



Docile Bodies in Benyamin's *The Goat Days*

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Abstract

The Benyamin's Goat Days portrays the harrowing experiences of Najeeb, a migrant worker in the Gulf, who is subjected to extreme physical and psychological oppression. This research seeks to explore how Najeeb's transformation into a submissive, compliant, and dehumanized figure aligns with Michel Foucault's concept of "docile bodies." Specifically, the study interrogates how mechanisms of surveillance, isolation, normalization, and control are employed by oppressive systems to produce a subject who internalizes discipline and relinquishes autonomy. The problem lies in understanding how systemic structures of power operate not only through overt violence but also through subtle techniques of normalization and bodily regulation — reducing the protagonist to a state of passive endurance. The paper poses several questions: How does Goat Days depict the transformation of Najeeb into a "docile body" in the Foucauldian sense? What role does physical space (the desert, the sheep pen, the sponsor's compound) play in shaping Najeeb's docility and loss of agency? What disciplinary mechanisms (e.g., surveillance, isolation, routines, punishment) are used to control and condition Najeeb's body and behavior? Through this analysis, the present paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersections between literature and social control.

Key Words : The Gulf, Docile Bodies, Normalization, Control, Michel Foucault, The Goat Days.

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الأجساد المطيعة في رواية أيام الماعز لبنيامين

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المستخلص

تصور رواية أيام الماعز لبنيامين التجارب القاسية التي يمر بها نجيب، العامل المهاجر في الخليج، الذي يتعرض لقمع جسدي ونفسي شديد. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف كيف أن تحول نجيب إلى شخصية خاضعة، مطيعة، ومنزوعة الإنسانية يتماشى مع مفهوم ميشيل فوكو لـ "الأجساد المطيعة". وتنتقل الدراسة على وجه التحديد الكيفية التي تستخدم بها الأنظمة القمعية آليات المراقبة، والعزل، والتطبيع، والسيطرة لإنجاح ذات تستبطن الانضباط وتتخلى عن الاستقلالية. تكمن الإشكالية في فهم كيف تعمل البنية السلطوية المنهجية ليس فقط من خلال العنف المباشر، بل أيضاً عبر تقنيات خفية من التطبيع والتنظيم الجسدي — مما يحول البطل إلى حالة من التحمل السلي. تطرح الورقة عدة تساؤلات: كيف تصور رواية *أيام الماعز* تحول نجيب إلى 'جسد مطيع' بالمعنى الفوكوي؟ ما دور الفضاء الفيزيائي (الصحراء، حظيرة الغنم، مجمع الكفيل) في تشكيل طاعة نجيب وقدانه لوكاللة؟ ما الآليات التأديبية (مثل المراقبة، العزل، الروتين، والعقاب) التي تُستخدم للسيطرة على جسد نجيب وسلوكه وتشكيلهما؟ ومن خلال هذا التحليل، تساهم هذه الورقة في تعميق الفهم حول تقاطعات الأدب والضبط الاجتماعي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الخليج، الأجساد المطيعة، التطبيع، السيطرة، ميشيل فوكو، أيام الماعز.

1. INTRODUCTION

This present paper employs the Foucauldian concept of Docile Bodies to understand the ways of control, domination and how the individual turns to be obedient as portrayed in Benjamin's *The Goat Days*. Foucault's concept, as it is explained in his publication *Discipline and Punish: Birth of Prison* (1975), is concerned with addressing how modern societies exercise influence over individuals through some mechanism such as surveillance and normalization and physical, psychological, and soul torturing.

The Goat Days narrates the harrowing experiences of Indian workers in the Gulf of (Saudia Arabia). In the novel, the author depicts in detail the physical and emotional pain

that these workers suffer from. But as a story about human suffering, it cannot be tied down to disability theory but can be better explained by master/servant relations of postmodernism and, therefore, is more expansive in its critique of the system. First published in 2008, the story tells about the harrowing experiences of Indian migrant laborer, Najeeb, who is trapped in a cycle of forced labor in the Gulf region. “*The Goat Days* explores the alternate world that many unknown Malayalees encounter and aims to create an eye-opener for those with gulf dreams. Initially, the narrative doesn’t seem much as a slave narrative but once he arrives in Saudi Arabia it becomes a slave narrative” (Kurup, 2018, p. 2).

