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## **THE GULF DREAM – DEROMANTICIZING DIASPORIC LIFE IN BENYAMIN'S GOAT DAYS**

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### **Abstract:**

The Gulf is considered a promised land for Indians, especially South Indians. The number of Indian migrants in the Gulf states is approximately nine million, and they remit nearly \$40 billion back home. The reasons for this mass migration vary from person to person. However, people usually migrate to the Gulf countries for economic stability, material gains, or employment opportunities. There is also another side to the story. Migration can always be equated with losses—primarily, the loss of loved ones and the motherland, and secondarily, the loss of self-respect and identity. Immigrants must deal with the traumas of leaving home, navigating a new language, and adapting to a new culture. A transformation—cultural and psychological—occurs within a migrant. On the darker side is the continued exploitation of migrants due to an increase in “slave labor,” where workers suffer from low wages, inadequate medical care, and brutal working conditions. Benyamin Daniel, a Bahrain-based Indian writer, in his novel *Goat Days*, meticulously narrates the downsides and challenges of an Indian immigrant’s life in Saudi Arabia. The novel, originally written in Malayalam as *Aadujeevitham*, was translated into English by Joseph Koyippally as *Goat Days* in 2012. The writer highlights the glaring disparity between the hopes nurtured in people’s imaginations by Gulf returnees and the stark reality of their brutal existence in the new promised land of the Gulf countries. The novel is a compilation of the author’s memories and the experiences of the protagonist. This paper focuses on the concept of the Gulf Dream, delving deeper into the psychological and existential crises of a migrant in the Gulf countries. It also aims to highlight the physical and mental trauma experienced by expatriates, along with their feelings of nostalgia and their state of ambivalence.

**Keywords:** Migration, alienation, psychological trauma, existential crisis, dislocation.

### **Introduction**

Migration has become a mass phenomenon as millions of people move from

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one country to another due to unfavorable conditions or to improve their lives. The reasons for this mass migration vary from person to person. In India, especially South India, the Gulf is considered a promised land. It has become a trend to be called a 'Pravasi' (expatriate). In northern Kerala, almost every family has at least one expatriate. People typically migrate to the Gulf countries for economic stability, material gains, or employment opportunities. More than any European country, people prefer the Gulf countries as their promised land.

With the discovery of oil in Arabian soil, many global multinational companies began investing there, creating a demand for various levels of employees. This was a major reason for the mass migration of Indians to the Gulf. India's economic conditions prompted a large number of young people to migrate to Gulf countries for financial upliftment. Even today, many qualified, jobless young people wait to migrate to the Gulf. Benyamin, in his bestseller *Aadujeevitham* (*Goat Days*), tells the heart-wrenching story of such a person. The novel reveals how the common man's conception of the Gulf Dream shatters within just a few days in Saudi Arabia. *Goat Days* is narrated by Najeed Muhammad. When he gets the opportunity to obtain a visa to work in Saudi Arabia in the early 1990s, when the wartime "dust of discord" in the region had subsided, he sees it as a chance to be in a safe zone. Recently married, with his wife four months pregnant, raising a family is difficult with his job as a sand-mining worker. This opportunity allows him to add a room to his house and settle some debts. Though hesitant to leave his homeland and family, the thought of settling debts and securing a happier life motivates him to accept an invitation from one of his brother-in-law's friends.

However, life there is not as he expected. The novel portrays the harsh reality faced by every Pravasi who toils in the desert to support their family. People in the homeland view every Pravasi as a source of income, often unconcerned about the hardships they endure under their rude and cruel sponsors, though not always. Benyamin's novel is a compilation of his personal memories and the protagonist's experiences. Unlike migrants in countries like Europe or America, those in the Gulf countries experience a profound sense of homelessness. They may live in these countries for decades but remain foreigners. Benyamin highlights this psychological trauma and alienation throughout the novel.

### **De-Romanticizing The Gulf Dream**

Benyamin Daniel's *Aadujeevitham* (2008), translated into English by Joseph Koyippally as *Goat Days* in 2012, is a poignant work. The author, who has lived in Bahrain for several years, describes *Goat Days* as a compilation of his own memories and the experiences of the character Najeed. Like many other young people in Kerala, Najeed decides to go to a Gulf country to improve his quality of life and meet the increasing demands of life. The Gulf Dream, akin to the American Dream, sows seeds of an ideal land in the minds of Najeed and his companion Hakeem. However, everything turns upside down when they are taken from the airport to become slaves.

