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Trapped in the System: Interpreting Benyamin's Goat Days through Lee's Push-Pull Theory

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Abstract: Benyamin's *Goat Days* is a well-renowned Indian novel that revolves around migration, an act of moving from the home country to a destination for living. The story represents the real voice of an Indian Malayali migrant, Najeeb Muhammed, who migrates from Kerala (Origin) to the Gulf (Destination). The article titled "Trapped in the System: Interpreting Benyamin's *Goat Days* through Lee's Push Pull theory" aims to explore the push and pull factors concerned with Najeeb's migration and to highlight the intervening obstacles and the personal factors he endured in the act of migration (Kerala to the Gulf). The researcher examines the realities of migration through Everett Lee's push-pull theory by spotlighting the character Najeeb's migration. This study examines the socio-economic forces that push and pull migrants, the intervening obstacles migrants endure, and the personal factors that depend on Individual experiences in the place of Destination. It also underscores that migration is not a uniform experience but is deeply shaped by intersecting mythologies and societal beliefs. This paper cites *Goat Days* as an effective novel that gives voice to the muted struggles of migrants while pointing out that migration is a mere trap where dreams are broken in the name of opportunity.

Keywords: Migration, Struggles, Reality, Dream, and Emotions.

Introduction

Benny Daniel, a well-known Malayali writer from Kerala, authored the work under the pen name 'Benyamin.' He has authored nearly 30 books across various genres, among them, the most sensational novel is *Aadujeevitham* (2008), which brought him to light and earned him the Abu Dhabi Sakthi Award, the JCB Prize, and the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award. The novel, originally written in Malayalam, was published by Green Books (2008), was then translated into English by Joseph Koyippally in 2012, published by Penguin Books (2012), and received global acclaim. In 2014, Director Blessy shaped this masterpiece into a movie, *The Goat Life*. The novel is penned based on the personal narrative of a man named Najeeb Muhammed, who migrated from Kerala to the Gulf in hopes of improving his life and escaping the economic crisis. He dreamt of leading a happy life by earning in the Gulf, but his dream soon turned into a nightmare. His story reflects not only his suffering but also that of countless other migrants, whose dreams of a better life are overshadowed by harsh realities.

Exploring Goat Days: A Glimpse

The storyline is based on an Indian migrant, Najeeb Muhammad, who had a strong desire to find better employment in the Gulf to earn a huge amount of money to settle his dues and provide his family with a secure future. However, his dream became a nightmare when he arrived in Saudi Arabia. Najeeb and his fellow companion, Hakeem, were forcefully taken by a local agent, Arbab, to a goat farm far out in the desert. The very moment, Najeeb understands that his life has turned abominable for him. He is held captive in the desert, surrounded by goats and camels, as his only companions. Human contact is prohibited, and he is isolated with the herd as his friend. Over time, he develops a strange kind of affection for the goats in his isolation. Najeeb has faced unimaginable struggles, working on various jobs in the barren desert, barely surviving miserably and in silence.

The novel is divided into four parts. The first part, Prison, is about Najeeb and Hakeem's voluntary surrender to the police and their imprisonment. They perceived the prison as a "disaster relief camp" (Benyamin 15) and even considered it a place of freedom compared to all the sufferings and struggles they endured. The second part, Desert, shows the Arbab's oppression and exploitation of Najeeb. He was isolated and haunted by the memories of his homeland. Often, he wished to die, but he survived with the hope of freedom. He developed a kind of relationship with the goats by recognizing them as his native neighbors. In the third part, Escape, Najeeb attempted to escape from the miserable place but was caught and punished terribly. Although he fails multiple attempts, eventually he succeeds in escaping. But he suffered all the way while he left the masara. He roamed for two days in the barren desert without water, food, and under the boiling sun. The final part, Refuge, highlights

Najeeb's transition from captivity in the boiling place to the heavenly prison, where he felt free, which he had longed for. This novel depicts his journey from Captivity to freedom.

Caged across the Border: Dreams to Nightmare

To analyze and bring out the push and pull factors connected with Najeeb's migration journey, the researcher utilizes the Push and Pull theory of migration, formulated by Everett Lee in his article titled "A Theory of Migration" (1966). Migration is a process of moving from the origin to a destination; the journey may be permanent or semi-permanent. It points out that migration happens as a consequence of two aspects: Negative (Repelling) factors associated with the place of origin and positive (Attractive) factors related to the place of destination. (Faridi) The decision and the process of migration involve four factors to mark the cause, such as Push factors, Pull factors, Intervening Obstacles, and Personal Factors. (Lee 50)

Push factors are completely concerned with their place of origin, where they are prone to face troublesome situations, and are reluctant to deal with them throughout their life. In the novel *Goat Days*, the case was of Najeeb, who had been forced to endure financial troubles and unemployment in his country. Like all others in his origin, he also dreamed of earning a handful to make his family's living better. But never provided with a high-earning job, instead a temporary job with low wages in sand mining out of the river, which is also rumored to be closed. This long-lasting attempt to strive for a finer job to promote his living is replicated through his utterance, "How long have I been here, diving for a living?" (Benyamin 35) He was deeply in sorrow and clouded with the thoughts of Hunger, unemployment, debts, his pregnant wife, and their unborn child. Hunger, Poverty, and adjusting to low-life circumstances are not new ones for him, but now he is married and soon to be a father, which is shown through the line "I have, in the past. But things are different now." (Benyamin 35) As he was the sole breadwinner of his family, he was awaiting the chance to thrive. So, he decided to migrate to the Gulf to fulfill his responsibilities and provide a finer life for his pregnant wife and his unborn child, which he had never experienced in his lifetime.