It is written by Benny Daniel, known by his pen name ‘Benyamin’. Born in 1971, this Indian novelist works in Malayalam, a language that is especially spoken in the Kerala state. The majority of his 25 published works, which include memoirs, novels, and short stories, center on the relationships between his people and their homeland and the outside world. (“Benyamin (Benny Daniel) From 6 September to 7 November 2023”).

Commenting on *The Good Days*, Kashif Hussain writes:

“The novel presents the life of Najeeb Muhammad, an expatriate missing in Saudi Arabia. He wanted to work in the Persian Gulf States and send back money to his home in India. Unfortunately, he was compelled by a series of incidents into a slave-like existence in the middle of Saudi deserts with an Arabic supervisor who beats him occasionally. In the end, he strives in a hazardous way to escape the situation and succeeds with much trouble and losing his brother like a friend, in the desert. I must recommend reading this hspectacular and awe-inspiring story at the earliest. (2021)

Foucauldian Docile Bodies refers to the way power shapes individuals to be obedient and useful through discipline. In the classical age, institutions like the military, schools, hospitals, and workshops developed techniques to control and manipulate the body at a detailed level. This involved regulating movements, gestures, and behaviors to maximize efficiency and submission. Foucault argues that discipline transforms individuals into "docile bodies" by subjecting them to constant observation, training, and correction. This process increases their utility (economic productivity) while ensuring their obedience (political control). Unlike earlier forms of power, which relied on overt domination, disciplinary power operates subtly, embedding control into everyday practices and routines.

Foucault emphasizes the idea that high power can make subject convinced that they are already watched, even if they are not. Therefore, they will ‘automatically’ discipline themselves to fit into what the power wants. In his terms, Foucault (1975) writes: “The exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces using observation” (*Discipline and Punish: Birth of Prison*, p. 200). Foucault (1978) holds that disciplinary power should not be confused with repression: “If power was never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you believe that we should manage to obey it?” (*History of Sexuality*, p. 36). He adds: “Where there is power there is

resistance” (p. 36). This refers to the idea that “power relations between individuals cannot be reduced to master-slave or oppressor-victim relations, but they are productive relations because they imply resistance – without which no power relation can be conceived: there is power, there is always someone who resists it.” (Ballan, p. 39).

The concept illustrates how modern institutions use detailed techniques to create individuals who conform to societal norms, making them both productive and governable. It highlights the intersection of power, knowledge, and the body in shaping human behavior.

2. DISCUSSION

The novel starts with Najeeb’s first impression and his hopes when he went to the Gulf in order to work and financially help his family in India. However, he is disappointed because he has to endure poor working conditions and he is treated cruelly. He finds that he is forced to work long hours under bad conditions where his welfare and human dignity are extremely ignored.

As the novel unfolds, Najeeb finds himself in a very bad situation. The dehumanization, loneliness, and erasure of individuality are reflected in Najeeb’s physical and psychological torture and Hell. The close monitoring by the farm owner creates a feeling of prison-like enclosure that is in concordance with Foucault’s notions of disciplinary power and control. All these factors reduce Najeeb to a state of suffering while thinking about the past, family, and dreams. Special emphasis is made on analyzing the man’s psychological condition, which shows how extreme cases of labor utilization affect a person’s well-being and identity. Such a bad condition makes Najeeb ‘voluntarily’ want to go to prison so that he would be rescued from the prison of the arbab. He says: “Despite its harshness, I had concluded that prison was the best option to survive my circumstances. Yes, I landed myself in prison because of my desire to live. Can you imagine how much suffering I must have endured to voluntarily choose imprisonment!” (Benyamin, 2008/2012, p. 15).

Docile bodies case is exercised through close vigilance and disciplinary measures, procedures for standardization, and consequent disciplining of the subject’s conduct and bodily existence. Foucault argues that when people are aware of the presence of authority that observes their activities, they are disciplined to regulate their activities even when there is no authority around them to monitor their conduct. This means that this system of surveillance keeps the people behaving the way that the rulers or regulators want them to, in effect turning them into their monitors. Foucault (1975) argues:

“Anyone who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his subjection.” (*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, p. 202).

