

A Prison without Walls: Captivity and Survival in Benjamin's *Goat Days*

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Abstract: *Goat Days* presents Gulf migration not as a straightforward journey towards economic prosperity but as an experience of hunger, thirst, cultural displacement, bodily suffering, ecological alienation and captivity. The narrator enters the Arabian desert with dreams of financial security and social advancement, but his expectations collapse when he is transported to an isolated masara and forced to live among goats, sheep and camels under the authority of an abusive arbab. The desert functions as more than a geographical background. It becomes an active literary presence that shapes the narrator's body, language, memory, emotional life and understanding of the non-human world. Food connects the narrator with family, domestic affection, cultural identity and trauma, while hunger exposes his vulnerability and loss of agency. Water becomes a symbol of life, dignity, memory, power and survival. The narrator's relationship with animals gradually develops from ignorance and fear into knowledge, companionship, identification and ecological awareness. Goats become substitutes for the human community from which he is separated, while animal birth and motherhood awaken memories of his wife and unborn child. The narrative also creates a powerful contrast between desert captivity and formal imprisonment. The prison provides regular meals, prayer, companionship and relative care, whereas migrant employment under the arbab resembles slavery. Through first-person narration, sensory imagery, symbolism, irony, personification, environmental contrast and spiritual reflection, the text transforms the migrant body, desert landscape, water, food, animals, fences, rain, moonlight, dawn, the oasis and the banyan tree into literary symbols of exploitation, endurance, memory, resistance and freedom.

Key Words: Gulf migration, desert literature, food memory, ecological consciousness, migrant displacement, water symbolism, human-animal relationships.

Introduction

Migration narratives frequently originate in dreams of economic progress, family security, personal dignity and social mobility. The foreign land is imagined as a space in which poverty ends and prosperity begins. In *Goat Days*, however, the narrator's journey to the Gulf destroys these expectations. The world that promises employment and comfort gradually becomes a landscape of hunger, thirst, fear, isolation, bodily exhaustion, animal labour and forced dependence.

The narrative derives its emotional power not simply from the description of exploitation but from the literary representation of embodied suffering. Hunger is felt in the stomach, dust restricts breathing, sand causes bodily pain, cold water gives temporary relief, familiar pickles recall home and the bleating of hundreds of goats announces the narrator's new existence. His body becomes a living record of the distance between the Gulf he imagines and the desert he actually encounters.

The Arabian desert is not merely a passive setting against which the narrator's suffering occurs. It determines his access to food, water, sanitation, shelter, companionship, movement and freedom. Its heat, cold, darkness, wind, dust, rain, vastness and emptiness enter his consciousness. The landscape takes up different roles as setting, antagonist, prison, teacher, spiritual testing ground and eventual pathway towards liberation.

The narrator's displacement is cultural, linguistic, emotional and ecological. Kerala survives in his memory as a landscape of water, greenery, domestic routine, familiar food, family affection and social belonging. The desert, by contrast, appears as a space of scarcity, silence, exposure and uncertainty. Yet this opposition gradually changes. As the narrator observes animals and endures extreme weather, he develops a deeper awareness of the environment. During his escape, the same landscape that confines him also offers moonlight, mist, an oasis, and the possibility of freedom.

The desert develops an important contrast between two forms of imprisonment. The narrator experiences the desert as an open prison where geographical vastness prevents freedom. Later, the official prison gives him regular food, companionship, religiously organised time and relative security. This ironic reversal questions conventional definitions of labour, employment, captivity and freedom.

Through food imagery, environmental contrast, animal symbolism, sensory description, first-person testimony, religious imagery, memory, humour and narrative irony, *Goat Days* exposes the collapse of the Gulf dream and examines how the narrator struggles to preserve his humanity in a system that attempts to reduce him to a labouring body.

Objectives of the Study

The present study examines how *Goat Days* transforms Gulf migration into a literary exploration of hunger, ecological alienation, animal companionship, captivity, memory, and freedom.

1. To examine the collapse of the Gulf dream and the desert's function as an active literary setting, antagonist and open prison.
2. To analyse food, hunger, water and the migrant body as symbols of memory, trauma, dignity, survival and control.

