

***Kafala System and its impact on Migrant Laborers in Benyamin
Daniel's Goat Days***

نظام الكفالة وتأثيرها على العمال المهاجرين في رواية بنيامين دانيال أيام الماعز

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Received: (30/1/2016), Accepted: (12/5/2016)

Abstract

In this paper, we try to examine the mistreatment, enslavement, forced labor, violence, and persecution meted out against Indian migrant laborers in Saudi Arabia. We also attempt to explain the *Kafala*, system of sponsorship, its mechanism, and how migrant laborers like the protagonist of Benyamin's *Goat Days*, Najeeb Muhammad, become victims to such system. This study sheds light not only on Najeeb's dehumanizing confinement, fear, mental agony, and physical torture but also on his resistance and rebellion against his own enslavement. It concludes that the story of Najeeb underscores the pressing need for the government of Saudi Arabia to reform the *Kafala* sponsorship system to prevent the exploitation of vulnerable migrant laborers and to ensure decent, safe working and living conditions for them. These reforms should be enforced by monitoring sponsors who would ensure that violators are persecuted. It is also an obligation shared by the migrant laborers' sending countries which should create awareness among migrant laborers about the working conditions laws, benefits and rights expected in the Gulf States to avoid persecution and slavery like Najeeb. This study concludes that Najeeb's narrative of slavery in Saudi Arabia harms its image and holy status as an enlightening minaret of Islam and

its loving and peaceful religious teachings that do not permit slavery, oppression, exploitation and humiliation.

Keywords: *Goat Days*, Benyamin Daniel, Migrant Laborers, *Kafala* System, slavery.

ملخص

يحاول الباحث في هذه الورقة البحثية فحص سوء المعاملة، والاستعباد والسخرة، والعنف، والاضطهاد الذي يلاقيه العمال الهنود المهاجرون في المملكة العربية السعودية. وتحاول الدراسة شرح نظام الكفالة وأليته وكيف كان بطل رواية بنيامين دانييل، نجيب محمد، ضحية لهذا النظام. تسلط هذه الدراسة الضوء ليس فقط على الظروف اللاإنسانية التي عاشها نجيب مثل العزل، والخوف الألم النفسي، والتعذيب الجسدي، ولكن أيضا على مقاومته والتمرد ضد استعباده. وبينت هذه الدراسة قصة استعباد نجيب محمد في المملكة العربية السعودية تتناقض مع صورتها، ومكانتها المقدسة باعتبارها منارة تنويرية للإسلام وتعاليمه الدينية السمحة التي لا تسمح بالعبودية، والقهر، والاستغلال، والإذلال. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن قصة نجيب تسلط الضوء على الحاجة الملحة لحكومة المملكة العربية السعودية لإصلاح نظام الكفالة لمنع استغلال العمال المهاجرين المستضعفين، وضمان ظروف عمل وعيش آمنة ولانقاة لهم، وينبغي تنفيذ هذه الإصلاحات من خلال مراقبة الجهات الكافلة ومعاقبة المخالفين، ويجب أن يكون هناك التزام مشترك من قبل الدول المرسله للعمال المهاجرين بتوعية العمال المهاجرين حول ظروف، وقوانين العمل، والمنافع والحقوق المتوقعة في دول الخليج لتجنب الاضطهاد والاستعباد مثل نجيب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أيام الماعز، بنيامين دانيال، العمال المهاجرين، نظام الكفالة، والرق.

1. Introduction

After the discovery of oil, the Gulf States witnessed a tremendous influx of Indian migrant laborers. As a result, development programs which focus on providing schools, hospitals, improvement of transport and communication were taken up. This resulted in “a spurt in demand for not only highly skilled technical experts but also for semi-skilled and unskilled workers.” (Abhyankar, 2008, p.182).

Historically speaking, Indian laborers have constituted a central pillar in supporting the British Empire. Millions of Indian laborers were shipped to the British colonies all over the world between 1830 and 1920. (Howard, 2011, Waheed, 2012, Collyer, 2013). Indian laborers were also

sent to replace the freed slaves working on the cotton and sugar plantations of the West Indies. Gabi Afram writes that there was “an early Indian migration of unskilled labor to work on mines and plantations in British colonies.” (2012, p. xii). It was a systematic policy adopted by the British Empire to recruit Indians not only to serve the British Empire as laborers but also as soldiers. Indian soldiers were used heavily in this capacity during the First World War, 1914–1918. (Beckett, 2014).

