

The trauma of Nowhereness: A Study of Benyamin's *Jasmine Days*

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Abstract

Benyamin's *Jasmine Days*(2018), initially written in the Malayalee language under *Mullappoo Niramulla Pakalukal*, has been translated into English by Shehnaz Habib and has won the JCB inaugural award. The novel illustrates the poignant story of a diasporic Pakistani family in an unnamed City in a Middle Eastern country. It is set in the background of Arab Spring and explores the life of its protagonist, Sameera Parvin, who is a radio jockey and lives with her Baba in 'Taya Ghar' is the protagonist. A Sunni Muslim herself, her best friend Ali bears the stigma of being a "second-class citizen" in the country because he belongs to the Shia community and feels like an outsider in his own country, called the city in the novel. The novel presents the themes of freedom, tyranny, women's rights, and immigrants' dilemmas. My paper shows how the riots occurring under the signs of politics, nationalism, religion, and the Arab Spring revolution caused physical and mental trauma in Sameera's life. As the process erupts, Ali and Sameera find themselves entangled in it. She is shaken to the core and has to choose between family and friends, loyalty and love, and life and death. She is forced to support the monarch as an immigrant worker, but she keeps the protesters inwardly.

Keywords: Pakistani diaspora, Arab Spring, religious conflicts, immigrants' dilemma.

Introduction

Benyamin (born Benny Daniel in 1971) is an Indian novelist and short story writer in Malayalam. Before returning to Kerala, he lived in the Kingdom of Bahrain from 1992 to 2013. His novel *Jasmine Days* (2018), initially written in the Malayalee language under *Mullappoo Niramulla Pakalukalin* 2014, has been translated by Shahnaz Habib and won the inaugural JCB Prize for literature. Writer Vivek Shanbag commented while announcing the award:

"The courage shown by Benyamin in *Jasmine Days* in examining some of the most important conflicts of our times is exceptional. The novel provides powerful insights into the violence associated with change. It also raises profound questions about the

relationship between crime, punishment, and forgiveness. A brilliant and intense novel.” (Porter)

Another author, Natarajan, comments:

“*Jasmine Days* captures the essential and active tension between inner and outer lives that pervades the diaspora while dealing with the larger and deeper moral questions of our times. It renders beautifully the small acts of unanticipated defiance negotiated by individuals trapped in oppressive circumstances and their various paths to personal freedom.” (Porter)

Jasmine Days presents a heartfelt story, touching upon contemporary themes of consumerism, immigration, labor, freedom, and human rights. The novel Benjamin "exposes the authoritarian politics of citizenship, nationality, and a community's strategic reduction to a non-entity. The question of belonging for immigrants in the Gulf is particularly complex, Benjamin shows, as these countries hardly ever grant citizenship to immigrants no matter how long they have stayed." (Fatima).

The novel is set against the dynamics of the Arab Spring and takes up the story of a young woman Sameera Parvin who moves to an unnamed City in a Middle Eastern country. Sameera comes to the City from Pakistan with her father, a 'Nathoor,' the lowest rank in the police department, later promoted to the armed forces, and stays in his elder brother's house called 'Taya Ghar.' She gets the radio jockey job at Orange Radio Station and holds her own against the “Malayalam Mafia” with her quick wit and sharp tongue. Although, in the beginning, she was scared:

"You know how it is when you arrive in a new place and feel like you do not belong there? That hesitation in reckoning with a new geography. That knowledge that this place is not mine, these ways of talking are not mine; these silences are not mine, this etiquette is not mine. So many new things to absorb. Moreover, the place also takes a little time to accept the new person." (Benjamin, 16).

Sameera's family is conscious of a sense of exile or nostalgia once their illusion is broken. A scholar, Fatima, remarks: "When people migrate to different countries seeking better employment, education or freedom, they take for granted that the laws of their host country will protect them. However, they rarely think of the tangled and intimidating issues that emerge when the host country is engulfed in political turmoil." (Fatima).

