
DIASPORIC IDENTITY AND THE PALIMPSESTS OF THE SELF: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORA IN BENYAMIN'S GOAT DAYS AND EMS AND A LITTLE GIRL

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Abstract

“The soul of Diaspora writing lies in the erasure of identity or rather, in the formation of an identity that is neither here nor there”. So writes Benyamin, a renowned Diasporic writer of Malayalam, possibly the first among his diasporic contemporaries to receive critical and public acclaim back in his homeland. The writer, a native of Kulanada, resides in the Gulf region of Asia, where a large number of Indian diaspora live. He works there for a private company and thus he forms the prototypical representative of the Kerala diaspora. This paper endeavours to form a critique of Benyamin's *Goat Days (Aadujeevitham)* and *EMS and a Little Girl (EMSumOruPenkuttyum)* as writings that confront the identity crises faced by South Asian Diaspora. In *EMSumoruPenkuttyum*, an anthology of short stories, different narratives differentiate between Diasporic life of both the political refugees and the migrant workers, in a way that would make one rethink the Diasporic stereotypes. *Aadujeevitham* speaks of the oft-unspoken aspect of migrant life, where one is forced to shed all his humanity and self-respect, in order to provide support and sustenance with his family back home. The paper further endeavours to unravel the different layers of identity crisis and socio-political turmoil that the diaspora goes through, and thereby reinstate the status of diaspora as that of a multi-layered flux of identities as opposed to the stereotypical reading of the community as the *nouveau riche*, socially elite class.

Keywords: Diasporic Writing, Middle East, Political Immigration, Economic Immigration, Identity Crisis, Palimpsestic Identities, Homosacer

Introduction

The History of travels and its retellings have also been the history of Literature. Ever since the primordial exodus from the cradle land of Africa to various parts of the world, humanity has continually travelled across lands unfamiliar and this has been part of the universal experience of humankind. The aims of the earliest exoduses may have been varied as compared to economic migration, be it for 'greener pastures', trade and commerce, or for safer places of dwelling.

As humanity spread across various land masses and settlements grew into civilizations in regions like the Middle East, East Asia, and the Indian Subcontinent; stories that emanated from their common experiences, now spread across the world, is something studied by Russian formalists like Vladimir Propp who link the commonalities in literature to shared myths and folktales. The stories of lands and creatures unknown fill the early kinds of literature and mythologies of the world. These were stories that speak of wonders of the 'other' land and the velour of the traveller.

The modern history of migrant life of Indians is as old as the Indian state itself, and presently the remittance sent by Non-Resident Indians amount to US dollars 68.9 billion which is about 25 per cent of Indian government's total plan expenditure (Bellman). A major portion of Indian emigrants (not immigrants) are currently placed in the Gulf region, most of whom are not settlers of the land and are bound to return to their parent nation.

The Indian outlook towards Non-Resident Indians, especially from the Gulf, have been evident in the stereotypes of the migrant Indian as evidenced in the various portrayals of Gulf returnees as that of *nouveu riche*, pompous and kitschy men who marry lascivious or arrogant women who force them to forsake their roots (Menon).

The Keralite writer, Benyamin, is a critically acclaimed Malayalam writer, who himself is an economic migrant in Bahrain. His writings are hailed to have transcended the stereotypical depictions of Non-Resident Indians and to have delved into the intricacies of their peculiar crises. His writings have indeed "deromanticised the diasporic life" (Rajasekharan and Jose). This study aims to look at his most acclaimed novel, *Aadujeevitham* (translated by Joseph Koikkal as *Goat Days*) and his anthology of short stories titled, *EMSumoruPenkuttiyumto* engage with the various voices within individual characters in these works.

Aadujeevitham, which is based on a real incident, narrates the tale of Najeeb, an economic migrant who reaches the gulf in hopes of supporting his family back in Kerala and is tricked into being a slave of a cruel farm owner, whom he calls *Arbab*. He is made to spend his days with the animals whom he must bathe, graze and feed. While coming to terms with the heinous conditions at the place, Najeeb realizes that much like his predecessor at the farm, he had indeed lost his humanity and had become "a horrendous animal" (Benyamin "Aadujeevitham" 139). The narrative shows how the traumatic experience at the farm, transforms the protagonist to shed his self and become sub-human, as evidenced by the illustration of Najeeb on the cover

of the novel (fig. 1).

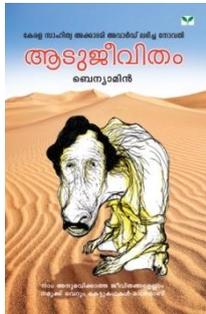


Figure 1: The cover of the novel *Aadujeevitham*

EMSumoruPenkuttiyum (*EMS and a Girl*) is an anthology of short stories in which the stories titled *EMSumoruPenkuttiyum* and *Kumar Devi* (Kumari, the Goddess) speaks of the lives of migrant communities in the Gulf region. The former story deals with the life of a woman, who was exiled from her land by her relatives and religious community for failing to become a ceremonial Goddess for them. Although she passed all the tests set by the community, she had reached sexual maturity and started her menstruation cycle right before the enthronement ceremony and was hence rejected. Having been ostracized and rejected, she travels to the Gulf and works as a home maid, having to hide her past and identity from everyone around her. The tale ends with her dreams unrealized as she deported to her 'homeland' due to visa irregularities.