The discovery of oil was instrumental in establishing Arab Gulf States which were supervised, monitored, and protected by the British Empire in its own power struggles against Ottoman and German interests. (Kamrava, 2005). More recently, the British Empire has been replaced by American economic and political interests which have played a prominent role in reshaping the political map of the Gulf States and particularly Saudi Arabia. (Edwards, 2014). After the oil boom in the 1970s, Arab Gulf states witnessed unprecedented waves of migrant laborers seeking jobs and a better life. It is reported that the “labor migration to the petroleum-rich states of the Arabian Peninsula comprises the third-largest transnational migration flow in the contemporary world.” (Gardner, A., Pessoa, S., Diop, A., Al-Ghanim, K., Le Trung, K., & Harkness, L., 2013, p.2).

The Gulf War in 1990, created instability driving Arab laborers out of the region. For example, Palestinians were driven out of Kuwait due to their so called implicit political support to Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait. (Hassan, 1999). Asian laborers, including Indians, migrated to the Gulf States to fill this gap. According to the latest statistics, there are almost fifteen million migrant laborers in the Gulf States coming mostly from Asian, African, and Arab countries. (Gardner et al., 2013).

Ninety five percent of Indian migrant laborers are concentrated in six countries in the Middle East, namely Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, and Kuwait. Saudi Arabia has, in fact, become a primary destination and attracted large numbers of Indian migrant laborers. This migration to Saudi Arabia may be attributed to political crises, poverty, and unemployment in their country of origin-

India. In 1994, Saudi Arabia received sixty-five percent of annual labor outflow from India.(Cortina & Ochoa-Reza, 2013). There are an estimated two and a half million Indian migrant laborers in the Gulf, the majority of them hail from Kerala. However, what makes Kerala account for the largest number of Indian migrant laborers is "the need for low skill laborers where most of the Kerala laborers happen to be young, unmarried, less educated, and unemployed or underemployed.”(Parekh, Singh, & Vertovec, 2003, p.119). Saudi Arabia represents the world’s largest contributors of foreign exchange remittances to India where money sent, particularly by migrant laborers from Kerala, accounts for fifteen percent of the total financial remittances sent to India. (Kumaraswamy, 2012).

Money that migrant laborers send home is not only important to their families but it also helps sustain their country’s economy. According to Ayuk-Taylor, H., et.al, “remittances earned in Saudi Arabia contribute heavily to supporting the economy of migrant workers’ source countries, often accounting for a large proportion of their annual Gross National Product.” (2014, p.53). In 2011, remittances represented three percent of India’s GNP (Cortina & Ochoa-Reza, 2013). India’s share in outward remittances has been increasing. “With more than USS1.58 billion in official outward remittances in 2008, India is fast becoming a large remittance-sending country”. (Afram, 1912, p. 87). This may construe why countries, like India, often ignore violations committed against its overseas citizens fearing that any real protest may harm bilateral economic and political relations between sending countries such as, India and Gulf States. Instead, India has adopted a policy which encourages migrant labor export due to the financial benefits of the remittances sent by migrant laborers. (Vlieger, 2012).

2- The Status of Migrant laborers in the Gulf States

Despite the valuable role that migrant laborers play in developing and sustaining the economies of the Gulf States, they face inequality, exploitation, exclusion, forced labor slavery, abuse, human enslavement, brutality, and dehumanization. (Kymlicka, W., & Pföstl, E., 2014).

Migrant laborers spend years separated from their families where they work in extremely low paid jobs and dehumanizing living conditions. Their passports are held by their sponsors according to the laws of the sponsorship system; thereby, it further limits their travel out of the country. The legal framework that “regulates both the ownership of businesses and the employment of non-citizen labor is known as the *Kafala*.” (Kymlicka, W., & Pförtl, E., 2014, p.177). *Kafala* fosters and facilitates exploitation, slavery, miserable living conditions, and low wages for migrant workers due to the fact that the migrant’s legal ability to live and work in the Gulf States solely depends on a single sponsor or employer.

