

## Neither Old nor New: Migration and Bondage in Benjamin's Goat Days

Jammi Ul Khair<sup>1</sup>, Sajad Rasheed Dar<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research scholar at the University of Kashmir, India. Email: jammiulkhair@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Sajad Rasheed Dar is a Research scholar at Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), Aligarh, India. Email: srdar@myamu.ac.in

### Abstract

Criticism of Benjamin's *Goat Days* (Aadujeevitham, 2008; translated by Joseph Koyippally in 2012) has moved along two paths. One reads the novel as an exposure of the Gulf kafala sponsorship regime. The other, drawing on Giorgio Agamben, reads the protagonist's degradation as a descent into bare life. Both illuminate how the novel renders vulnerability, yet neither takes up its more consequential claim about the way South Asian diaspora studies periodises its subjects. This paper argues that *Goat Days* brings into view a diasporic formation that Vijay Mishra's influential division cannot hold. Mishra separates an 'old' diaspora of nineteenth-century indenture from a 'new' diaspora of late-capitalist metropolitan mobility, and the temporary, sponsor-bound Gulf migrant fits neither. He is not the settler-coolie who founded creole cultures in the plantation colonies, and he is not the naturalised professional of the Western city. Reading the novel's central figure, the 'goat life' into which Najeeb is slowly reduced, as the aesthetic form of labour extraction under petro-capitalism, the paper proposes that his ordeal stages the return of the indentured *girmitiya* inside the legal and economic architecture of the contemporary Gulf. The novel's form matters to this claim. Because *Goat Days* reaches its readers as a mediated and translated testimonio, the paper treats its retained legal and social vocabulary as the formal means by which the subaltern's silence is marked rather than dissolved. It names the formation the petro-indentured precariat and asks what such a subject means for a diaspora theory still organised around the metropolitan West.

**Keywords:** diaspora; Gulf migration; kafala; indenture; bare life; petro-capitalism

### Introduction

Benjamin's *Goat Days* has, since its English publication in 2012, been read mainly in two registers. The first treats it as a documentary indictment. It catalogues what the Gulf sponsorship system does to the migrant labourer: the passport taken at arrival, the wage never paid, the body starved and beaten in a place with no lawful way out. The second register is more openly philosophical. It reads Najeeb's descent into the condition of the animals he herds as an instance of what Agamben calls bare life, the human being stripped to biological persistence and abandoned by every institution that might have recognised him. Ross Caputi's short essay is one instance of this second approach, mapping Najeeb's suspension outside civil protection onto the figure of *homo sacer*. Each reading catches something the novel plainly does. Neither reaches what is arguably its largest claim, which concerns not the fact of suffering but the categories through which the study of the Indian diaspora has learned to sort its objects.

The most authoritative of those categories is Mishra's. The *Literature of the Indian Diaspora* splits the field in two. On one side is the 'old' diaspora of classic capitalism: the nineteenth-century movement of indentured labourers, the *girmitiyas*, to the sugar and rubber colonies of Fiji, Mauritius, Trinidad, Guyana and Natal. Its imaginative signature is loss and an impossible longing for a homeland to which return is foreclosed. On the other side is the 'new' diaspora of late modern capitalism: the largely post-1965 migration of educated South Asian professionals to Britain, North America and Australasia, whose signature is mobility and a celebratory hybridity. Mishra's account has shaped a generation of scholarship, and its reach is considerable. Yet it rests on an assumed historical passage, from coerced rural labour and permanent exile to voluntary settlement and flexible belonging (Mishra).

The labour migrations that bind Kerala, and much of South Asia, to the Arabian Gulf never complete that passage. The Gulf migrant, the *pravasi*, is neither the settler-coolie of the Caribbean nor the citizen-professional of the Western global city. His route could hardly be more contemporary: the commercial flight, the recruitment agency, an oil economy hungry for construction and service labour. And yet he is denied the settlement, the political membership and the social reproduction that Mishra's 'new' diaspora treats as given. The Gulf states take his labour on strictly temporary terms and withhold naturalisation as a matter of policy. By every economic measure he belongs to late capitalism; he belongs to none of the diasporic formations that late capitalism was supposed to have produced. This is the void into which *Goat Days* speaks.