3. To study the narrator's changing relationship with animals through observation, naming, birth, companionship and parallel structures of exploitation.
4. To investigate how nature, prison irony and memory transform migrant suffering into a literary testimony of endurance and freedom.

Research Methodology

The paper thematically explores Gulf disillusionment, food and hunger, the desert as landscape and prison, water symbolism, human–animal relationships, migrant captivity, nature and testimony. The analysis draws upon ecocritical reading, human–animal studies and a psycho-literary understanding of memory and trauma.

The Gulf Dream and Migrant Disillusionment

The narrative's central irony originates in the contrast between expectation and reality. Before reaching the Gulf, the narrator imagines material comfort and social advancement. His dream consists of modern luxuries - "An AC car, an AC room, a soft mattress with a TV in front of it!" (63). The air-conditioned car and room symbolise the popular image of Gulf prosperity and promise protection from heat, physical comfort, leisure and economic success.

The narrator instead travels through dust and darkness before sleeping on the desert sand beside an enclosure filled with goats. The situation he is placed in reflects Edward Said's views on exile "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home" ("The Future of Criticism" 173). The hard earth replaces his dreamed mattress, his private room by an exposed landscape and his imagined modern employment by forced animal labour. His body immediately exposes the falsity of the migration fantasy. The narrator understands the absurd difference between expectation and experience. He reflects that no one else fully understands how far his dreams stand from the reality of his situation. His description of the "first night in the Gulf was such a fiasco" (63) and all these collapse his hopes into bitter humour. Laughter temporarily protects him from despair and becomes a means of psychological survival. The desert he encounters differs completely from the Gulf described by successful migrants. As the vehicle carries him farther from human settlement, he recognises that "The Gulf I had learned about from so many people was not like this" (52). The statement exposes the difference between the public narrative of migration and the hidden experience of exploited workers.

Stories of prosperity circulate widely, while stories of suffering remain concealed. The narrator's testimony challenges this selective cultural memory. His account reveals a Gulf defined not by wealth and comfort but by hunger, language barriers, geographical isolation, violence and the absence of meaningful choice.

Food as Cultural Memory and Emotional Trauma

Food occupies a central position in *Goat Days* because it connects physical nourishment with memory, family, cultural identity, affection and trauma. Eating is never represented as a purely biological act. Particular foods carry emotional histories. In prison, the meals include different kinds of meat - "chicken, mutton, camel" (18). Although food is available, the narrator cannot eat when mutton is served. He admits, "Even the word mutton made my eyes moist" (19). The sight, touch and name of mutton activate memories of his suffering in the desert. His emotions are on par with Mannur's views: "Culinary narratives, suffused with nostalgia, often manage immigrant memories and imagined returns to the 'homeland'" (*Culinary Fictions* 27).

Food becomes a site where the past returns involuntarily. The prison meal belongs to the present, but its smell and texture carry the narrator back into captivity. His body reacts before he consciously controls his response. His refusal develops into a repeated ritual. On days when mutton is served, he “wouldn’t even sit for the meal” (19). He distances himself physically from the communal plate because he cannot distance himself psychologically from memory. Even severe hunger does not completely overcome the power of trauma. The narrator explains, “If I was very hungry, I would dip the khubus in water and eat” (19). Bread dipped in water becomes a minimal meal of survival. He chooses physical deprivation rather than consume food associated with emotional suffering.

Food serves a double function - it nourishes the body, but it can also injure the mind. The narrator’s inability to eat mutton shows that trauma enters ordinary objects and transforms their meaning.

Hunger and the Vulnerable Migrant Body

Hunger appears throughout the novel as a sign of migrant powerlessness. The narrator reaches the Gulf without eating properly. Nervousness prevents him from eating before departure and unfamiliarity prevents him from eating during the flight. As he travels with the arbab, he declares, “I was actually starving” (51). His hunger becomes frightening because he does not know when or whether food will be provided. In Kerala, hunger occurs within a familiar social and environmental world. In the desert, it exists alongside linguistic isolation, fear, geographical uncertainty and dependence upon a stranger.