Moreover, *Kafala* is a binding system which denies migrant laborers the right to get transferred from abusive sponsors who, in return, report them to the government as trouble makers and absconders, in a way which could make migrant workers risk losing their legal status and could make them liable to deportation. Irudaya Rajan argues that there is a large number of undocumented migrant laborers “due to the malpractices of the employers such as refusal to release the passport or denial of consent to switch jobs.” (2014, p.21). Migrant laborers are facing further exploitation and humiliation at the hands of sponsors following the global financial crisis, reduction of jobs, and wage manipulation.

Migrant workers are heavily exploited as they accept lower wages from what was agreed upon earlier. This is because according to the Saudi laws of labor, “the only contracts with legal validity are those written in Arabic. The contract must include the agreed-upon terms of employment, and must be in writing, drawn up in Arabic and in duplicate, one copy to be retained by each of the parties.” (Sherry, 2004, p.20). Only contracts that are written in Arabic are valid, while contracts written in another language are not recognized as valid. Consequently, this may lead to wage exploitation since migrant laborers sign contracts in their home countries that often include different provisions, benefits and wages than those signed once they arrive in the host country. Employment contracts usually include articles about working, living

conditions, wages, deductions, and costs; additionally, recruitment agencies tend to provide false information to migrant laborers concerning the basic conditions of their work and contracts. Migrant laborers are often forced to sign a new Arabic contract without knowing and understanding its provisions and content. (Ayuk-Taylor et al., 2014).

3- Revisiting the Kafala System and its Impact on Migrant Laborers in Benyamin Daniel’s *Goat Days*

Although South Asian migrant laborers and their experiences constitute a prominent phenomenon in the Gulf States, there is a dearth of fictional literature which examines the painful predicament of South Asian migrant laborers and their dehumanizing working conditions. This may account for the importance of this critical study of Benyamin Daniel’s novel, *Goat Days*. The novel explores the experiences of Najeeb Muhammad, an Indian migrant worker, living and working in Saudi Arabia. It also reflects on the urgency of tackling migrant laborers’ painful experiences in diasporic fictional works.

In this paper, the author examines the mistreatment, enslavement, forced labor, violence, and persecution meted out against Indian migrant laborers in Saudi Arabia. I also attempt to explain the system of sponsorship, its mechanism, and the way migrant laborers like the protagonist of Benyamin’s *Goat Days*, Najeeb Muhammad, become victims to such system. This study also tries to uncover the gripping and painful reality that lies behind the façade of employment in the Gulf States.

Benyamin’s *Goat Days* is based on a true story about a migrant laborer who is found in Saudi Arabia after being assumed missing for a long time. Benyamin writes that when he heard about Najeeb, he “decided to meet him—not because I thought it was a good story but through sheer curiosity. This man had been through so much and after a while it felt like it became my duty to tell the world about people like him, living their lives in such suffering and pain” (East, 2013, p.1).

Benyamin’s *Goat Days* examines the life of Najeeb who dreams, like other South East Asian migrant laborers, to work in the Gulf States, earn

money, and send it to their families at home. Unfortunately, Najeeb has to go through painful experiences where he finds himself working as a slave laborer taking care of goats at a goat farm in the middle of the Saudi Arabian desert at the mercy of a cruel sponsor or *Arbab*. It portrays Najeeb's struggles to survive and the challenges that he faces in his journey from slavery to freedom where he fights for his own emancipation. (Waheed, 2012).

Najeeb narrates his route from Kerala to Riyadh and from Riyadh to the Saudi Arabian desert in his quest for economic betterment. Benyamin's *Goat Days* sheds light on the plight of a South East Asian migrant laborer who may have worked for years in the Gulf States, learned Arabic, but who will never be given the right to apply for citizenship as would be the case in many other countries. As a result of "the stringent naturalization and citizenship laws prevalent in the gulf countries, it is almost impossible for any immigrant to become a citizen of any Gulf country." (Parekh, et al., 2003, p.119).

