom from the perspective of those who come from afar to labour in its cities and deserts.

Najeeb is haunted by the loneliness and the memories of the evergreen landscape of his village and of his loving family. The only solace is the companionship of the goats that metamorphoses into his community and the faith in the God that keeps him going. Najeeb uses his imagination to suppress his nostalgia and constructs an imaginary community of goats to survive. The imagination has played a significant role in the survival of various diasporas of the world, from Jews to modern day Najeeb. The role of community, real or fictitious is also significant for the migrants to survive and thrive in alien milieu (Parekh and Vertovec, 2003). Despite all the hardships Najeeb does not lose hope and contrives a hazardous scheme to escape his desert prison. In the end, he is successful in escaping the hell. Later on, after coming back to India he realises that he was destined to do some other job and was literally kidnapped and forced into the desert prison. Thus, he had suffered and lived someone else's life in desert prison. Benjamin's ironic and tender narrative transforms this strange and bitter comedy of Najeeb's life in the desert into a universal tale of loneliness and alienation.

This is symptomatic of the larger problem existing in the Gulf region. The migrants mostly belong to the sections that are poor and desperate to move. Illiteracy is another major factor, which leads them to being trapped in such horrendous working conditions. Migration is not a plain economic phenomenon but also a personal phenomenon where the individuals and families go through various emotions, situations and transformation. The migration to the Gulf is peculiar in the sense that it's mostly the individual migration and the migrant returns back home. Therefore, it has created different sociological conditions where families are distant and only exist in memories. As families of the workers do not reside in the Gulf, this kind of economic migration thwarts the conditions for formation of community in the region, and they remain sojourners. Thus, we need to look at the Indian Diaspora in the Gulf from a different perspective compared to all other diasporas.

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