The narrator desperately wants necessities: “I wanted to howl, arbab, please stop, get us some food, some water” (51). His use of “howl” suggests an urgent cry that is almost animalistic. Yet the desire to speak does not become actual speech. He confesses, “nothing came out of my throat. It would not come out. I was afraid” (52). The throat becomes a powerful symbol because it is both the passage through which food and water enter the body and the organ through which speech emerges. The narrator, however, lacks nourishment and voice simultaneously.

The narrator’s silence does not mean that he has no thoughts or needs. It results from fear and unequal power. The arbab does not require chains to control him; uncertainty and terror prevent him from expressing even the most basic demands. Hunger therefore weakens both the body and the will. The narrator becomes physically dependent upon the arbab, while fear prevents him from questioning the conditions of that dependence.

The Desert as an Alien and Hostile Landscape

The desert functions as an active literary presence that shapes the narrator’s emotions, body and choices. According to Buell, “The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence” (*The Environmental Imagination* 7). Dust, darkness, sand, distant hills, emptiness and geographical unfamiliarity transform the environment into a source of fear. During the journey, even the sky seems to participate in the narrator’s alienation. He observes that “the stars hid their lustre” (52). Stars traditionally suggest beauty, guidance, hope and divine order. In this scene, their hidden light reflects his uncertainty and lack of direction.

When the narrator reaches the masara, he sees “not a building or tree anywhere in sight” (55). Buildings represent human society, while trees represent life, shade, rootedness, fertility and protection. Their absence makes the landscape appear emptied of everything that permits ordinary habitation. His cry, “My Lord, where have I ended up?” (55) transforms

geographical confusion into spiritual anxiety. He does not simply ask where the vehicle has taken him. He questions the direction of his entire life.

As his captivity continues, the narrator encounters an even more severe landscape. He remembers that “it was only sheer emptiness that filled me then” (74). External emptiness becomes internal emotion. The desert’s barrenness enters his consciousness and becomes the psychological form of displacement. The narrator challenges the familiar image of a desert composed only of flowing sand. He initially sees hard soil and boulders. Unlike Kerala, where vines spread through rocky areas, “there was not a speck of green here” (74). He describes the environment as “a sterile wasteland” (74).

The adjective “sterile” carries ecological, emotional and symbolic meanings. The landscape seems incapable of fertility, growth, tenderness and renewal. It reflects the narrator’s own separation from his pregnant wife, family, home and future child. The desert consequently functions as a literary antagonist. It does not intentionally punish him, but its scarcity, vastness and climatic extremity strengthen the arbab’s control.

The Desert as an Open Prison

One of the narrative’s most powerful paradoxes is that the limitless desert functions as a prison. Its openness does not provide freedom. The absence of roads, landmarks, settlements, water sources and geographical knowledge makes escape almost impossible. When the narrator considers running away, he observes, “All around there was only a vast expanse of nothing” (57). The phrase “vast expanse” suggests openness, while “nothing” suggests the absence of possibility. He understands that without knowledge of the terrain, he “would die wandering in this desert” (57). The environment becomes the arbab’s invisible wall. Physical chains and conventional guards are unnecessary because the landscape itself prevents movement. Yi-Fu Tuan in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* writes “From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space” (6). This is especially relevant because it refuses to treat open space as liberating. Space contains freedom, but it also contains danger when it lacks familiarity, security, resources and recognisable landmarks. In *Goat Days*, the masara offers limited security through food, water and shelter, whereas the apparently open desert represents uncertainty, thirst and possible death. The narrator’s statement that “Every prison has its own aura of safety” (141) closely corresponds to Tuan’s distinction between the security of place and the simultaneous freedom and threat of space.

Dominique Moran, Jennifer Turner and Anna Schliehe in “Carcerality Beyond Prison Walls” observe that forms of control can “operate beyond conventional carceral spaces” (666). Their concept allows the desert to be understood as a carceral landscape. The narrator is physically mobile, but his movement is restricted by thirst, remoteness, geographical ignorance and the risk of death. The landscape performs the function of prison architecture even though it contains no visible boundary. In a conventional prison, walls limit the prisoner. In the desert, the absence of boundaries creates restriction. The narrator can theoretically move in any direction, but every direction contains the possibility of thirst, disorientation, exposure and death. As captivity continues, he recognises that “Every prison has its own aura of safety” (141). The statement expresses the psychological complexity of confinement. The masara is cruel, but it offers minimal food, water, and shelter. The open desert promises freedom but may take his life.

