

## Research Article

# The Gulf between Hope and Reality: Analysis of Benjamin's Goat Days

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**ABSTRACT**

Indian English Literature is a curious native eruption, an expression of the practical wisdom and creative genius of the Indian people. The term Indian English Literature or Indo-English Literature connotes literature written in English by Indian authors. It remarkably differs from Anglo-Indian Literature which was created by Englishmen in India who were fascinated by her romantic and exotic charm. Benjamin (Benny Daniel) is an Indian novelist and short story writer in the Malayalam language. His most significant novel *Goat Days* (*Aadu Jeevitham*) was published in 2008. Its fame soon crossed the linguistic barrier when it was translated from Malayalam to English as *Goat Days* by Joseph Koyipally in 2012. The novel navigates across the barriers of time and space to bring to light the desolation, nostalgia, alienation, and helplessness of the people who have been trapped in the nexus of labor trade.

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Indian English Literature has a great tradition behind it, stemming from the decision to use English as the medium of higher education. The nationalist movement and social revolutionary tendencies gave an impetus to its emergence. Indian English Literature is the outcome of the cross-fertilization of two fruitful cultures - Indian and English. All Indian writers who have written in English since the days of Raja Ram Mohan Roy down to our own time belong to Indian English Literature. It is a spontaneously and powerfully drawn record of the varying shades of emotions, thoughts and feeling, typical of the genius, and characters of India.

The novel came into existence in India in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Indians started writing fiction in the Indian regional languages as well as in English. A journey into the past of Indian novel reveals the central pre-occupation of the novelists with the historical events such as the Gandhian movements for freedom, partition, creation of Bangladesh, and the trauma of riots. Writers like Kushwanth Singh, Manohar Malgonkar, K.A. Abbas, Salman Rushdie, and Amithav Gosh amply illustrate this point. K.R.S. Iyengar has given a detailed account of Indian English Literature in his book *Indian Writing in English*.

Literature cannot be separated from human life as human life is made up of various aspects. Then as part of fiction contains the overall human experience, or a translation of literary journey that comes into contact with human life, so

much so that, it can be said that works of fiction are a portrait of reality that is manifested through the esthetic language. The novel as a work of fiction offers a world that contains an idealized model of life, an imaginative world which was built through a variety of intrinsic elements such as events, plot, character, background, perspective, and others.

Translation is a powerful tool for bridging the gap between cultures and gaining insight into different ways of life and ideals. Messages that might otherwise stay unheard are not only lost in translation but also rather found and understood. Translation connects people and cultures from around the world. Translators take part in a hunt that traverses languages to uncover the secret links that bind us together. *Aadu Jeevitham* (*Goat Days*) depicts the life of Najeeb Muhammed, an Indian emigrant who went missing in Saudi Arabia. Recently married, he dreams of a better work in any of the Persian Gulf States. In Riyadh, however, he gets trapped. He is used as a "slave" laborer and shepherd assigned to look after goats and camels for almost 3½ years, in the remote deserts of Saudi Arabia. He is forced to do backbreaking work, is kept half hungry, and is denied water to wash and suffer unimaginably. The farm's brutal supervisor keeps Najeeb in control with a gun and binoculars and frequently beats him with a belt.

Barry Brummett articulates in *Techniques of Close Reading*, thus: "Irony is a kind of winking at each other as we all understood the game of meaning reversal that is being



played” (Brummett 56). Human life itself is the greatest irony. It invalidates what man plans and proposes. Ordinary jokes and harsh realities of life simultaneously create irony. It juxtaposes both the serious and the silly to proclaim that life is absurd or paradoxical. The post-gulf boom era has witnessed human confinement and brutality in unprecedented magnitude. The story of *Goat Days* is set in the Gulf, the oil-rich paradise, the dream destination for many nationalities worldwide. Like every Keralite who wishes to go to the Gulf countries, Najeeb, a modest sand miner from Kayamkulam, travels to Riyadh in the early 1990s. However, unfortunately, he is enslaved for over 3 years in the interior desert of Saudi Arabia on a goat farm (masara) at the mercy of a cruel master (arbab). In a way it is the story of the journey, Najeeb makes from incarnation to freedom, including perilous desert voyage.