This paper argues that Benjamin's novel makes that void visible and, in doing so, shows up the limits of the binary that left it unmapped. Najeeb Muhammad is a Malayali sand-miner who reaches Saudi Arabia on a fraudulent visa, is seized at the airport by a stranger who becomes his master, and is held for years on an isolated desert farm, the *masara*. Through his ordeal the novel demonstrates that the disciplinary apparatus of nineteenth-century indenture has not been left behind by late capitalism but rebuilt inside it. The figure that carries the demonstration is the 'goat life': Najeeb's slow assimilation, in body, in speech and in reproductive capacity, into the herd he tends. I read that figure as the aesthetic form of labour extraction under petro-capitalism, and I argue that Najeeb is best understood not as bare life in the abstract but as the return of the indentured *girmitiya* within a specifically contemporary economy. For this formation I propose the term petro-indentured precariat. Since the novel is also a mediated and translated testimonio, the argument keeps its eye throughout on

the operations of translation and paratext by which a silenced labourer is made readable to a global audience, operations the text performs in the open. The discussion moves in four stages: the migrant's making as a legal non-subject under kafala; the zoomorphic reduction as an aesthetics of extraction; the structural return of indenture and the failure of Mishra's periodisation; and the mediation of the subaltern witness through translation and paratext.

### Literature Review

The scholarship this paper draws on belongs to three conversations that seldom meet. The first is the theory of the South Asian diaspora, where Mishra's binary is the reference point and Robin Cohen's typology of victim, labour, trade and imperial diasporas supplies the comparative grammar that has kept coerced and voluntary migration analytically apart. Both frameworks tend to place the plantation coolie and the metropolitan professional at the two ends of diasporic experience. The temporary Gulf worker falls between them, or falls out of the account altogether.

The second conversation is the anthropology and sociology of the contemporary Gulf, which has described in close detail the very condition diaspora theory has struggled to name. Neha Vora, writing on Dubai's Indian population, theorises a belonging without membership: a life lived at the centre of the economy and permanently outside the polity, which she captures in the paradox of the impossible citizen. Andrew Gardner, studying Indian workers in Bahrain, places kafala within a structure of everyday violence in which private sponsors hold quasi-sovereign power over the men bound to them. Aihwa Ong's flexible citizenship names the exact obverse of Najeeb's position: where Ong's mobile subjects turn capital into passports and movement, the Gulf labourer is pinned in place, his mobility confiscated with his documents. Together these studies establish that the Gulf produces a permanent temporariness for which the older diasporic categories keep no place.

The third conversation is about biopolitics and the ethics of subaltern representation. Agamben's *Homo Sacer* supplies the vocabulary of bare life, the ban and the state of exception that recent readings of *Goat Days* have found hard to resist, and Caputi's essay is the clearest case of that pull (Agamben; Caputi). The trouble, as this paper will argue, is that Agamben's ontology raises sovereign violence into an ahistorical condition and so brackets the one thing the novel keeps in view: the economic usefulness of the migrant's exclusion. Judith Butler's account of grievability offers a corrective, since it makes the recognition of a life as injurable depend on the frames through which it is seen rather than on a metaphysical given. The further question, of who speaks for the excluded labourer and in whose idiom, carries the discussion to John Beverley's theory of testimonio and to Gayatri Spivak's warning that the subaltern, silenced by the very structures that produce her, cannot simply be handed a voice (Beverley; Spivak).

What none of these conversations has done is bring them together on this novel. That indenture was itself unfree labour licensed by contract is not in dispute: Hugh Tinker's foundational study calls the nineteenth-century system a new system of slavery and documents the machinery that held it in place. That the contemporary Gulf binds its workers through debt, confinement and confiscated papers is likewise well established in the sociology already cited. The question left open is what this persistence means for literary diaspora theory. The existing criticism on *Goat Days* reads the book for trauma, for existential absurdity or for its human-rights charge, and the diaspora scholarship that might reperiodise the field has not turned to the novel to do it. This is where the paper places its contribution. It does not claim to discover that Gulf labour resembles indenture, a resemblance historians and sociologists have long remarked. It argues that Benjamin's novel supplies the aesthetic apparatus through which that resemblance becomes legible as diaspora, and that reading the novel this way forces a revision of the categories by which the Indian diaspora is periodised.

### Theoretical Framework

The reading that follows draws on these materials but subordinates them to a single analytic. Mishra's periodisation is treated not as an error to be thrown out but as a map whose blank spaces are diagnostic. Tinker's account of indenture as a new system of slavery provides the historical bridge: proof that unfree labour can survive inside, and be licensed by, the forms of modern contract. Agamben's bare life is kept as a description of Najeeb's condition and refused as an explanation of it. That distinction does real work. To say Najeeb is reduced to bare life is accurate; to stop there, as the Agambenian reading does, is to turn a historically specific labour relation into a timeless structure of sovereignty, and so to lose the economic logic the novel insists on. Butler's grievability, together with a materialist attention to the political economy of the Gulf, is enlisted to set bare life back in the labour archive from which the novel takes it. The last analytic governs the reading of form: the double frame of testimonio and epistemic violence, Beverley's mediated subaltern narrative and Spivak's insistence that such mediation is never transparent. Out of this synthesis comes the paper's operative term. The petro-indentured precariat names the diasporic subject who occupies the most advanced spaces of contemporary capital while being governed by the disciplinary mechanisms of the nineteenth-century plantation. The term is meant as a structural and analogical claim, not as an assertion of legal identity between two regimes whose juridical forms differ sharply.