The narrator’s hesitation to escape does not demonstrate cowardice. It reveals his awareness of environmental danger. Freedom without water, direction, clothing, or shelter may become another form of death. The desert enters his imagination and creates

psychological boundaries. He remains confined not only because the arbab may pursue him but also because he cannot imagine a survivable route beyond the masara.

Water as Life, Memory and Human Dignity

Before captivity, the narrator considers water an abundant and ordinary part of existence. He associates bathing and cleanliness with personal discipline and cultural habit. In the desert, water becomes scarce, controlled, and economically valued. Gaston Bachelard associates water with imagination, memory, purification and psychic value, reinforcing its cultural and spiritual meanings and is of the view that “Water is truly the transitory element” (*Water and Dreams* 6). When the narrator attempts to use water for sanitation, the arbab beats him and declares that it is “meant for my goats” (78). The statement establishes a hierarchy based on economic usefulness. The goats produce milk, offspring, and profit; the worker is treated as a replaceable instrument.

The narrator’s inability to wash represents more than physical discomfort. It marks the destruction of his previous identity. He remembers, “Without water, nothing happened in my life” (78). Water connects him with cleanliness, bathing, domestic life, health, culture, and home. He recognises that “the breaking of all my habits began that day” (78). Captivity begins by controlling the body’s most ordinary needs. The narrator is gradually separated from the practices through which he understands himself. Water consequently changes from a familiar natural resource into a sacred and forbidden substance. Its scarcity changes his language, behaviour, bodily habits, and emotional responses.

The restriction of water becomes a form of political control. The arbab decides when the narrator drinks, washes and how water is distributed. Scarcity becomes surveillance. Even when the arbab is not present, the narrator fears touching water. The master’s rules enter his consciousness and become self-discipline. Environmental scarcity and human cruelty combine to produce domination.

Human-Animal Relationships and Ecological Awareness

The narrator’s relationship with goats develops from ignorance and fear into observation, knowledge, companionship and identification. Although goats live near his home in Kerala, he admits that he has never examined them carefully. His confession raises an important ecological question. Human beings may live close to animals without truly understanding them. Physical proximity does not automatically create ethical attention.

The narrator eventually recognises “the need to keep our eyes open to our environment” (89). This realisation forms the centre of his developing ecological consciousness. Environmental awareness begins with observation. The narrator learns to identify bodily features, illnesses, sounds, habits, reproductive cycles, food preferences and emotional responses.

John Berger’s “*Why Look at Animals?*” examines modern animal objectification; the narrator counters it by recognising goats as individual subjects “With their parallel lives, animals offer man a companionship which is different from any offered by human exchange” (Berger 6). The goats cease to appear as an anonymous herd. They become individual beings with distinct faces, temperaments, movements, and needs. This transformation challenges the arbab’s economic view of animals. The arbab sees milk, wool, offspring, meat, and profit. The narrator increasingly sees vulnerable living companions.

Naming the Goats: Memory and Imaginative Resistance

Borkfelt's statement "Giving an animal a name does often draw it closer to us. It can make us think about it as an individual, a person" (121) closely matches the narrator's relationship with Lalitha, Ragini, Padmini and the other goats. Naming removes the named goats from the arbab's anonymous herd and makes them recognisable individuals. He later gives other goats the names of neighbours, acquaintances, actors and public figures. Naming serves a practical purpose because it helps him distinguish the animals. Its emotional and literary significance, however, is greater. Through these names, the masara becomes an imaginative recreation of Kerala. The animals carry the narrator's lost community into the desert.

The narrator observes that a goat's face is "quite similar to a human's" (161). He chooses names according to facial expressions, behaviour, sounds, gait, temperament and personal associations. The practice of naming resists the arbab's economic worldview. The arbab treats the goats as productive units, while the narrator transforms them into individual characters with personalities and emotional identities. He constructs personalities and personal histories around them, transforming the herd into an imaginative version of his Kerala community.