Denying migrant laborers citizenship means that they have no political rights, and this creates a huge gap between natural citizens and migrant laborers. This policy of exclusion has alienated migrant laborers in the Gulf States. A majority of the migrant laborers are seen as strangers and foreigners who work in humiliating conditions without legal rights. These circumstances worsened after the global financial crisis (Rajan, 2014).

In *Goat Days*, Benyamin renders that the peripheral and marginal voices of migrant laborers and their plight. It presents a critique of the helplessness of migrant laborers who find themselves trapped in the Gulf States while simultaneously exposing the dark side of the Gulf prosperity which can, otherwise, be seen only as a good example of modern urbanity. (Pal, 2012). As a prelude, Najeeb's journey to Saudi Arabia is fraught with difficulties starts with him selling everything that he has to secure the required amount of money to travel and finish visa procedures conducted by an agent in Bombay. Migrant laborers usually enter the labor market in Saudi Arabia through recruitment agencies, "which uniformly charge fees to handle the labor contracts, traveling

arrangements, basic job training, and other issues related to the their employment in the country”. (Ayuk-Taylor et al., 2014, p.54). Najeeb narrates the process that every Indian migrant laborer to the Gulf has to go through to obtain a visa: “The very next day, I went and my friend’s brother-in-law. He asked for thirty thousand—twenty to be given to him within a fortnight before he left for the Gulf. He had to give to the Arab to process the visa. After getting the visa, the remaining ten had to be given to the agent in Bombay for the ticket and other expenses. That was not an amount that I could put together without difficulty. Still, daringly, I agreed. Yes.” (p.37)

Najeeb struggles to secure the amount needed to obtain a visa. He solves this issue by “mortgaging the house and the little amount of gold Sainu had as jewelry, and by collecting small amounts from other sand miners and by borrowing from everyone I knew. Yes, ‘fix up’ best describes it.” (p.37). There are several testimonies rendered to human rights organizations from migrant laborers who have entered Saudi Arabia legally and paid lots of money to recruitment agencies in their home countries to secure legal working visas. (Batty, 2014). They either sell their properties back home or assume heavy debts to meet the costs of working visas. Unfortunately, once they are in the kingdom, Virginia Sherry argues, migrant laborers find themselves “at the mercy of legal sponsors and de facto employers who had the power to impose oppressive working conditions on them, with effective government oversight clearly lacking. Unaware of their rights, or afraid to complain for fear of losing their jobs, the majority of these workers simply endured gross labor exploitation. (2004, p.2).

For Najeeb, and those that he represents, his journey is a dream which is about to be fulfilled where he can work in the Gulf and secure a better economic future for his family: “I dreamt a host of dreams. Perhaps the same stock dreams that the 1.4 million Malayalis in the gulf had when they were in Kerala-gold watch, fridge, TV, car, tape recorder, VCP, a heavy gold chain.” (p.38). Najeeb’s excitement and joy on hearing the news that his visa is ready may have exceeded the joy of thousands of Indian migrant laborers working in the Gulf. “Finally, the

telegram from the agent in Bombay arrived: 'Visa ready. Come with the balance amount.' The joy that I experienced then! It was greater than the joy of the tens of thousands of Malayalis who had reached the Gulf before me, I am sure." (p. 38). Indian Migrant laborers are arguably lured by stories of success coming from the Gulf States which loom larger than the painful reality of migrants who live in constant humiliation and subject them to slave-like conditions.

Migrant laborers travel to Gulf States seeking opportunities which turn out to be merely traps for them. They usually come back home with nothing but painful memories of the land which crushed their dreams and forced them to live in servitude. Similarly, Najeeb's harrowing experience in Saudi Arabia has betrayed and shattered his dreams. When Najeeb, especially, recalls these moments, he feels "nauseated as though from the stench of a fourth-rate film scene." (p. 39).