### Methodology

The paper works by a qualitative and interpretive method built around close reading, paratextual analysis and historical comparison. Its primary object is Koyippally's English translation, the text through which *Goat Days* entered global circulation, and the reading treats that translation as a mediating act rather than a clear window onto the Malayalam. The corpus is deliberately small. A single novel read closely can carry a re-periodising argument in a way a survey cannot, because the argument depends on the fine grain of figuration, on how the turning of a man into a goat is staged sentence by sentence, and on which words the translation keeps and which it renders. The analysis runs along four axes. It reads the legal and spatial making of the migrant as a non-subject against the scholarship on kafala. It reads the zoomorphic reduction as an aesthetic figure whose referent is labour extraction. It sets the novel's narrative stages beside the documented sequence of the colonial indenture archive to test the periodising claim. And it reads paratext and translation for the marks they carry

of subaltern mediation. The method's chief limitation is also the nature of its object: to read the translated text is to read the migrant's testimony at one more remove, a remove the paper counts as part of its evidence rather than a fault to excuse.

## Analysis and Discussion

### The Legal Non-Subject: Kafala and the Privatisation of Sovereignty

To read Najeeb's captivity as generic cruelty is to miss its legal shape. Under the kafala system that governs labour migration across the Gulf Cooperation Council states, the right to enter, reside and work is tied not to the state but to an individual sponsor, the *kafeel*, to whom the migrant's legal existence is handed over. Vora and Gardner have shown how the arrangement passes a portion of sovereign power to private citizens, so that the worker meets the state only through the person of his employer (Vora; Gardner). Benyamin stages the onset of this condition exactly. Najeeb and his companion Hakeem land at Riyadh expecting the sponsor named on their papers. No one comes. Unable to read the language or find their way through the bureaucracy, they are gathered up by a stranger who loads them into the back of a truck and drives them into the desert. The confiscation of their passports that follows is the system's opening move, the act that severs the migrant from any standing of his own before the law.

The masara Najeeb is taken to gives spatial form to what the Gulf scholarship calls permanent temporariness. Set far from any road or settlement or means of contact, the farm is a place where the state is only a distant threat and the *arbab* holds total and immediate authority. He enforces work with beatings, doles out foul water and hard bread, forbids washing, and watches his herdsman through binoculars. Here Agamben's account of the ban fits as description. Najeeb is not beyond the reach of power; he is abandoned to it, held at the point where the law withdraws its protection but keeps its grip. Yet the novel will not let this abandonment drift free of its cause. The masara is a unit of production, and Najeeb's exclusion from legal personhood is exactly what makes his labour cheap, total and impossible to refuse.

The surest measure of the migrant's non-subjecthood is the manner of his rescue. When Najeeb at last escapes across the desert and reaches the city, he cannot approach the state as a victim, because the state does not know him as a subject with a claim to press. His only way home is to engineer his own arrest, to make himself legible to authority as a deportable body rather than a person with rights. The deportation prison becomes, against all expectation, the first place in years where the state registers him directly and overrides the private dominion of the *arbab*. To get his life back he must first accept the status of criminal. The scene compresses the whole argument about kafala. The system does not simply fail to protect the migrant; it makes him unprotectable, visible to the state only at the moment it expels him.

It is worth being precise about the sense in which this regime revives indenture. Nineteenth-century indenture was statutory. The colonial state administered it, the Emigration Acts codified it, and magistrates and penal sanction enforced it; Tinker records its bureaucratic apparatus in detail. Kafala works the other way, through the decentralised delegation of sovereign power to private sponsors rather than direct statutory control. The continuity between them is therefore structural and disciplinary rather than juridical. It lives in the shared mechanisms of recruitment debt, confiscated documents, spatial confinement and the criminalising of flight, which produce comparable unfreedom by different legal routes. The novel's strength is to make that kinship perceptible without collapsing the difference, since Najeeb's absconding is punished as an offence against a private master under a modern immigration code, not as the breach of a colonial labour contract.