Naming also protects the narrator's humanity. Through the animals, he continues to remember, speak, scold, care, love, and form relationships. His imagination prevents the masara from becoming a completely impersonal space. The goats become a substitute society. They enable him to maintain a connection with the social world that captivity attempts to erase.

Animal Birth, Fatherhood and Emotional Projection

The birth of a goat becomes one of the narrative's most emotionally significant incidents. The narrator has never witnessed an animal giving birth and does not know what assistance it requires. Nevertheless, he responds instinctively. The mother goat immediately licks the newborn and guides it towards her udders. The narrator recognises her maternal responsibility and compares it with his own uncertain position as an absent husband and possible father.

The birth releases memories that the narrator tries to suppress. Sainu is pregnant when he leaves Kerala, and he has no information about her delivery. He interprets the birth of the male kid as a possible sign that his wife has given birth to a son. He names the newborn Nabeel, the name he imagines for his own child. He calls the kid "the present Allah gave me" (107). The goat becomes a symbolic son and receives the paternal affection that the narrator cannot give to his human child. This emotional projection reveals the depth of his loneliness. The scene dissolves the boundary between human and animal experience. Birth, vulnerability, motherhood, affection and care appear as shared conditions of life.

Animal Exploitation and Environmental Injustice

Cary Wolfe in *Animal Rites* critiques the reduction of nonhuman life to instrumental value, supporting the novel's parallel structures of animal and migrant exploitation with his views "Human freedom . . . has as its material condition of possibility absolute control over the lives of nonhuman others" (Wolfe 7). The narrative extends its ethical concern beyond the narrator's personal suffering. It questions the treatment of animals forced to live in unsuitable environments. During winter, sheep are brought to the masara for breeding and wool production. The narrator recognises that sheep are better suited to cold mountainous regions

and concludes, “Rearing them in the desert is an injustice to them” (141). The word “injustice” places animal suffering within an ethical framework. The sheep remain in the desert not because the environment supports them but because the arbab gains profit from their wool.

The same economic logic governs the narrator’s existence. Both the worker and animals are removed from suitable environments, confined, controlled and valued according to productivity. This comparison does not erase the difference between human and animal experience. It exposes a shared structure of domination. Food, reproduction, water, movement, rest, and shelter are controlled in order to increase economic benefit. Ecological injustice and labour exploitation therefore exist within the same system.

Prison as a Paradoxical Place of Care

The narrative reverses the conventional relationship between freedom and imprisonment. The narrator enters the Gulf as a supposedly free worker but loses control over food, water, movement, communication, sleep, sanitation, and shelter. The official prison, by contrast, provides milk, tea, khubus, curry, rice, meat, biscuits, prayer, routine and companionship. This contrast does not glorify imprisonment. It condemns a labour system so brutal that formal confinement appears comparatively humane.

Hameed’s statement about improving health in prison exposes the depth of the narrator’s earlier deprivation. Prison provides the basic care that migrant employment denies. The narrative consequently asks the reader to reconsider the meaning of captivity. A person may be legally free while possessing no meaningful choice, mobility, voice or dignity. A prisoner may experience forms of community and care unavailable in the supposedly free world.

Nature as Threat and Companion

Nature remains morally ambivalent throughout the narrative. The desert exposes the narrator to thirst, heat, cold, darkness, dust, disorientation, and exhaustion. Yet natural elements also assist his survival and escape. During captivity, the desert functions as the arbab’s invisible wall. During escape, movement through the same desert becomes the narrator’s only possible route towards freedom. Moonlight illuminates the path, darkness hides the fugitives, and mist may conceal their movement. The narrator feels that “both Allah and nature were with us” (191).

Nature, previously associated with punishment and imprisonment, becomes an ally. This transformation does not mean that the desert becomes safe. It means that the narrator’s relationship with it changes. The same landscape becomes prison or pathway according to his circumstances. Nature cannot be reduced to a purely hostile or benevolent force. It remains unpredictable and independent of human systems.