Sameera loves her job and, keeping the national identity aside, cultivates a friendship with Ali Fardan, a Shia. In the City, Shias are treated as "second-class" because the ruler belongs to the Sunni community, and they have the power to make their subjects see themselves as "second-class." Sameera asked Yunus why they call him a second-class citizen; he says:

"Because he is a second-class citizen here, that is why. He does not have citizenship in this country. These people came from Iran long ago and had been living here illegally. His majesty pretends not to see, so they get by. Otherwise, they would all have been packed off back to Iran. We Sunnis are the first-class citizen." (Benyamin, 62).

Ali tells Sameera:

"Second class! This is how a country treats its people. Do you know how many years we have been suffering this discrimination? The curse of not belonging to the ruling majority! You will never understand how terrible it is till you experience discrimination in your land." (Benyamin, 63)

Shias are not uncommonly humiliated in a Sunni-dominated country, denied equal rights, and even state-sponsored torture and killings. In Ali's words:

"But do you know, many of us are not counted as citizens and do not even have basic fundamental rights because we are Shias? We are not allowed to leave the country. Some professions are completely closed to us....It does not matter how well we behave, how much we express our patriotism, how much we declare our love for His Majesty-we could never join the army or the police." (Benyamin, 91).

In the novel, the Shia and Sunni factions are divided into two groups- one that supports the established government of His Majesty and the second that protests against him. However, immigrants like Sameera need to be more knowledgeable about such divisions and, being outsiders, find it difficult to make sense of the revolution. Sameera says: "I had no idea who Shias were and what they believed in. Till I came to this country, I had not even heard of such divisions. I was Sunni by birth but had never given it any thought" (Benyamin 63).

As the revolution rages, nobody is spared. Doctors, nurses, and musicians start taking sides, and when all these things happen, nothing more is left to say. When Sameera brings a gravely wounded man to the hospital and informs the nurse about him, "She looked at me scornfully. She looked at me as if I had committed some crime. 'He did not get wounded doing anything good, did he? He was attacking our people. Let him lie there. We will bury him when he dies,' she said" (Benyamin 154). Sameera's tweet, "When there is no freedom of the press, rumor becomes news" (Benyamin 165), is her way of coming to terms with the happenings around her. The primary issue that Sameera's family has to deal with appears in political agitation. The politics of their adopted land brings out the worst in every family member of hers. Sameera finds herself caught in a double bind of familial loyalty – her family supports His Majesty – and her empathy is with Ali. She says: "What scared my aunts and uncles was that Ali was a Shia. That is when I realized that Shias were not just second-class citizens in the City, they were kafirs to be detested like hell" (Benyamin 72). As she confronts the political changes in the tumultuous state, christened as Arab Revolution, Sameera finds herself negotiating deeply ethical questions such as forgiving her father's killer and examining her loyalty to the existing government. She thinks:

"-Why is God silent, like a guilty criminal, when the contradictions of religion are exposed? Who is right-the minority or the majority? Does something become true simply because the majority believes in it? If so, why doesn't this country accept that?... What right do governments have to divide people into official followers and dissidents? Just because a government is in power and has managed to rule over its people for a long time, does that give it the right to brand some people as rebels? (Benyamin,73).

In such a critical situation, the immigrants are in a horrible conditions. "They are like between the devil and the deep sea. If they favor His Majesty, which they have to do, being government employees, they incur the wrath of the agitators; if they do not, then the government would be after them, and they stand a good chance of losing employment and maybe life too" (Batra, 2021, p. 4859). At the same time, the developments question the stable identity, as Stuart Hall suggests. The second concept of identity emphasizes the similarities and differences of a cultural group. It recognizes that some critical points of difference constitute 'what we are; or rather, since history has intervened-'what we have become.' We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about "one experience, one identity, without acknowledging its other side--- the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute, precisely, the Caribbean's uniqueness" (Hall, 225).

The revolution brings drastic changes in the life of immigrants who are forced to fight a battle that is not their own. They do not have the right to question the established government, as Sameera says to Ali: "Do not be annoyed at my questions. I am just asking about the things I have heard. But aren't you Shias also immigrants like us? What right do you have to question the rulers?" (Benyamin 91). In the novel, there is a reference where an Iraqi man, who was listening to Sameera and Ali's conversation, talks about the violence that started in Iraq between Sunni and Shia factions:

"I am a Sunni who lived in a Shia-majority region. When the violence broke out, and Sunnis started getting attacked, I took a Shia name and got a fake ID card...However, our tragedy did not end there. The Sunni fundamentalists came to our streets. Their targets were not Shias; instead, they were hunting down Sunnis leading fake lives...They did not try to understand the circumstances under which we had to choose these fake lives." (Benyamin, 94).