The events in Benyamin's *Goat Days* are narrated to us in a flashback, begin at a Sumesi prison. It is a place where migrant laborers end up after escaping from their abusive sponsors. "Many migrant labourers flee their employers after finding out they are cheated or mistreated. They hand themselves down to police where they are deported back home in the general amnesty that the government offered for undocumented foreign workers (Sherry, 2004, p.22). Sumesi prison is a place where Najeeb voluntarily resorts to as an escape from the brutal treatment of his sponsor since there is no other place for him to go. Najeeb describes the Sumesi prison blocks which are divided according to nationality. "One block for each nationality—Arabs, Pakistanis, Sudanese, Ethiopians, Bangladeshis, Filipinos, Moroccans, Sri Lankans, and then, finally, Indians. Most of the Indians were surely Malayalis. Naturally, we were taken to the Indian block." (p.11). Najeeb enjoys his freedom in prison compared to the life he had before with his abusive sponsor: "For him jail provided relief from the suffering he had been enduring. For many, it was inconceivable to return to the Arabs who had been torturing them. They must have endured so many beatings before they reached the jail."(p.22).

For Najeeb, Sumesi prison had become a sanctuary compared to the terrible life he had before. We find Najeeb justify his voluntary imprisonment as an indicator to his previous terrible sufferings: “Can you imagine how much suffering I must have endured to voluntarily choose imprisonment?” (12). This shows how Najeeb’s previous life had “subverted his idea of confinement and freedom.” (Rajasekaran& Jose, 2015, p.81). Therefore, life in prison not only represented a new kind of freedom for Najeeb and Hameed but also an eye opening experience that they were not the only victims of the dark side of being a migrant laborer in Saudi Arabia. Najeeb says, “Everyone who ended up in the jail had a similar story like mine to tell—of pain, sorrow, suffering, tears, innocence, and helplessness” (p.20). Stories of the other migrants in Sumesi prison gave Najeeb some sense of psychological relief and liberation. Migrant laborers usually abscond from their abusive sponsors to prisons from where they get deported back to their home countries. Normally, sponsors would search for migrant absconders at hospitals and prisons for two months before they register a complaint with the police and give up the search. A migrant laborer’s worst fear was to get retrieved from the prison by their abusive sponsors and sent back to work.

In *Goat Days*, Benyamin sheds light on the *Kafala* system and how laws are manipulated by Arab sponsors to enslave migrant laborers on parade days:

The Arab enjoyed more freedom in a foreign land. On these parade days, any Arab could freely move around the Sumesi prison if he carried a paper showing that he had registered a complaint in a police station. If he managed to find his absconding slave, he could drag him out and present him before the jail warden and submit his petition to him. The nature of the case would change. The man who was in prison for a petty case would be turned into a criminal offender (p.22).

Therefore, we find that sponsors take migrant prisoners back without any human consideration; instead, they are shouting accusations at them such as “he ran away after stealing my money; he tried to rape my daughter; he tried to kill me. The prisoner’s face would reflect the

abjection of a goat being led to a slaughter.”(p.22). Sponsors are empowered by the *Kafala* system which grants them the right to hold a migrant laborer’s fate in their hands. According to the *Kafala* system, any migrant laborer is denied a work permit in the Gulf States without a local sponsorship or *Kafil*. Migrant workers “cannot enter Saudi Arabia for work without a local guarantor or sponsor, which can be an individual, a government agency, or a private institution.” (Ayuk-Taylor et al. 2014, p.55). Once the employment sponsorship expires or gets terminated, migrant laborers must leave the country at their own expense as they immediately become illegal residents.

The *kafala* system ties a migrant laborers’ ability to live and work in the host country to the permission of their sponsor. Consequently, it denies them the opportunity to seek alternative employment. Sponsors usually cover the expenses of migrant laborers such as recruitment documentation and medical exams. Due to the large amounts that they pay to recruitment agents, sponsors oppose the abolition of the sponsorship system. Therefore, sponsors hold their passports, wages, and subject them to cruel working conditions. Migrant laborers who protest and are unhappy with their poor working conditions expose themselves to food deprivation, physical abuse, isolation, the risk of losing their jobs or even being falsely charged and deported. (Waheed, 2012). Benyamin sheds light on the collaboration and complicity among sponsors, Saudi prison officials and courts and how they all operate without respect to the rule of law and human rights. For instance, the Sumesi prison is described by Najeeb as a place where “the prisoners, lying down in whatever space they could manage, resembled dead bodies laid out after a natural disaster.” (p. 13). Najeeb narrates his most terrifying moments on the weekly “Parade Day” at Sumesi prison when Arab sponsors are called to identify their absconding migrant laborers.