The latter story, speaks of PakavuSayang, an Asian American who refuses to play along with the elaborate pre-wedding rituals of her community and tries to lead her own life as an American. She belongs to the Mon community, who were exiled from China and underwent further hardships in Vietnam, a community that clings on to their ancient culture and practices which they try to preserve even in the foreign land, which in this case is the United States of America. The crises that an immigrant/exiled community faces in a foreign nation, especially as they struggle to impart their identity and history or to educate their offspring of it forms crux the story...

Diaspora, a term originally used to denote the exiled Jews around the world, has come to denote both the exiled migrants and economic migrants from different parts of the globe. The movement has been studied on their identity formation, sense of belonging and dislocation, attempts of remaking the home etc. Postcolonial writers such as V.S. Naipaul speaks of the loss of identity and history in his essay *A Turn in the South*. Identity is in a way the power of an agency to create and express one's self is perhaps the true underlying cause for Diasporic writings. Diasporic writers like Benyamin, in contemporary times, have tried to make use of the agency to form an identity of themselves through realistic representations of themselves.

Jacques Derrida writes, by "adventuring outside oneself towards the unforeseeably-other" (as qt. in Nancy 87), a being is moving into "the impossibility of return to the same". This impossibility of a return looms upon the diasporic beings. This is the biggest crisis that the diaspora faces. Any attempts to return to an 'original' fails and ends up in a further clash within themselves.

The Moratorium of Migrant Lives

The moratorium is a concept of identity developed by Eric Erikson. It is the state of a person who explores different identities but is unable to commit to any of these explored identities (Erikson 'What is identity crisis?'). The migrant is constantly forced to renew himself/herself in his/her attempts to survive in the new land. This is the primary crises that many of Benyamin's characters undergo. Be it Najeeb in *Aadujeevitham*, Kumari in *Kumari Devour the Mong* community in *EMSumoruPenkuttiyum*, they all go through the state of Moratorium, as they experiment with multiple identities without affixing one as permanent or final.

Najeebdons his various identities by shedding own human self and by becoming one with the goats at Mascara, the farmland. He is playing through his identities as a way of surviving his life there. It is interesting to note here that the master of the farm never addresses Najeeb by his own name. His identity is lost in the vast expanse of desert which has engulfed him and has kept him as a dehumanized being - a homosacer in Giorgio Agamben's terms (Buchanan 233). Kumari, on the other hand, dons the mantle of *Devi* and other selves knowingly, to celebrate her loss and to play the role of *Devi* as wish fulfilment. Her flurry between the identities is perhaps a coping mechanism to come to terms with the life, that she is presently leading and the one that she aspired to have. Throughout her life, she engrosses several challenging identities to survive to shed her homeland identity, return to 'homeland' that is no longer hers only to face stigma and shame.

The Mong community is perhaps least interested in any alteration of identities but the subsequent generation willingly takes up and accept a new identity. At heart, they protest and question the need for superstitious and premodern practices or rituals. Both the generations are torn and lost between the two worlds of the old and the new.

Palimpsests of the Exiled Identities

The experiences of exile vary greatly from the experiences of economic migration. Unlike the Indian migrants to the Gulf, the larger migrant population from other Asian countries are the influx of political refugees - the resultant of political instability in their homelands. The challenges that a refugee faces in the Gulf region is of self-reclusion of identity and seclusion from the political turmoils of the new land. In that sense, the refugee dons a new identity suppressing his/her past identity.

Thus the term, *palimpsest*, becomes especially relevant while speaking of the identity crisis faced by the political refugee. A palimpsest is a parchment that has been used multiple times, where the former writings were erased but faint markings remain from the past.

The present identities of the political exiles are in constant struggle with the past. While the economic migrants celebrate and perpetuate their history and past, the political exiles struggle within and showcase themselves as the 'other'.

The characters showcase the *palimpsestic* nature of migrant identities, be it be Kumari, the exiled with the double life, as the "arrogant" maid or as 'Devi' to the Nepali diaspora, or Najeeb who visualises himself as a "horrendous animal" - one among the sheep - to survive. The revelation that Kumar is not the Devi adds to the quagmire of reinventions that the character undergoes. She is thus, neither an everyday maid nor the Devi, as both were the self-disguised identities taken up for her survival, though this pretension never stopped her from boasting in front of employers for having enjoyed the admiration and power as a *Devi*. Her attitude, appearance, and dressing accessories prove (to the readers) that she contently never shed her assumed identity as the *Devi*.