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As the novel progresses, Benyamin describes how Najeeb is constantly tortured and threatened with death by a merciless arbab at his workplace. Finally, Najeeb manages to escape from the masara with the help of Ibrahim Khadiri, a godsend who assists Najeeb and Hakeem in their escape. The long, weary journey through the desert claims Hakeem's life. Najeeb eventually reaches jail and, from there, returns to his homeland.

Benyamin's poignant literary endeavor stands apart from many Indian diasporic writings by shedding light on the miseries faced by labor migrants who travel from India to Gulf countries in search of better employment and financial gains. The insightful description of the lives of these migrants in a remote Arabian desert is unexpected. The novel echoes the brutality experienced by countless Black individuals during the Transatlantic slave trade in the West. Though slavery was legally abolished, human trade in the form of labor migration persists. During the era of British territorial expansion, it was practiced as indentured labor; currently, it is practiced as the 'Kafala' system of labor sponsorship in Gulf countries. Under this modern, inhumane institution of slavery, millions are exploited and tormented, their passports confiscated by their masters, and they are forced into rigorous servitude. *Goat Days* navigates barriers of time and space to highlight the desolation and helplessness of people trapped in this contemporary labor trade. Benyamin portrays the downsides and challenges of an immigrant's life. Beyond exposing common themes of alienation, nostalgia, and homelessness, he discloses the harsh realities of slavery and the psychological disposition of the individual. The tension between remembering and forgetting, and the use of memory as a tool, are notable features of the novel. It also recounts the traumas of leaving home, navigating a new language, and coping with rejection and repression.

The novel is filled with contradictions and ironies. It opens with Najeeb and his friend Hameed waiting in front of a police station in Batha. In the first chapter, the author provides a romanticized account of jails in Saudi Arabia. Both Najeeb and Hameed eagerly await the police to take them to jail. When Najeeb reaches the prison, he experiences a kind of freedom: "I had desperately craved this in the past three or four years—the chance to talk to someone" (Koyippally 15). Life in prison becomes a new kind of freedom for him.

His days in jail also help him realize that he is not the only victim of the darker side of migration. He states, "Everyone who ended up in the jail had a story similar to mine to tell—of pain, sorrow, suffering, tears, innocence, and helplessness" (Koyippally 20). Understanding this fact brings him relief, and he psychologically enjoys the freedom gained in prison. This itself is a contradiction. Nobody wants to be in prison, but Najeeb enjoys it because he was physically, mentally, and emotionally trapped in the masara, which is worse than prison life. He has a fair chance of being released from prison, whereas in the masara, escape is nearly

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impossible, and the fearful presence of uncertainty causes significant psychological stress.

“I too have an arbab of my own. The one who walks in front of me is the custodian of all my dreams, the visible god who will fulfill all my ambitions” (Koyippally 48). The term *arbab* means “savior.” However, as the novel progresses, the reader realizes that the arbab does not fit this description. The arbab is the embodiment of power in *Goat Days*. The fear he instills in Najeed during their first meeting is appalling and capable of silencing him forever. The arbab, the custodian of his dreams, hopes, and future, is not a debonair figure as imagined but a rugged man with a “severe stench.” When Najeed tries to reason with the arbab, he is met with the blood-curdling whoosh of a belt. Starvation and back-breaking work become the norm, even for an unconscious attempt to violate a rule. Anticipating that Najeed might try to escape while herding goats in the wilderness, the arbab exhibits the machinery of subjugation: a pair of binoculars and a double-barreled gun. Escape being a distant dream, Najeed realizes that his life has “become inescapably bound to those goats” (Koyippally 73). The binoculars and gun induce a state of conscious and permanent visibility, aligning with Michel Foucault’s panopticon notion. The major effect of the panopticon is to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that ensures the automatic functioning of power. Thus, power is visible yet unverifiable.

“From that moment, like a 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. The Gulf I had learned about from so many people was not like this. A whiff of danger. Nothing clear” (Benyamin 46). Benyamin portrays a dismantling of the Gulf Dream concept. The Gulf Dream can be considered an Indian version of the American Dream, a vision of a happy life. Many Americans believed it was achievable by anyone in the U.S. through hard work, leading to success, good jobs, a nice house, two children, and plenty of money. The American Dream is the belief that anyone, regardless of their birthplace or class, can attain their version of success in a society where upward mobility is possible. It is achieved through sacrifice, risk-taking, and hard work, not by chance. Similarly, in India, the Gulf Dream has gained prominence. However, Benyamin, through his novel, shows that hard work and risk-taking are not enough to survive in the Gulf. Fate plays a significant role, as emphasized in the novel. In the final chapter, when Najeed learns that the arbab kidnapped both Hakeem and himself from the airport, the reader, along with the narrator, feels a sense of wonder, questioning if that was someone else’s fate that befell them.