Pull Factors are the appeal that influences individuals to migrate to a destination where they believe they can acquire a stress-free life. Here, Najeeb has always dreamed of having a life with secure employment and income, to settle all his debts, and to add a room to his small home, as he welcomes his new family member. It was a widespread idea that whoever goes abroad settles well, which strikes Najeeb as the only way to lead a happy life, to work in the Gulf for some period. This belief has never faded among the people even to date. When the opportunity knocked on his door to migrate to the Gulf, Najeeb, without hesitation, agreed to step out, as he

believed in the widespread belief of his surroundings. Once he paid half of the amount to process a visa, he was over the cloud, which is evident here, “Perhaps the same stock dreams that the 1.4 million Malayalis in the Gulf had when they were in Kerala.” (Benyamin 38) His process of visa and journey to an unknown country is not yet confirmed, but he dreamt a count of dreams about buying a TV, AC, gold watch, VCP, car, Fridge, tape recorder, and a heavy gold chain. The entire night, in the darkness, he lit up his wishes to Sainu, his wife, and their future together with the unborn child. Najeeb had never experienced living with these luxuries, so he wanted his wife and unborn child to experience this without facing the difficulties he had endured in his past.

Intervening Obstacles are the struggles and difficulties that an individual faces while migrating from their origin to their destination. Najeeb, raised high in happiness, was also haunted by thoughts of arranging money for the visa process, once he heard the words of his friend, which are quoted here, “If money is sent, the visa will arrive within two months” (Benyamin 36). Najeeb had faced a financial crisis in processing the formalities to migrate to the Gulf. His friend demanded thirty thousand, twenty for the Arbab (Master) to arrange his visa, and ten for the agent. Though he was alarmed by his financial crisis, he agreed to pay for it. He faced several hardships in obtaining the needed amount, through mortgaging his house, selling his wife Sainu’s Jewelry, and borrowing money from others. The financial breakdown was not the only obstacle he had faced, but also leaving his wife and the unborn child. Somehow, he managed to overcome all the obstacles and waited for his day to step out of Kerala and the day to get to the Gulf.

Personal Factors are related to the individual hardships that they encounter in the place of destination. With a full heart, Najeeb entered the city of Bombay and waited for his Arbab with much anticipation. He says, “City of my dreams, I have arrived. Kindly receive me. Ahlan wa Sahlan!” (Benyamin 43) At the very blissful moment, Najeeb never realized that his life was going to be hell from now on. The first thing Najeeb encountered was his arbab’s anger, thirst, hunger, and inhuman treatment by separating him from his companion Hakeem, dragging him, and forcing him into the Masara (Goat Farm). “A man sat on it, with bowed head. Seeing that figure, I was petrified.” (Benyamin 60) Najeeb had no idea that he had come to work along with him and was going to face the same hardships and nightmares. He had not been provided with basic needs to clean his teeth, no bathroom for his natural concerns, and no water to wash himself, barely gets clean water to drink, usually goat water and khubus (Bread), for almost two years of his stay, before he escapes. He was made to wear a stinking cloth and boots, and to work throughout the day without rest. Najeeb’s captivity is conveyed in his single line of words, “Mine is a

goat's life." (Benyamin 181) He almost had the life of a goat in the desert, where he barely lived his human life and desired death to find the way to him. At last, he and Hakeem set out to escape with the help of Ibrahim, a co-worker of Hakeem. Throughout, they endured harsh sun rays, thirst, hunger, fear of getting caught, fear of death, and had no idea how to find the path in the darkness. They roamed in the desert like 'stray dogs.' (Benyamin 198) They were blanked out to move to the directions, whether right or left, east or west, north, or south. They were frightened of all the things they encountered, and the sense of fear haunted them completely.

