



'HOMELAND: A PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSTRUCT OF ILLUSION AND REALITY'

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ABSTRACT

{The concept of homeland in diaspora is complex and denotes plurality. It is as much a psychological experience as it is a geographical experience. This paper attempts to explore the fluidity of the concept of homeland and the psychological compulsions that define an immigrant's life: the factors that compel him to immigrate being lured by the advantages of the imagined life in the new land set against the realistic practicality of life in his native land.

Najeeb, the protagonist of Benjamin's Goat Days goes through the full circle. A minority Muslim in multi-religious India, hopes and believes that his status would be elevated and that he would be treated as an equal in the Islamic State of The Gulf only to find himself treated like an animal, leading to the dehumanizing of his 'self'. Later, he returns to India, to lead a 'quiet life'. This paper explores the interplay of illusion and reality in the mindscape of Najeeb, who is the representative of all exploited immigrants and who dream to make 'Gulf Land' their home. }

This paper tries to understand the psychological impact of an immigrant's real life situations versus his imagined dreamland through the study of Benjamin's 'Goat Days'. Najeeb, the protagonist of the narrative, is the representative of all exploited immigrants who dream to make 'Gulf Land' their home. Like many other youngsters in Kerala he decides to migrate to improve the quality of life for himself. But, unfortunately he is exposed to the harsh realities of life in an alien land. This paper explores interplay of illusion and reality in the context of the Indian Sub-continent, which is a multi-religious landscape. The paper also gives vivid details of the comprehensive analysis of psychological crisis of the protagonist who is a citizen of the Islamic state and aspires to be treated fairly in an Islamic country. The eventual non-realisation of his dream leads to the dehumanizing of the self.

KEY WORDS: Optimism, Diaspora, Homeland, Reality –Illusion, Identity-dehumanize

An Overview:

Goat Days, the translated best seller *Aadujeevitham (2008)* by Benjamin (Benny Benjamin Daniel) is an account of the ordeal of thousands of poor Keralites working in the Arab countries. Goat Days is based on the real story of Najeeb, a labourer involved in sand-quarrying in Kerala. Tired of a life of utter poverty, Najeeb leaves his home town for Saudi Arabia in the fond hope of earning enough to secure the future of his mother, wife and unborn child. He travels along with Hakeem, a young boy from his home town, to Riyadh. Hakeem and Najeeb is kidnapped by a cruel Arab, and is separated as soon as they reach the desert. On reaching the dreamland Najeeb faces an unexpected twist of his dreams. He is forced to work as a shepherd in the middle of the inhospitable Saudi desert. Hungry, thirsty, humiliated, threatened and mercilessly whipped, he is forced to single handedly take care of



hundreds of goats, sheep and camels. He survives the harsh climatic conditions of the desert without food, shelter, proper clothing, unfamiliar language and no fellow beings to console.

Three years of this life in the desert tells a tale of dejection, misery and disillusionment. Constantly watched over by his master with a gun and a set of binoculars, Najeeb gives up all hopes of escape from the desert prison. However an unexpected shower of rain which makes his master flee in fear gives him the chance to escape and meet his long lost companion Hakeem who was working in the neighbouring goat farm. On a lucky day Najeeb, Hakeem and Ibrahim Khadiri, a Somalian who works with Hakeem escape when their masters leave to attend a wedding. The prisoners run for days and nights without getting caught by other Arabs. However, they lose their way in the endless desert and are in despair. Hakeem surrenders himself to the fatigue and ends up in the desert while Ibrahim is missed by Najeeb. Finally, all by him Najeeb manages to take shelter in Malabar Restaurant run by a compassionate Keralite named Kunjikka. Najeeb is fed, bathed, shaven and clothed there. When he is told that the date is 13th August 1995, he realizes that three years, 4 months and 9 days have passed by since his landing in Saudi Arabia. He is so disfigured that he cannot recognise himself. After some months, on the advice of Kunjikka, Najeeb and another escaped farmer Hameed surrender to the police. Compared to what they had suffered in the desert, the prison turns out to be a safer and luxurious place for them. Their only fear is the weekly identification parade when the Arab employers come in search of their runaway workers. Later, the Indian Embassy offers a free out pass to Najeeb and eighty other Indians trapped in Saudi Arabia who had no legal documents. Accepting, everything to be his divinely ordained inescapable destiny, Najeeb returns home awakened to the truth that the Arab whom he served all the while was not his sponsor.

In his review of 'Goat Days' ShreekumarVarma ,a critic 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 Hindu- Oct 6, 2012).

Though the plot appears to be very straight and simple as presented in the overview, the force of the novel is not the story or the events that move the reader, it is rather the psychological longing for the realisation of the protagonist's dreams of a rich home in another country juxtaposed against the real life he experiences, presented through Najeeb's account that captures the reader's attention.