The novel clearly illustrates the difference between the illusion of the Gulf Dream and reality. Benyamin uses the dichotomy of illusion to show how the so-called success stories of Gulf returnees create false hope, persuading people to

migrate to Gulf countries. Through Najeeb, he unmasks the promised land and reveals the reality experienced by him and other immigrants who leave their families. Gulf countries, with their oil exports, have risen economically. However, these nations, with limited populations, found it burdensome to hire laborers. They sought workers who would work loyally for meager salaries. This created a demand for laborers and opportunities for unemployed individuals in dire need of work, resulting in mass migration. Gulf returnees often create a false reality of their lives to avoid judgment, fostering the illusion of the Gulf Dream in the minds of millions. Many dream of settling in the Gulf, but it is not as easy as it seems. Though slavery is abolished, it persists in the Gulf, where laborers are enslaved, their conditions dire, and their only dream is to return home alive. Trusting this illusion, they leave their homes to work, only to face the harsh reality of life there, shattering their dreams.

Through Najeeb's story, Benyamin also portrays the psychological trauma experienced by expatriates. Migration brings changes in their social, cultural, and psychological circumstances, often leading to feelings of alienation. They experience disillusionment and loss of identity, gradually leading to psychological trauma where they question their identity. Post-migration stress and negative life experiences are potential sources of anxiety and depression for immigrants in resettlement countries. Alienation is perhaps the most profound psychological consequence for an immigrant. Geographical alienation sets in at the beginning of Najeeb's journey from the airport to the masara. The awe he feels at Riyadh airport fades as the jeep rattles off into the darkness. The nighttime journey alienates him from his surroundings, and he loses track of time and direction. He is uprooted from the space-time continuum, which helps locate oneself. With these dimensions eliminated, Najeeb embarks on a timeless journey into the unknown. An envelope of fear descends, making him uncertain of his future. The sights, smells, and sounds of fertile Kerala contrast starkly with the monotone desert land. Upon reaching the masara, he realizes that the arbab, his custodian, is not a friend but a cruel taskmaster. He has no human contact except the arbab.

Najeeb arrives in Saudi Arabia with the promise of a job as a construction helper but ends up as a shepherd in a highly unhygienic, deserted masara fit only for goats. Isolated from humanity, except for his cruel arbab, he lives on two khubus and a glass of water for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and one thobe—a typical Saudi Arabian men's dress—day after day for three years. He goes hungry as punishment for any wrongdoing. He begins to communicate with the goats, christening them with familiar names from his village, creating a make-believe community with which he identifies. At one point, Najeeb even sleeps with a goat. Living with and like the goats, he loses his human identity, seeing himself as one of them. His identity transforms from a subaltern to a slave, and then to a dehumanized existence.

### **Conclusion**

The novel *Goat Days* by Benyamin traps readers in the heat of the desert, the

stench of cattle, and the absolute submission of a human being to modern slavery. Najeeb's story is not unique. Like millions from South Asia, Najeeb, with hope in his heart and a lack of prospects in his homeland, arrives in the oil-rich Gulf States. In his optimism, he hopes a stint in the desert, away from family and in a completely different environment, will enable him to make a better living and save for his unborn child. The dreams of most Gulf Malayalis—to marry off sisters, buy a fridge, TV, or car, build another room, or save for rainy days—are familiar social aspirations. In this context, it is important to review the reasons for this mass migration from India. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), India is one of the top two source countries (alongside the Philippines) of migrants to the Gulf countries. These migrants are a significant source of income for India through remittances while also contributing to the economic development of the Gulf States. Despite their role in building these economies, immigrant rights are largely ignored. Many suffer under the miseries of Gulf countries, a situation that needs review. Najeeb's three years in the desert tell a tale of dejection, misery, and disillusionment, resulting in physical and mental trauma. Even his existence is in doubt.

In his review of *Goat Days*, critic Shreekumar Varma recounts, "This is the chilling account of extreme subjugation of body and mind, a journey into darkness that could easily lead to defeat or self-annihilation but for the existence of that third entity, the spirit. No one prepared us for this" (Varma). The novel has been interpreted as a symbol of the slave-like life lived by Malayalis in Arab countries.

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