After translating into English, Benjamin’s novel *Aadu Jeevitham* acquired enormous critical acclaim. The language of the novel helps the reader to visualize a true but strange picture of the trauma and alienation which the protagonist suffers. The simile used in the closing sentence of the novel renders the summing up of the experience of the protagonist during the past 3 years. Najeeb compares the scene of travellers walking toward the flight for their return journey to their homeland to “herding a flock of goats back into a masara” (Daniel 253). Najeeb dehumanizes and identifies himself as another goat. He puts the garb of a goat and walks, eats, behaves, and even thinks like a goat and thus moves far away from the human world. He tries to humanize his goat amigos by giving them names of men and women whom he knows well in his native place. He names the goats by considering their physiognomy character traits or even their slight mannerism. In fact, he asks to the readers: “would you believe me if I told you that in my masara we had goats that laughed like Jagathy walked like Mohanlal, stammered like ‘EMS? (Daniel 169).

Najeeb expects and dreams of a better and glamorous Gulf life, but what he gets is unwelcomed and unbearable hardship. In fact, he says in the novel:

I dreamt a host of dreams. Perhaps the same stock of dreams that the 1.4 million Malayalees in the Gulf had when they were in Kerala. Gold, watch, fridge, TV, car, tape-recorder, videocassette recorder, a Heavy Gold Chain (Daniel 38).

Najeeb once says that in his childhood he often dreamt of being a goat herd. Many prophets including Muhammed and Moses were shepherds for a considerable period in their life. Even the romantic poets loved and cherished this simple, but great profession. Najeeb wished to become another Santiago or Ramanan. Shepherding was, for him, what dreams were made of. However, when he gets the chance of being a shepherd, he painfully realizes the gulf between “hope” and “reality.” He says: “We shouldn’t dream about the unfamiliar and about what only looks good from afar. When such dreams become reality, they are often impossible to come to terms with” (Daniel 124).

Many people like Najeeb desecrate to migrate to foreign lands in search of better monetary conditions. People expect more but what they confront will be far away from reality. The novel’s graphic and insightful description of the life of

migrants in a remote Arabian desert is quite startling. It echoes with reflections of similar brutality that was experienced by innumerable blacks during the transatlantic slave trade in the West. Although legally the institution of slavery was abolished, yet human trade in the form of labor migration continued. Najeeb, the protagonist, dreamt of travelling to Gulf like many of this fellow Malayalees. There were countless employment opportunities in the “oil kingdoms.” However, everything turned upside down. On landing in Riyadh, Najeeb cheerfully exclaimed that “City of dreams, I have arrived. Kindly receive me. Ahlanwasahlan”(Daniel 43). Unfortunately, what he confronted was far away from what he expected about oil kingdoms.

Benjamin’s *Goat Days* is a real-life story about beautiful dreams of the future that goes horribly wrong. As Sreekumar Varma commented in a review of *Goat Days*, published in *The Hindu*. “This isn’t the angst of the intellectual or the dissonance of diaspora; it is the stunned response of an insect as you trample on it, the struggle for survival” (*The Hindu* 13/1). Benjamin mentions that Najeeb was so unwilling to speak about the nightmarish experience he had since he wanted to block the memories of those days. The novel panoramically reveals the pathetic condition of Indian labor diaspora or migrants in economically booming nations so as to inform global as well as local readership of the issues that have been overlooked during the past few decades.

## Notes:

**Simile:** A figure of speech involving the comparison of one thing with another thing of a different kind used to make a description more emphatic or vivid (e.g. as born as a lion).

**Transatlantic slave trade:** The Atlantic slave trade or transatlantic slave trade involved the transportation by slave traders of enslaved African people, mainly from Africa to the Americas, and then their sale there.

**Diaspora:** A diaspora is a scattered population whose origin lies within a smaller geographic locale. It can also refer to the movement of the population from its original homeland.

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