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## Dismantling the popular “Gulf Dream” stereotype: A reading of *Goat Days* as a modern slave narrative

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### ABSTRACT

The initial wave of mass migration of Malayalis, from the Indian state of Kerala, to the Middle Eastern Arab states of the Persian Gulf from 1972 to 1983 is termed as the “Kerala Gulf boom”. Ever since then a myth was in making regarding Kerala’s economy and its key source of income-remittances. Gulf migrants, many of whom were from the working and the lower-middle classes, gradually gained social status which led to the popular belief of the 'Gulf man' being affluent. These gulf dreams have also found its expression in various Malayalam cinema and literature. The objective of this paper is to portray a contrary perspective to this popular belief amidst Keralites on the subject of pravasi (the expatriate) through Najeeb, the protagonist of the novel *Goat Days* written by Benyamin. The paper aims to explore this alternate world that the protagonist of Benyamin’s book encounters. Based on an oral account of a real survivor, Benyamin challenges these “gulf dreams”. The paper will study the symbolism of the goat, the trials of the exile and his gradual disintegration of selfhood and dreams.

**Keywords:** alternate, pravasi, gulf dreams

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### I

Starting from the late 1950s, the discovery of large oil deposits in the Persian Gulf triggered a massive demand for labour. Given the historical ties and the massive unemployment initiated by the second communist government in 1967 of Kerala, the Malayalees to migrate to gulf countries as a mass phenomenon. This initial wave of mass exodus of people in search of jobs from the Indian state of Kerala, to the Middle Eastern Arab states of the Persian Gulf particularly noted from 1972 to 1983 is termed as the “Kerala Gulf boom”.

Ever since then a myth was in making regarding Kerala’s economy and its key source of income-remittances. Gulf migrants, many of whom were from the working and the lower-middle classes, gradually gained social status which generated the popular belief of the 'Gulf man' being affluent. The “Gulf” was seen as the land which fulfils one’s economic aspirations, enhances one’s opulence. Those from the Gulf were hence seen as “rich”, prosperous, with infinite buying power. Hence Gulf migrants were highly sought after as bridegrooms. Their attractive earnings, irrespective of their shortcomings, enabled them to marry into wealthy and respected families when they returned home.

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Despite Gulf Malayalees' contribution to the economy in a major proportion, they did not get the proper representation in popular culture that they deserved. Gulf Malayalees have been stereotypically portrayed in Malayalam literature and films as nouveau riches who brag about their newly found wealth and their changed social position. Movies like *Akkare Ninnoru Maran*, *Nadodikkattu*, etc can be mentioned as example to the depiction of Gulf as a phantasmic presence for almost the entire late 20th century Malayalam film. *Akkare Ninnoru Maran* showed the struggles of a poor young man who had to pretend to have returned from the Gulf in order to marry his rich uncle's daughter. On the other hand, *Nadodikkattu* portrayed the protagonists who had dreamt about the bright and luxurious life ahead in Dubai to be victims in the hands of the visa agent.

The objective of this paper is to challenge this "gulf dream" stereotype by exploring the alternate world of slavery in the gulf that the protagonist, a lower class malayalee Najeeb Muhammad, of Benyamin's book *Goat Days* encounters.

## II

*Goat Days* is a translation of the famous Malayalam novel *Aadujeevitham* (2008) based on real-life events about an abused migrant worker named Najeeb Muhammad in Saudi Arabia written by Bahrain-based Indian author Benyamin (Benny Daniel). *Goat Days* explores the alternate world which many unknown Malayalees encounter and aims to create an eye opener to those with 'gulf dreams'. Initially the narrative doesn't seem much as a slave narrative but once he arrives in Saudi Arabia it becomes a slave narrative. Najeeb is an average lower middle-class Muslim from Kerala who wants to earn some quick money, pay off his debts and provide a comfortable life for his family. When he arrives at Riyadh airport, wide-eyed and enthusiastic, he is kidnapped and dumped in the masara, a goat farm in the middle of the Saudi desert, at the mercy of a brutal arbab (sponsor). There he is used as a "slave" labourer and shepherd and is assigned to look after goats for almost three and half years.