### The Goat Life: Zoomorphic Reduction as an Aesthetics of Extraction

The novel's governing figure is the slow passage of the man into the animal. Najeeb does not only tend the herd; he grows assimilable to it, and Benyamin tracks the assimilation across three registers that together make up the 'goat life'. The first is bodily. With no water to spare for washing, Najeeb wears one garment for years and takes on the smell of the animals; his soles thicken until he can cross thorn and hot sand unshod; shut in the pen through sandstorms, he eats from the animals' trough. The body the labour regime wants is a body pared down to endurance, indistinguishable in its needs and its treatment from livestock.

The second register is linguistic and social, and here the figure reaches its depth. Cut off from human speech, Najeeb loses his fluency in Malayalam; his sounds shrink towards the calls he uses to drive the goats and camels. Against this loss of language he mounts one defence. He names the animals after the people of his life, relatives and acquaintances and figures from his town, until the herd holds the social world he can no longer otherwise inhabit. The gesture is not sentimental. It marks the moment when a human being, stripped of the linguistic and social ties that sustain personhood, projects those ties onto the only others left to him. Spivak's concern with the conditions under which the subaltern can be heard finds an oblique image here, in the labourer who has lost the very language his testimony would need.

The third register is reproductive, and it surfaces in the episode where the *arbab* makes Najeeb help castrate the young male goats. Holding the struggling animals while the work is done, Najeeb reads the act as an emblem of his own state. Kept from his pregnant wife, his body given over wholly to the extraction of labour, he too has been cut off from familial continuity and reduced to an instrument whose reproductive future is closed. The castration is the figure's logical end point: the worker maintained as living energy for the employer and severed from the reproduction of his own life. Across the three registers the novel does something more exact than mourn dehumanisation. It shows the labour regime dissolving the line between the human worker and the commercial animal, and it finds the cause of that dissolving not in an abstract sovereign decision but in the concrete demands of extraction.

This is the point at which the biopolitical reading needs correction rather than rejection. To call Najeeb bare life is right; to explain his condition through Agamben's sovereign ban alone is to cut it loose from the economy that produces it. The novel keeps that economy in the foreground. Najeeb's reduction is not the working out of a timeless structure by which sovereignty abandons the living being; it is the specific product of a petro-capitalist labour market that needs a body it can use without limit and discard without cost. Butler's grievability clarifies the novel's counter-move. By giving Najeeb's inner

life such detail, his memories and his prayers and his naming of the goats, the narrative works to make grievable a life the frames of Gulf labour treat as disposable. The zoomorphic figure is thus double. It registers the regime's reduction of the man to an animal and, at the same time, refuses that reduction by pressing the reader towards moral recognition of him.

### **The Return of Indenture and the Failure of the Binary**

Held in place by recruitment debt, confiscated papers and unfree labour, Najeeb's trajectory reproduces, stage for stage, the sequence Tinker's history assigns to the nineteenth-century coolie. The parallel is close enough to set out plainly. Recruitment works through deceit and debt: where the colonial *arkati* lured the villager with false promises and a mortgaged future, Najeeb is delivered to the Gulf by a fraudulent visa agent and a crushing loan. The passage that once carried the indentured labourer across the *kala pani* in a ship's hold becomes the commercial flight that ends in the cargo bed of a desert truck. The enclosed and overseen plantation barrack becomes the isolated *masara* under its watching *arbab*. The scurvy and the flogging of the estate reappear as Najeeb's starvation, his cracked skin and his beatings. And the fugitive status of the coolie who fled his indenture returns as the criminalised absconding of the migrant who flees his sponsor. What Tinker called a new system of slavery has, on this reading, taken on a newer form still.

The consequence for Mishra's periodisation is direct. His binary depends on a story in which the coerced agrarian labour of the 'old' diaspora gives way to the mobile professional migration of the 'new'. The Gulf corridor breaks the story's assumption of supersession. It is plainly a formation of late capitalism, expanded by the oil economy from the 1970s and run on the most contemporary machinery of recruitment and transport, and it still subjects its labourers to the disciplinary conditions the binary files under the nineteenth century. On the evidence of *Goat Days*, the 'old' diaspora is not a closed chapter but a living structure that late capitalism has absorbed and refitted. Mishra's two categories do not so much shut the Gulf migrant out as fail to see him, because their terms assume that coercion belongs to the past and mobility to the present. The formation the novel makes visible needs a name of its own. I propose the petro-indentured precariat: the migrant who works inside the ultramodern spaces of the Gulf while living that space through the labour discipline of the colonial plantation. The term needs careful placing. That the empirical continuity between old and new systems of bondage is demonstrable, at the level of contract and mobility and debt, has already been argued in the historical and sociological scholarship. What the paper adds is not that continuity but its cultural registration. *Goat Days* is the aesthetic apparatus through which the structural persistence of indenture becomes legible within postcolonial literary culture, and it is on the strength of that registration that the periodising categories of diaspora theory can be revised. Where the sociologist documents the parallel, the novel makes it thinkable as diaspora, and in the same movement obliges the theory to find room for a subject it had left unhoused.