Lost Identities of the Exiled

To forgo one's communal identity is the greatest crisis than an exiled community faces. The crisis is aggravated with the conflicting old and new generation of exiles. The insistence of parents to stick to the native culture and the conflict of the second generation who never completely native of the new land nor connected to the life of their forefathers form the crux of Benyamin's story *EMSumoruPenkuttiyum*.

PakavuSayangis a second generation member belonging to the Mong community who were exiled from China and living as exiles all around the world. While living in Vietnam, the community was used by the American army to wage battle against the communists there. However, as the US withdrew from the Vietnam war, the Mongs were left there to die in the hands of the communist government. A fortunate few were given the citizenship by the US government in honour of their military services with which they came to the United States while the rest perished.

The community tradition dictates that the groom must abduct the prospective bride, who is then forcefully kept at his house, only after which the families would conduct their weddings. Pakavu however, rebelled and asked the help of the narrator to abscond with her actual boyfriend. She is never to be found again, as she fades into the melting pot of cultures in the US. She must be equally under trauma over the pressure of having to fit in her ethnic culture as well as the foreign culture in which she was born into.

Personal trauma is posited against the failing attempts of the community to keep themselves true to their past. The family is devastated by Pakavu's refusal to come to terms with the community's rituals. In the words of her groom, "The Mongs are those who have lost everything. All that is left for us to call our own is our rituals. Shouldn't we safeguard that at least? How else shall we remain as what we are?" (Benyamin EMS 3732).

The elders of the family lament the loss of their native land and the long for a return. The

vanishing of Pakavu into the American life and culture aggravates their sense of landlessness. As figures like Pakavufades into the American life, forcing others fiercely cling on to their communal selves as the last piece of their treasured past.

Migrant Experience as the Erasure of Self

The traumatic life of a migrant labourer as evidenced through the life of Najeeb, who is indeed made to go through erasure of not just his personal identities, but rather his humanity as a whole. While working as a migrant 'slave' to the *Arbab*, the Arabic word for master, Najeeb's life amongst the goats, reaches a point where he feels that he is one with the goats. There is a moment in the novel when Najeeb tries to have intercourse with one of the goat. That is the point of his complete shedding of humanity and the embracing of the 'animalness'.

The self-identity of Najeeb is brutally slaughtered by his present trauma. His essence of existence being ceased to metamorphosis into a newly adopted 'self'. In his words,

What do you think I wanted most during my first summer in the desert?", Najeeb asks, Freedom? Water? Good food? Seeing my child?...No none of these. My fervent desire was to sit in a bit of shade for some time. You can imagine my sufferings if that were what I dreamt of and longed for! (Benjamin Adujeevitham 198)

He responds by banishing his memories of the past and thereby truly reinventing the self. His attempts to forgo of his past in the face of immediate necessities is evidenced in the lines. The cover of the first edition of the Malayalam novel depicts a humanoid figure that is physically disfigured having a hunchback with a face that resembles a goat is indeed a stark reminder of the psychological turmoil that the protagonist went through. The horrendous creature shown on the cover is indeed the creature that the narrator says that Najeeb has, in a *Kafkaesque* fashion, turned into in his attempt to overcome the turmoils of the migrant life.

Najeeb finds solace and refuge in the animals that he is rearing. As he has to graze the goats over long stretches of land, his days and even nights were spent in their company. He gives them names that relate to his past, his former lovers or politicians. He picks a goat and considers him to be his son, who is given the name Nabeel gets preferential treatment. As he becomes close to the goats, the division between the goats and his blur and "I had become a goat", becomes a frequent train of thought. He identifies with the goats because they, like him, "lack all agency and are at the mercy of the temper and knife" (Nair). Najeeb's the butcher of these goats as well, he has to go through the experience of loss all over again as he butchers them, including the goat named Nabeel.

In the process of killing, he completes his transformation as a dehumanized being as he butchers all that he considered dear. The return to humanity can be seen in his spiritual rebirth that takes place during his trek through the desert to reach civilization. Thus the transformation of identities from a naïve migrant to a slave and an animal is one in which the former self is

erased and upon his escape, a new man is created out of these experiences rather than it being a return to his pre-migrant self.

Conclusion

The identity crises that a migrant goes through in a foreign land are well captured in these three texts. The works posit that there is never indeed a true identity to be unveiled nor are the identities a mask worn in pretence. They are thus not masks but palimpsests. The identities are the result of circumstances, situations and the zeitgeist as they get written, erased and rewritten, with each rewriting leaving an indelible mark on the individual. Najeeb is no more the Najeeb of the pre-migrant days, in spite of his initial yearnings for a return, he himself comes to terms with his palimpsestic identity towards the end of the novel. Kumari too leaves her migrant life with stoic resistance towards the sufferings that she will come across in her supposed 'homeland'. Even as the Mongs cling on to a past that is no more, they are no more the same, the exile had made them closer to their homelands than the life there must have.

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