Slave narratives are accounts of the lives of former slaves, either written or orally related by the slave personally on the accounts of slavery under the white master. As autobiography or as fiction these narratives give voice to generations of black people's struggles, sorrows, trauma, aspirations and triumphs. Though slavery has been legally abolished in different parts of the world, we find that the protagonist in this novel of Benyamin is subjected to dehumanizing and slavish working conditions as mentioned in slave narratives.

Slave narrators explain their misery stemmed from their having been transported from Africa to America forcefully in many of the slave narratives. But contrary to that, in *Goat days*, Najeeb's was a voluntary migration to the Middle East. Despite this difference one can see a number of parallels between Najeeb's story and slave narratives. The treatment of slaves by their white masters in the slave narratives are depicted as brutal and degrading. This depiction of master – slave relationship as seen in slave narratives can be observed in *Goat Days* too where Najeeb as a slave suffers and survives the beatings, backbreaking work, the imprisonment, the stark meals of bread and water, and the fear of death in the hands of his master or arbab if he tries to escape. In the beginning of the novel, Najeeb regards his Arbab as the custodian of all his dreams, the visible god who would fulfill his ambitions or his saviour. But gradually after experiencing the severity or reality of the desert life, Najeeb's realisation grew and festered that his Arbab and the paradise desert were far different from the vague and superficial stories he heard from other gulf

malayalees. In the desert reality of the Gulf, Najeeb and his arbab's relationship becomes increasingly like the the master- slave relationship in African-American slave narratives.

The descriptions of Najeeb's helplessness, the arbab's violence, the degeneration of Najeeb's body and selfhood and Najeeb's gradual disintegration of dreams from economic betterment to impoverished disillusionment due to his deadly desert life diminish the concept of 'gulf Dream' within the readers.

Slave narrators often portray slavery as a condition of extreme physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual deprivation, a kind of hell on earth. Benyamin's novel similarly depicts Najeeb's confinement, his fear, mental agony, and physical torture. The gun and binoculars- both these objects instil fear in Najeeb to the extent that he succumbs to his Arbab's brutal abuse in the desert.

Similar to many of the enslaved Africans away from their homeland, Najeeb in the novel is portrayed as a man who doesn't know language, places or people of the Gulf. He is thrown violently into the midst of multiple isolations like he is isolated from language, isolated from geography, and isolated from people, other than his arbab. He is isolated even from water which constructs Najeeb as an alienated character amidst the harsh desert environment, away from any human interaction. Najeeb thereby steadily starts to identify himself with the goats and humanizing them in turn. In this we see Najeeb's complete loss of self- hood and how like the helpless goat his body too is being persecuted to be sacrificed for the economic advancement of the Arbab. His longing in the prison to be deported back to his native soil as soon as possible can be all related to the trauma of slavery within him which he is burdened to carry on for a lifetime. In this alienation he gives names of his relatives in his homeland to his goats, this can also be seen as his attempt to survive alienation.

It is noticeable that Benyamin's *Goat Days* is not only about the dehumanizing condition of Najeeb but also about his resistance and rebellion against his own slavery. Najeeb resists and rebels against the dehumanizing conditions of his solitary confinement by virtue of his inner psychological strength, adaptation and strong faith in God, and by virtue of his resolve to live and return home. Najeeb's resistance can also be seen in narrating this experience. Benyamin's book gives testimony to this oral tale, which otherwise would have remained unknown.

### III

One of the reasons behind the construction of ' gulf dream' stereotype was that the writers who had not any first hand or lived experience of the intricacies of gulf migration influenced the mainstream Malayali to look at the Gulf Malayali as an affluent man or as a comic figure in literature and film. But Benyamin's *Goat days* can be considered as an example to prove that once the Gulf Malayalees started representing themselves through their narratives, the Gulf Dream stereotype constructed by other writers started to diminish because *Goat Days* explores the life of Gulf Malayalees with an insider's consciousness that was sensitive to the lived experience of the migrant population in the Gulf. Through the narration of the life of Najeeb, the protagonist of *Goat Days*, Benyamin negotiates with the stereotypical image of the pravasi in the Malayalam literary milieu.

Recounting his meeting with the real-life Najeeb, Bennyamin reminisces: "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. Usually we only hear of stories of success from the Gulf. But I wanted to talk about the many who lead lives of suffering and pain." Consequently we as readers right from the beginning of the novel identify that Najeeb lives to recount the suffering of his slavery and Bennyamin voices it. *Goat Days* thus becomes the untold story of many Malayalees in the Gulf.

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