The day for the Arabs to identify the absconding workers—a tear-filled day in prison. On that day, after breakfast, all of us were made to stand in a line outside the block. Arabs would walk in front of us looking at each of us carefully, like eyewitnesses trying to identify the accused. There would be a few unfortunate ones among us each week. The first

reaction of the Arab who recognized his worker was to land a slap that could pop an eardrum. Some even unbuckled their belts to whip the prisoners till their anger subsided. (p. 21).

The prison system is strongly linked to the *Kafala* system. It is actually founded to supervise and monitor migrant laborers. The identification parade exposes the pitiable condition of migrant laborers who “bear the scars of a traumatic past, and an unknown fear of a ghastly future that awaits them.” (Taskeen & Mohsin, 2015, p.308).

However, when Najeeb arrives at Saudi Arabia, we see him waiting at the airport for his sponsor to come and take him where he is destined to work and live like a slave in the masara. Najeeb tells his own story of working at the goat farm in the desert where he encounters an awful reality which is completely different from the shining dreams that he shared with his wife, Sainu. Najeeb is disillusioned when he lands in Saudi Arabia and finds out that he is an alien to the land and is new to the profession of a shepherd, tending goats in a desert land. (Fernandez, 2014). He has to sleep miserably on the ground at the goat farm without bed and cover. Najeeb sums up his first night in the Gulf as a disaster.

My back ached. I smiled at the 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 realized how far my dreams were the reality of my situation. My first night in the Gulf was such a fiasco (p.63) .

Though slavery has been legally abolished in different parts of the world, we find that Najeeb is subject to dehumanizing and slavish working conditions. For Brian Keely, the diaspora has become a new form of slavery. (2009). For example, Najeeb finds himself trapped in the desert and forced to change his living habits and rituals. “The Arbab signaled to me that I should eat. I had not even brushed my teeth in the morning, nor followed any of my morning rituals. I had not taken a bath. Had it been at home, I would not even drink coffee without first ducking into the river- even when it rained.”(p.68). Najeeb is forced to violate his hygienic habits like brushing his teeth and bathing. “But that day, for the

first time, I violated all my hygiene rules. I had drunk milk without brushing my teeth. Hunger for one and a half days forced me to ignore my habits. I sat outside the tent and greedily ate the new dish called khubus, even though I had nothing to dip it in or to smear it with.” (pp.68–9). Najeeb’s meals consist of bread, milk, and water. Besides this, there are constraints on cleanliness due to lack of water. He finds himself in unbearable situations where he has to clean himself with stones after defecation. “I had never faced such a predicament in my life The harshest for me was this ban on sanitation.” (p.78). Najeeb’s sponsor’s main priority is to ensure that the work is done. He is not concerned about the comfort or discomfort of his laborer. He says, “The Arabab cared only about my work, not my discomforts”. (p.94). His abusive behavior drives Najeeb to question the hospitability of Arabs, “Is this the legendary Arab hospitality that I have heard about? What kind of Arabab are you, my Arabab? Don’t deceive me. In you rests my future. In you rest my dreams. In you rest my hopes.” (p.59).

Benyamin’s *Goat Days* is not only about Najeeb’s confinement but also about his fear, mental agony, and physical torture. Najeeb clearly understands that displaying the gun and binoculars is to be taken as an explicit message by his sponsor that any attempt to escape will only result in death. Both these objects instill fear in Najeeb to the extent that he succumbs to his sponsor’s brutal abuse in the desert. When it comes to physical abuse, we find Najeeb persecuted and lashed by his sponsor for anything seen as a violation of the rules of goat farm such as using water and not separating new born goats from their mothers. “I felt a lash on my back. I cringed at the impact of their sudden smack. I turned around in shock. It was the Arabab, his eyes burning with rage. I did not understand. What was my mistake? Any slip-up in my work? Did I commit some blunder?”(p.77).