Therefore, I have presented some important situations which make the reader empathise with the immigrants. The narrator's use of language evokes in the reader compassion, sympathy and empathy being moved by the poignancy of the situation and takes the reader on a psychological journey of the mindscape of Najeeb. The reader gets a hint of the pitfalls and the dangers Najeeb was going to face right from the beginning of the story. There are quite a few indications in the text.



We learn that soon after reaching Riyadh, both Najeeb and Hakeem wait in the airport the whole day long expecting their sponsor to take them to their dreamhome. Najeeb says “I would pleadingly look at the faces of each Arab. I am the Najeeb you are looking for. This small boy with me is the Hakeem that you are looking for. I communicated to everyone with my eyes and with my suppliant posture. But no one heeded my appeal”.

But as no one comes there to take them, even after prayer time, they go to a Malayalam looking airport official and share their plight. The airport official asks them information about the sponsor.. When he asks about the company, the telephone number and anybody whom they knew from their hometown.

This is what Najeeb tells the reader,

“I had no answer:.

I had forgotten to get that (the number from the agent)”:

I did not know anyone “.

From his replies the reader can understand the plight of the innocent, illiterate immigrant and the reader can take this as an indication of the fate of Najeeb and all immigrants in an alien land.

It is ironic to know that instead of getting scared in an alien country, soon after getting assurance from the airport official “ Surely your Arbab will not fail to turn up”, Najeeb is rather charmed by the word ‘ Arbab’ and says “ Come fast, save us from this fear. Arbab! Arbab!”. But it is the very same Arbab who turns out to be his future tormentor.

Later, both Hakeem and Najeeb willingly walk into the trap set by the Arbab the only reason being, their inability to speak in the Arab’s language. Here again the narrator gives a hint to the reader of the likely plight of Najeeb after being taken to his place by the Arbab. Najeeb tells the reader that the Arbab sounded very angry and rude when he asks them whether their name was ‘Abdullah’. Later Najeeb naively says “I had associated Arabs with the fragrance of attar and other perfumes. Hundreds of Arabs had walked past us wafting enticing fragrances. I had joked to Hakeem some time earlier that a new perfume could be made by distilling the urine of the Arabs who use perfumes everyday..... but my Arbab had a severe stench, some unfamiliar stink.” It is here that the reader gets a hint that instead of being given a comfortable life in the Arab country, Najeeb was going to be forced to eke out a living in a Goat House- a Masara.

Najeeb also talks about the dress of the Arabs thus: “While the other Arabs wore well ironed pristine white clothes, my Arabab’s dress was appallingly dirty”. Then we get a glimpse of the Sacrificial Goat Najeeb is going to become when he says “whatever it is an arbab had come for me. I was relieved by that thought. I too have become a Gulf NRI”. The whole situation is so starkly ironical here.The reader can imagine the sacrificial goat willingly and



obediently following the butcher stretching its neck. Look at these lines “The one who walks in front of me is the custodian of all my dreams, the visible God who would fulfil my ambitions”. Nothing can be more poignant than this situation. It’s the juxtaposition of illusion and reality expressed in every word and every situation that makes it a very moving account of a diasporic immigrant.

Next, Najeeb and Hakeem start their journey to their supposed to-be dream land, the Arbab’s place, in a pickup vehicle. Once again the author foregrounds the kind of world that awaits the immigrants when Najeeb describes the pickup vehicle as “an old vehicle-not a car, jeep or lorry”.

The two immigrants travel in the pickup vehicle precariously perched up hours together and move out of the city into the desert area. Najeeb says “When I thought about the hours we had travelled from the city, a fear was kindled in me about the place I had reached. I was chained to that place by that very thought” (GD page 61). Then we get to know that by the time they reach their destination they are extremely tired and hungry and Najeeb confesses “What kind of a journey is this Lord. I cried involuntarily” then he tells the reader that he was becoming aware of the kind of dreamland they were going to be kept in. Even though his intuition tells him the truth Najeeb tells us “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 for”. For the first time he lets the reader know that he had become aware of a change in his dreamland. Najeeb says “The Gulf I had learned about from so many people was not like this. A whiff of danger”

Here we see a transition from puffed up happy feelings to a situation of unknown fear and despair. Later at one point he says “Fear had really taken position of me now, a feeling that I had entered into a dangerous situation”. Then we get a real description of the nature and the place that he was likely to be lodged. At one point he says, “if my arbab lies down in a tent in the middle of the desert, where am I going to stay, the imagery of the desert is strong enough to evoke in the reader feelings of alienation.

The next morning soon after waking up Najeeb says “I smiled at my emptiness. What dreams I had had! An AC car, an AC Room, a soft mattress with a TV in front of it! I laughed. What else could I do in my present condition? No one else could have realised how far my dreams were from the reality of my situation. My first night in the Gulf was such a fiasco.” (GD page no 63)

Next Najeeb tells us about the bleating of hundreds of Goats that woke him up in the morning. This sentence speaks volumes about the plight of the immigrant who is no better than the goats and the lambs that were bleating there.