He further says:

"How could we continue in such a land? We abandoned everything and took refuge here, hoping there would be peace. Thus, my friends, that is my experience. If a country is going to be split along communal lines, it is far better to be under a dictator. You have only lost your freedom so far. However, you will lose your peace and your life if the dictator falls." (Benyamin, 95)

The immigrants are accused of swiping jobs that otherwise could have gone to the native citizens. The natives want to expel them from their country at any cost because "Many protesters felt that foreigners like us were the reason they were denied equality, justice, and employment opportunities" (Benyamin 129). A middle-aged man in the Square

of Pearls, looking at Sameera, shouts: "He must have guessed that I was a foreigner. Pointing his finger at me, he said, 'Get ready to leave this country. The end is coming for you and your kind. If not in my time, at least in my son's. I tried to move out of his vision, but he fixed his eyes on me and went on, partly to me, partly to society itself" (Benyamin 129).

However, on the other side, we have people like Farhana who were born in the city and are not ready to return to Pakistan. She questions:

Why should I return to Pakistan? She asked. 'I was born here, grew up here, and have every right to continue my life here. I am not going to run away, scared. This land belongs to me just as much as it belongs to the protesters.'...This city where we had made our homes for so long-were to pack up everything and leave like refugees, simply because of a few threats?" (Benyamin, 150)

The protagonist, Sameera, finds herself entangled in a mental debate about what she should do under such circumstances. She is forced to support the ruler as an immigrant worker as her Baba, Taya, and other male members of the family are employed by the Sunni ruler to "defend the country." However, inwardly, her empathy lies with Ali, whom she knows is not a rebel without a cause. Very soon, the news of Baba's death shakes Sameera to the core when she learns that Ali brutally murdered her Baba. It is natural to hate such a person, and Sameera does the same. However, she negotiates with ethical questions when an older man reveals Ali's experience while growing up and makes her understand how society was responsible for Ali's crime. Sameera forgives Ali, but that is also not taken kindly by His Majesty's government. Her Baba is declared a martyr, and his status as a faithful servant is established, but Sameera is placed under house arrest pending her deportation to Pakistan. She has to face all this because she was suspected of favoring the protesters.

Sameera stands for human values and resists the pressure of the family and government too, which indirectly shows that Benyamin supports the moral values that transcend time and space. The writer told Vineet Vyasani in an interview:

"For entertainment, we have so many other mediums available. However, all those mediums are so blind to reality. They are in a utopian dream world. Then who will address the reality? Who will raise the political questions other than writers? We must raise political questions in our fiction. That is the best medium to address the political issues and questions against power." (Vyasa)

Benyamin treated writing seriously, as is demonstrated by his comment made in the speech accepting the JCB prize for literature:

"In the modern era, reading and writing are not just hobbies; they are a part of the political process in themselves. Moreover, at the same time, writers caution that novels do not turn into mere political slogans. Thus, I believe that my novel *Jasmine Days* is not only the narrative of the dictatorship, the Arab Revolution,

and troubles but also about solitude, isolation, rejection, sorrow, internal conflicts, despair, and frustrations of a human being in each one of us” (Malayalam).

The novel *Jasmine Days* have very sincerely and authentically analyzed the predicament of the diasporic people in critical situations like the one portrayed here. It not only presents the hollowness of pretensions of sublime faith but also shows how the identity becomes a ball that takes the beating in a ping-pong match. In any society, the experience of diasporic existence can be reckoned in the following observation by a critic:

It is seen that the interface progresses along the trajectory of initial prejudices, culture shock, economic hardships, nostalgia, and sense of loss, creation of imaginary homelands, adjustment with host culture to the extent possible, shaped finally by the politics which decides if the adjustment will be favorable to the native or the migrant. (Batra 2019: 223-237)

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