Benyamin shows through his character, Najeeb, how migrant labors are enslaved, imprisoned, and persecuted in Saudi Arabia. Najeeb experiences moments of anxiety, fear, boredom, and sickness. He feels that the years he spent in Saudi Arabia are extracted from his life since time appears to literally stop for him. He is merely waiting for something

to happen which would allow him to escape out of his slavery. This means that he has to spend a total of three years merely waiting for a miracle to happen since he is isolated in the desert from any human and social contact. At the same time, Najeeb is fully aware of the fact that anxiety and fear are useless and would endanger his life; therefore, he must adapt to his new environment in order to survive.

Anxiety and worry were futile. That world had become alien to me. Now only my sad new world existed for me. I am condemned to the conditions of this world. I have fallen headlong into the anxieties of it, and it is better to identify with the here and now. That was the only way to somehow survive. Otherwise, my growing anxieties would have killed me or my sorrows drowned me. May be this was how everyone who got trapped here survived, no? (p.95).

This undying urge to survive has boosted his courage in the face of adversity. However, one of the most tragic aspects of the situation of migrant laborers is that they silently accept the exploitation, oppression, and deprivation of their legal rights because they view themselves as powerless humans in a foreign country. In such condition, Virginia Sherry writes, migrant laborers arrive in Saudi Arabia ignorant of “the rights they have under existing Saudi law and the actions they can take when inequities and mistreatment occur” (2004, p.5).

4- The Urge to Rebel

Benyamin’s *Goat Days* is not only about the dehumanizing condition of Najeeb but also about his resistance and rebellion against his own slavery. When it comes to the mechanism used by Najeeb to resist his own solitary confinement and inhumane conditions, it is done by the virtue of his inner psychological strength, adaptation and strong faith in God. Such a mechanism is instrumental in his survival and return: “I would often wonder how I survived for such a long time in that scorching heat without even a drop of water and with no rest at all. The two factors that helped me through that phase were my desire to live and my infinite faith in Allah.”(p.119).

It is noticeable that the only means of survival urges left for Najeeb has been the language of brutality of his sponsor, and the language of hope and humanity seen through Najeeb's communication with goats. Najeeb finds himself living on a goat farm isolated from people and he sums up his plight by saying: "I lived on an alien planet inhabited by some goats, my Arbab and me" (p.125). Najeeb also recounts the painful torment of his slavery since his only companions are the goats. We find him identify with goats on a symbolic level to survive particularly when he is denied any human communication or compassion: "To tell you the truth, I have often felt that goats can understand things better than some humans." (p.121)

Najeeb is deprived of any human communication and only finds goats to interact with. He gradually develops a strong familial bond with the goats as seen when he names the new born goat, Nabeel—the name he has picked for his own unborn son. For Shaista Taskeen and Syed Mohsin, Najeeb has assigned "human characteristics to these goats who shared his loneliness. He scolded the goats, cuddled them and adored them like his family." (2015, p. 310). He finds himself in a situation where he has to sleep and live like the goats he shares a home with. He is seen eating the husked wheat which belongs to the goats to the extent that he comes to realize that "I had indeed become a goat." (p.150).He tells that:

Each of them was dear to me in one way or another. Have you ever looked carefully at a goat's face? It is quite similar to a human's. I named the goats not only by looking at their faces but also relating their names to some character traits, their gait, the sounds they made, by incidents that reminded me of them. Just as how one gets a nickname back home ... So there were many strange and personal reasons for each name I gave the goats. The logic of the names might be lost on others but they made perfect sense to me (pp. 161–162).

For Najeeb, the goats become symbols of his survival, inner yearning, and longing for home. Najeeb names goats after the names of his children, relatives, and the people in his own town. In this way, Najeeb is able to create a similar home environment where he is able to

resist his own solitary confinement and keep his sanity: “It is a craving that makes us hate our present condition. Then, that craving takes the form of a crazy urge to rush home, like a wild boar rushing wildly through sugarcane fields when it’s been shot.” (p.146). Due to the fact that Najeeb is isolated from language, location, people, and even his sponsor, he creates an environment which helps him sustain his existence and maintain his very humanity. When it comes to faith, we feel Najeeb’s spirituality and connection to God in his distress during his work as a slave laborer at a goat farm. Faith has played an instrumental role in his survival:

I didn’t know if Allah heard me or not. But the belief that Allah was looking after me instilled in me a new confidence ... For me, prayers were my bolt-hole. It was because of faith alone that I could be strong in spirit even when I was weak in my body. Otherwise, I would have withered and burnt like grass in that blazing wind. (p.153).