### **Mediating the Subaltern Witness: Testimonio, Translation and Paratext**

The novel's argument cannot be separated from its form, and its form is that of a mediated *testimonio*. Benjamin has said plainly that the narrative rests on the account of a real Malayali migrant whose experience he reconstructed rather than invented, and he has framed the book as an attempt to record the lives of suffering that the familiar Gulf success story hides. That framing aligns the novel with the testimonial tradition Beverley theorises, in which a narrator who would not otherwise be heard reaches a public through an interlocutor who shapes the telling. But the mediation is precisely what Spivak's critique makes us examine. The labourer, silenced by legal exclusion and language and trauma, does not address the world's readers directly. His spoken account is composed into a Malayalam novel by an educated writer and then carried into global English by a translator, and at each stage his speech is altered as it is passed on.

Koyippally's translation is not a neutral conduit, and the paper reads its choices as part of the novel's meaning. Turning the Malayalam into a global postcolonial English, the translation still keeps a layer of untranslated words, *masara*, *arbab*, *kafeel*, *pattini*, that carry the particular legal and social violence of the Gulf labour regime. These retentions do more than supply local colour. They mark the places where the migrant's experience refuses to pass over into the receiving language, and they hold open, inside the English text, a space the translation declines to fill. The effect is to register the subaltern's silence as a formal limit rather than to smooth it away in fluent equivalence. The translated novel makes no pretence of having recovered an unmediated voice; in its retained vocabulary it records the distance the testimony has crossed.

The novel's claim to truth has itself drawn discussion, and that discussion belongs inside the argument rather than beside it. Benjamin offers the book as the reconstruction of a real man's ordeal, and the questions this raises, about the accuracy of the account, about the ethics of turning another's suffering into fiction, about what is owed to the person behind the character, are not blemishes on its truth-claims. They are symptoms of the difficult conditions under which the petro-indentured migrant becomes visible in world literature at all. The novel does not present the subaltern's voice as something it has securely obtained. In its paratext as in its prose, it stages the imperfect process by which a precarious labourer enters global literary consciousness, and it leaves the marks of that process on its surface.

### **Findings**

Several conclusions follow. The first is that *Goat Days* exposes the limits of Mishra's binary not by adding a case to one of its categories but by making visible a formation neither category can hold. The second is that this formation, the petro-indentured precariat, is defined by a paradox held in one breath: full membership in the economy of late capitalism and subjection to the labour discipline of colonial indenture. The third concerns method in the criticism of the novel. The biopolitical vocabulary of bare life describes Najeeb's condition accurately, but it explains that condition only once it is set back in the political economy of petro-capitalism; cut loose from that economy, it converts a labour relation into a metaphysics. The fourth is that the novel's mediation, its status as translated *testimonio*, is part of its intervention rather than a detail of packaging, since the retention of untranslatable legal and social vocabulary is the formal means by which the text marks the subaltern's silence. Taken together, these findings set the paper's contribution apart both from the



sociological work that has traced the continuity between old and new labour systems and from the criticism of *Goat Days* that has read it for trauma or absurdity or advocacy. The contribution is literary-theoretical: it shows that a single novel can reorganise the periodising categories of a field.

### Conclusion

Diaspora studies has tended to treat the Persian Gulf as an exception, a guest-worker corridor whose want of settlement and citizenship puts it outside the diasporic proper. Benyamin's novel suggests that the exception is really a challenge to the categories that made it one. By staging the reduction of a man to the condition of the animals he tends, and by rooting that reduction in the recruitment debt, confinement and criminalised flight that once defined colonial indenture, *Goat Days* shows the 'old' diaspora surviving inside the 'new', reorganised by petro-capital and licensed by *kafala*. The petro-indentured precariat is the name this paper

offers for the subject so produced, one who works in the most contemporary of economies under the oldest of disciplines. The reading has kept deliberately to a single text, and the concept it proposes asks to be tested against the wider archive of Gulf-migration writing, from the Malayalam fiction of the *pravasi* to the anglophone literature of the labour camps. What the reading of *Goat Days* secures is narrower, and secure in its narrowness: the categories by which the Indian diaspora has been periodised were drawn with the metropolitan West in view, and a novel written from the desert of the Gulf is enough to show where they give way.

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