I have given quite a few instances of the narrator’s technique of juxtaposing illusion and reality so as to present a concrete picture of what an innocent, illiterate immigrant has to face in an alien inhospitable land despite the fact that both the master and the slave pray to the



same Lord. In the next part of my paper I have presented a few concepts related to diasporic literature.

Homeland in Diaspora

The boundary between 'home land' and 'host land' is often blurred in diasporic writing. Most people leave their homeland to migrate to a foreign land with the hope and desire of making a better livelihood for themselves – hopes of a better job that would elevate their status and of course financial security. Over a period of time, the foreign land becomes the homeland as the immigrant begins to assimilate into the new geographical and cultural environment. However, psychologically, one is not completely at home. Simultaneously, the geographical and cultural environment of the homeland becomes alienated. For some others, the challenges are too great to assimilate, and hence, they only survive in an alien land. However, most diasporic literature is about the survivor or the one who thrives through assimilation. We find very few voices that talk about the failed. Here is one such voice that delineates the traumatic experience of Najeeb an Indian immigrant in Saudi Arabia. To escape from his solitary confinement he creates his own imaginary homeland in the Masara where he names each goat with the names of people from his locality like Aravu Ravuthar, Marymaimuna, Njandu Raghavan, Parippu Vijayan, Kausu, Razia, Thahira and public figures like Mohanlal, Jagathy and EMS Namboothiripad. He discovers that a goat's face resembles a human's face. So he pours out his sufferings, emotions and dreams in front of them. He feels they listen to him and even shed tears with him. Not only does he name them by looking at their faces, but also by some character trait, the sounds they make and exclusive incidents that remind him of them. He recalls an incident where a goat attacks him and fractures his hand. He calls the goat, Aravu Ravuthar, after the rowdiest person in the homeland who did the same to Najeeb's father. Later he says 'The logic of names might be lost on others but they made perfect sense to me' (Pg. 162) Here I would like to quote Salman Rushdie who in his essay 'Imaginary Homeland' recounts 'But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge which gives rise to profound uncertainties- that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost, that we will in short create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, India's of the mind' (pg 10)

We find very few voices that talk about the failed. Here is one such voice that delineates the traumatic experience of Najeeb an Indian immigrant in Saudi Arabia. The conception of homeland for Najeeb is further complicated, because he is a minority Muslim in multi-religious India. As a Muslim he is leading the life of a marginalized. Besides yearning for recognition, he also dreams of being treated an equal in the Islamic state. So we see that even in his 'homeland' he is alienated. And in Saudi Arabia, his hope crashes as he experiences extreme inhuman treatment, and his life is reduced to that of a goat/cattle... So Saudi Arabia doesn't become his homeland, but a land that dehumanizes him. So which is his homeland now? In times of communal warfare, is life on the fringes all that a minority Muslim can hope for in India?



Just as Najeeb's idea of homeland hovers between illusion and reality, so does his **identity** in the Masara. He comes here with the promise of job as a helper in a construction site, but ends up as a shepherd in a highly unhygienic, deserted Masara fit only for sheep. He is isolated from all humanity, except his cruel, inhuman Arbab. He lives on 2 khubus and a glass of water for breakfast, lunch and dinner and one thob- a dress of the typical Saudi Arab man-day after day, for three years. He has to go hungry as punishment for any wrong-doing. He begins to communicate with the goats, christening them with familiar names back in his village and creates a make-believe community with which he can identify. Living with the sheep, and living the life of a sheep, he soon loses his identity of being a human. He sees himself as one among the sheep...a sheep himself. So his identity transforms from being a subaltern, to a slave and then to a de-humanized existence.

Alienation is perhaps the most profound psychological consequence of an immigrant. Geographical alienation sets in right at the beginning, during Najeeb's journey from the airport to the Masara. The awe he feels when in Riyadh begins to fade away as the jeep rattles off into the darkness. The journey at night alienates him from his surroundings. He doesn't have any idea of what direction he is travelling. He also loses track of time from this point onwards. He is uprooted from the space and time continuum. Space and time are two dimensions that help us locate ourselves. With these two eliminated, Najeeb is on a timeless journey into the unknown. An envelope of fear descends on Najeeb, suddenly he becomes uncertain of his future. The sights and smells and sounds of fertile Kerala contrasts starkly to the monotone dessert land. Upon reaching the Masara he also realizes that the Arbab, his custodian, is no friend, but only a cruel, taskmaster. He has no human contact, except his Arbab.

Conclusion

Thus this paper has made an attempt to present how the narrator has used language effectively juxtaposing illusion and reality to portray the journey of a naive and illiterate Muslim young man named, Najeeb from his safe homeland to an alien hostile landscape hoping to make it rich and how the journey turns out to be a transition from puffed up ambition to accepting crude reality as divinely ordained. In the process the reader gets a dip into the mindscape of the protagonist, his poignant suffering and the cruelty of Arabs. In "Goat Days" Najeeb is a typical representative of a diasporic immigrant though the kind of sufferings an immigrant is likely to face may vary from person to person, situation to situation and from country to country.

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