In *The Goat Days*, the system of surveillance is pervasive and disturbing, reflecting Foucault's concept of the panopticon. In such touching words, Najeeb expresses his suffering with the Arabab:

"He shot at the sky with his gun, demonstrated the range of the binoculars, observed me from the top of his vehicle whenever I went out, and drove around me when he felt that I had gone too far. I feared he would never let me escape from this hell. I had observed fear and precaution in each action of the scary figure. I could discern that fear in each word he uttered to me: Never attempt to flee. He will kill you if you do—that unkind, brutal, ruthless arbab" (Benyamin, 2008/2012, p. 79).

Since the physical control is exerted by the oppressive figure, Najeeb is always under the watchful eyes of the person who exercises psychological control over him. The threat of getting caught or punished, shown in "Never attempt to flee", is reminiscent of the panoptic system of control. The arbab functions like a vigilante. It is an Arabic word that means 'master. In Foucauldian terms, the arbab acts as a panoptic watcher, implanting fear through permanent monitoring: "observed me from the top of his vehicle whenever I went out". Therefore, Najeeb becomes aware of being watched and develops self-observance. This illustrates how panoptic power can exercise influence over humans without confrontation.

Najeeb's suffering begins on the goat farm (massara), where he is cruelly mistreated by the arbab. In his opinion, the Masara serves as a desert prison where the Arbab carries out numerous violent crimes against the Indian laborers. This power dynamic is depicted in a scene where the arbab ferociously attacks and abuses Hameed:

"As soon as he saw Hameed, the Arab jumped at him like a cheetah and rained blows on him. He beat him with his hand, his belt, and the iqal which secures the gutra, till his anger subsided. Like the others in the block, I could only watch and cry. 'I wanted to go home. I could not bear to be there any longer. Let me go... leave me ... leave me ...' Although Hameed screamed, the Arab dragged him to the room of the warden" (Benyamin, 2008/2012, p. 28).

In the masara, the arbab enforces a system of power and submission, turning the workers into objects of control, further dehumanizing them under a rigid social hierarchy that strips them of any autonomy or freedom until they be normalized with their life situations. According to Foucauldian theory, power is not a force, ability, or authority. Harikumar argues that "Foucault's view on power is that it is impersonal. Foucault views power as a set of relations. Power is attributable and it can be exercised by agents over other agents. The power relations always have an immediate hold upon the body. A body becomes productive only when the body becomes subjective" (p. 33).

It is necessary to shed light on Foucault's *panopticon*. Foucault coined the term 'panopticism' in 1975 and began by providing a brief overview of Bentham's utilitarian

theory. Panopticism, the ideology of the surveillance society, was based on Bentham's conception of a penitentiary as an all-seeing overseer. (*Beyond Foucault*, 2016, p. 2).

According to Foucault, Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, which subverts the conventional notion of a dungeon, is an example of modern punishment. The purpose of this system is to continuously and anonymously monitor its subjects. Because of the panopticon's design, all of the inmates (Najeeb) can be observed by a single person, the arbab in this book. There are two types in *The Goat Days*: 'desert/metaphorical prison' and 'Sumesi/real prison'. Strangely, the desert prison (the living under the arbab) is more brutal than the real one. It serves as a resort and a refuge to which Najeeb (and those who are in his condition) seeks to get rid of the harsh treatment he receives from his arbab. Najeeb wonders: "Despite its harshness, I had concluded that prison was the best option to survive my circumstances. Yes, I landed myself in prison because of my desire to live. Can you imagine how much suffering I must have endured to voluntarily choose imprisonment?" (Benyamin, *The Goat Days*, 2008/2012, p. 15).

Isma Shihada clarifies that "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" (p. 2095). He further illustrates that "Sumesi prison had become a sanctuary compared to the terrible life he had before" (p. 2096).

3. CONCLUSION

Considering Foucauldian docile bodies in the context of Benyamin's *The Goat Days*, one can distinguish how power manifests itself under the conditions of oppression. The novel depicts how power affects behavior and manifests itself in surveillance and self-regulation, teaching that power is everywhere. Benyamin challenges the concept of control through the issues depicted in the struggle of the characters while at the same time promoting the notion of courage in the face of the formidable force of society. Furthermore, *The Goat Days* is informative as a specification of Foucauldian concepts to the modern discourse on power and subjectivity. The conflict of personal and collective interest allows the readers to ponder over the circumstances that deem some actions normal and some rights liberating. This research enriches knowledge about how literature can help explain power dynamics and how plausible is change when oppressive systems define individual and collective action.

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