Najeeb's journey of migration marks the poignant truth that lies behind the widespread myth that migrating abroad would provide employment and a financially stable life. The main driving forces that serve as the reason for migration are push factors, including financial crisis, unemployment, societal myth, and societal pressures for betterment in life, and pull factors, including stable high income, employment, social status, and a carefree life. These pull factors are the illustrations that deceive people with the glamorous vision of the destination. Out of which, Najeeb encounters intervening obstacles like deception, debts, and Personal factors, like Isolation, Physical abuse, and psychological trauma. It marks that Migration is not a linear journey towards upliftment but a deceptive path towards struggles and sufferings, which can be addressed through this quote, "How many lives like that end halfway, incomplete!" (Benyamin 30)

Trapped Life of a Cyclically Reinforced Migration

What is frightening about the novel is not being captive, but how the process of making people captives works on a continuous basis. Reading Lee's push-pull theory, one realizes that migration is not a simple process that happens once, beginning with departure and ending with arrival. The whole process thrives on the myth it creates. Pull factors that attract migrants, namely money, social prestige, and social mobility, continue to work because the victims themselves, after undergoing such an awful experience, do not want to reveal the whole truth about what happened to them. The shame, debt, and even the social humiliation of coming back to your community without anything leads to secrecy surrounding this migration. The intervening obstacles that Lee describes, including distance, legal restrictions, and cost, do more than just serve as hindrance that bind the migrant to the process of migration and prevent any form of retraction. After Najeeb mortgaged his property, sold his wife's jewelry, and borrowed money from neighbors in order to pay the agent, there was no way that he could turn back and still maintain his honor. The payment turned the dream into a reality that cannot be avoided. However, one thing that the push-pull model fails to address is the role of the intervening obstacle, in this case, the distance, cost,

and legal restrictions, in preventing any form of retraction on the part of the individual who has paid for the trip. Therefore, in practical terms, Najeeb's decision to leave Kerala was, in fact, a one-way ticket because once the agent was paid, there was no turning back anymore.

Furthermore, Benjamin points out the sponsorship system practiced in various Gulf nations, where the migrant worker's dependence on the employer in every way becomes natural due to the system, in which the former lacks any kind of independent legal existence. While the author does not name the phenomenon, the dynamic between Najeeb and his Arbab is based precisely on this concept. The worker's status depends on the desire of the employer in such a manner that the worker has no choice but to comply since he risks deportation, incarceration, or something even worse. This makes the problem that seems a mere coincidence turn into a system, a condition, for this case, is not unique to Najeeb. This case is only another variation of the experiences undergone by thousands of undocumented or irregularly working migrants in the Arabian Peninsula. Thus, it becomes clear that in order to understand Lee's framework of migration, one should focus not only on individual psychology but on the entire institutional context within which the individual works.

Conclusion

Goat Days is thus one of those pieces of literary creation where, in contrast to sociological study, the author permits the reader a window through which to enter the migrant's head directly from the time he embarks on his journey from Kerala, brimming with hope and ending up with relief after being put behind bars in Saudi Arabia. According to Everett Lee's push and pull model of migration, in analyzing *Goat Days*, it can be stated that migration does not just happen due to push and pull factors but rather because of the interaction between both of these phenomena. Economic, social, psychological, and structural factors do not act independently but in a collaborative manner in order to influence the migrant's decision. It is true that all the factors that motivate Najeeb to migrate are very real, but then again so is what draws Najeeb towards migration.

The intervening barriers and personal factors outlined by Lee become for Najeeb not just minor irritants, but the very heart of his whole existence. The cost of migration, deceptive agents, the powerlessness of an undocumented immigrant laborer, the isolation of the masara – all of these aspects combine to produce a situation much more complex and dire than the total of each factor taken separately. It is the contribution of the novel to theory that it provides the elements of its structure with the sense of texture and the investment of time. The Lee

model shows that personal factors matter; the Benyamin narrative shows how they can be peeled away until he or she is reduced to fighting for survival.

Ultimately, *Goat Days* is proof that the Keralite migrant story, which has been celebrated by culture for generations due to its success narrative, is also the story of a community that was made vulnerable and deluded in terms of how it thought about itself. In other words, while the novel does not criticize migration in itself, it highlights the danger of thinking that migration can never end in disaster because of a combination of deceit, denial, debt, and fear of shame. As is evident in the end of the story, Najeeb returns free not as a successful migrant who has brought his family prosperity, but as a man who survived a hell that he cannot even recount to anyone else. The experiences of people like Najeeb should be heard all over the world, not as stories of defeat, but as a cry for compassion toward the cost of migration.

Several research studies have been carried out on the novel from different perspectives. Najeeb's survival is analyzed through Mysticism, framing it as a spiritual guidance from GOD to escape. (Deepthi) Najeeb's migration is discussed in the view of Diaspora and Subaltern Studies. (Taskeen) The novel is examined as a means of social realism and a mere replication of the process involved in Gulf migration. (Thankachan) Many studies examined the story as a mere exploitation of the means of dislocation, voluntary and involuntary migration, alienation, and survival in another country. (Kumar) While this paper attempts to uncover the actual driving force behind migration in the novel *Goat Days* with the aid of Lee's underexplored 'Push-Pull Theory.' Najeeb's story is not only an individual experience but a representation of the migrant community. The novel *Goat Days* serves as a representation of migrants, where people are mostly trapped in a cyclic system that never ends, until the myth is buried deeper, which is evident in the following line "We also promised our friends we would arrange visas for them as soon as we landed there and met our Arab." (Benyamin 42) Hence, the researcher claims that migration is a mere trap, where their dreams are broken in the name of opportunity, merely a human tragedy.

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