Major Findings

1. The desert functions as an active literary presence and an open prison. Its scarcity, vastness, climatic extremes, and treelessness shape the narrator’s body, consciousness, movement, and understanding of freedom.
2. Food, hunger, water, and bodily suffering carry the narrative’s strongest meanings of memory, trauma, dignity, survival, and power. The control of basic necessities becomes a method of dehumanisation.

3. The narrator's relationship with goats, sheep, and camels develops from fear and ignorance into observation, ecological awareness, companionship, and identification. Naming and animal birth preserve memory and emotional connection.
4. Migrant exploitation and animal exploitation operate through parallel structures of confinement, restricted movement, controlled nourishment, reproductive regulation, and economic objectification.
5. Nature remains ambivalent: the desert confines and wounds, while darkness, moonlight, and the possibility of escape reveal nature as a companion that exceeds the arbab's authority.
6. Prison irony and first-person narration redefine captivity and freedom. By narrating his experience, the narrator converts enforced silence into testimony and regains the interpretative authority denied to him during captivity.

Conclusion

Goat Days transforms Gulf migration into a literary narrative of hunger, memory, ecological alienation, bodily suffering, animal companionship, captivity, and survival. The foreign land initially appears as a space of economic opportunity, but the narrator encounters a world governed by hunger, thirst, fear, language barriers, geographical isolation, and forced labour.

Food becomes one of the narrative's most important symbols. The fish pickle prepared by the narrator's mother and the lemon pickle prepared by Sainu preserve domestic affection and cultural belonging. Mutton activates traumatic memory, while khubus dipped in water represents endurance. Prison meals expose the irony of finding nourishment and companionship within formal confinement.

The desert functions as setting, antagonist, prison, teacher, and spiritual testing ground. Its vastness creates captivity, its dust attacks the body, its darkness conceals the future, and its treelessness represents the absence of shelter and rootedness. Although the narrator can see the horizon, he cannot initially find a path towards freedom. Water becomes a symbol of life, cultural identity, dignity, power, and grace. The arbab's restriction of water demonstrates how natural scarcity can be transformed into political domination. Rain later reverses the balance of power and reveals the master's vulnerability before nature.

The narrator's forced labour among goats, sheep, and camels gradually develops his ecological consciousness. He learns that living near animals does not necessarily mean understanding them. True environmental knowledge begins through attentive observation. His naming of the goats transforms them from economic objects into individual companions. Through their names and personalities, he recreates the community from which he is separated.

Animal birth and motherhood intensify the narrative's emotional power. Nabeel becomes the symbolic son whom the narrator cannot meet, while the newborn's separation from its mother mirrors the migrant's separation from Sainu and his family. The narrator's declaration, "I spent the winter as a sheep among the sheep" (140), challenges fixed boundaries between humanity and animality. The human master acts without compassion, while the sheep provide warmth and companionship. The narrative suggests that humanity is revealed through care rather than power.

Nature remains ambivalent. The desert wounds, confines, and disorients, but moonlight, darkness, mist, dawn, water, the oasis, and the symbolic banyan tree offer protection and renewal. During escape, the landscape changes from prison to pathway. Dawn announces a new life, and the oasis becomes a restorative Eden. The contrast between the masara and the official prison creates the narrative's deepest irony. The supposedly free migrant experiences starvation, violence, silence, and confinement, while the prisoner receives food, routine, companionship, prayer, and temporary care. Freedom therefore cannot be defined simply by the absence of walls.

Through first-person narration, sensory imagery, symbolism, personification, ecological contrast, humour, and irony, *Goat Days* dismantles the myth of Gulf prosperity. The narrator's body becomes the most reliable witness to exploitation, while memory and storytelling preserve the identity that captivity attempts to destroy. Ultimately, the narrative demonstrates that ecological and human consciousness emerge through vulnerability. The narrator learns the value of food through hunger, water through thirst, shelter through exposure, animals through companionship, family through separation, and freedom through captivity. The desert attempts to empty him of identity, but his relationships with memory, faith, animals, nature, and narration enable him to endure and remain human.

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