For Najeeb, God is not only a savior but also a source of confidence to which he turns in dire need. Although Najeeb desperately wants to leave the goat farm, he has no clue as to the map of the area: “I did not know anything about this country, not even about the area I was in. In which direction—east, south, west or north—should I run to find a way out.”(p.141). Besides, the disappearance the scary figure whom he met when he arrived at the goat farm and later his death by his Arbab makes Najeeb feel terrified. “It was a human palm! A palm rotting away to the bones. With intense fear and anxiety I started brushing away the sand. I had merely removed a layer of earth when a human skeleton came into view. I was really terrified now.” (p.174). The death of the scary figure may also reflect on the issue of the mysterious disappearance of migrant laborers in the Gulf States whose fate is unknown. (Ullah, et al. 2015).

Despite overwhelming dangers, Najeeb is determined to escape even if it costs him his life: “[L]et me die at the hands of the Arbab. I cannot take the suffering anymore.”(p.122). He will revolt against his sponsor and his brutal treatment once an opportunity comes: “If you do not use this moment, you might never get a chance like this, ever. You do know that such opportunities do not come again and again. Do it. Escape from

this hell somehow. My hand, indeed, moved towards the trigger.”(p.134). Yet, Najeeb stopped short of killing his sponsor once he heard him praying and calling him by his name, Najeeb, for the first time instead of the usual calls, *Himar* or *Inti*. “That call of prayer softened my heart. I did not feel like escaping after killing a coward who had been crying for my help. I returned the gun to its place.”(p.134). Later, Najeeb devises alternative ways to survive and return home. He flees with two of his friends, Hakeem and a Somali man who works at a nearby farm.

The novel ends with Najeeb’s deportation to India. However, a question still lingers in his mind: does his sponsor not recognize him or has he pretended not to see him at the parade day? He thought, “Either the Arbab had lied to mask the pity he had shown his prey or he had revealed a horrible truth. Wasn’t he my sponsor then? Had he illegally held me captive?” (p.251). These questions which reflect the pathetic situation of migrant laborers in Saudi Arabia are finally summed up by Benyamin’s *Goat Days*, “This is not just Najeeb’s story, it is real life. A goat’s life.” (p.255)

5- Conclusion

To conclude, in *Goat Days*, Saudi Arabia is seen through the eyes of migrant laborer, Najeeb Muhammad. The story of Najeeb underscores the pressing need for the government of Saudi Arabia to reform its laws and regulations to prevent the exploitation of vulnerable migrant laborers. Benyamin’s *Goat Days* highlights the importance of reforming the *Kafala* sponsorship system which is given precedence over the national and international labor laws. It should also ensure decent and safe working and living conditions of migrant laborers which include: outlawing passport confiscation, respecting contracts and regular payment. These reforms should be enforced by monitoring sponsors and ensuring violators are persecuted. There is also the obligation shared by the migrant laborers' ending countries such as; India, which should create awareness among migrant laborers about the working laws, benefits and rights expected in the Gulf States to avoid persecution and slavery like in case of Najeeb.

Benyamin’s *Goat Days* conveys a warning message to the Gulf States, in general, and to Saudi Arabia, in particular, that there is a growing public anger nationally and internationally related to the unbearable ordeal of migrant laborers which must come to an end. This study concludes that Najeeb’s narrative of slavery in Saudi Arabia contradicts with its image and holy status as an enlightening minaret of Islam and its loving and peaceful religious teachings that do not permit slavery, oppression, exploitation, humiliation, blackmailing, threatening, breaching of contracts, and violation of human dignity and rights.

Endnotes

1. *Kafala* is a system used to monitor migrant laborers working mostly in the construction and domestic sectors in the Gulf States.
2. Benyamin’s *Goat Days* has become a bestseller winning the Kerala Sahitya Academy award and shortlisted for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in 2012 and 2013 respectively.
3. *Arbab* is a Persian word which means boss, master, and landlord.
4. *Himar* is an Arabic word which means a donkey.

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