Anusandhanvallari
Vol 2026, No.1
June 2026
ISSN 2229-3388

Assimilating into Silence: Forced Acculturation and Postcolonial Survival in Benyamin's *Goat Days*

[1]Krishna Priya G , [2]Prema. E

[1]Research Scholar, Sri Meenakshi Government Arts College for Women, Madurai, Tamil Nadu.
[2]Associate Professor, PG & Research Department of English, Sri Meenakshi Government Arts College for Women (Autonomous), Madurai, Tamil Nadu.

Abstract

Benyamin's novel *Goat Days* (2008), translated from Malayalam by Joseph Koyipally, tells the story of Najeeb Muhammad, a Kerala migrant worker trafficked into slave labor on a Saudi Arabian desert farm. This paper reads Najeeb's gradual psychological and physical adaptation to that environment not as defeat, but as a form of postcolonial survival. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry and Frantz Fanon's theorization of colonial violence, this paper argues that Najeeb's assimilation into the rhythms and conditions of the desert represents a complex negotiation of selfhood under conditions of extreme subjugation. His acculturation is not chosen. It is the only available response to a system of power that strips him of language, identity, and human recognition.

Keywords: response, psychological, strips, rhythms

Introduction

There is a moment in *Goat Days* when Najeeb stops thinking about home. He does not make a decision to stop. It happens the way all deep psychological shifts happen, quietly, out of necessity, almost without his noticing. He describes it himself: "All such thoughts had become alien to me as they were to the dead who had reached the other world. So soon you might wonder. My answer is yes. No use being bound by such thoughts. They only delay the process of realization that we've lost out to circumstances and there is no going back" (Benyamin, 2012, p. 102). What follows is not peace. It is a harder, stranger thing. It is survival through assimilation.

Najeeb does not assimilate into Saudi culture in any recognizable sense. He has no access to it. He cannot speak Arabic. He has no community, no documents, no legal standing. What he assimilates into is something more fundamental: the physical logic of the desert, the daily rhythms of the goats he tends, and the brutal economy of an arbab who measures his worth in milk and obedience. Understanding this process requires a framework that takes seriously the violence at its root. Postcolonial theory, particularly the work of Bhabha and Fanon, offers exactly that.

The Desert as Colonial Space

The Saudi Arabian desert in *Goat Days* functions as more than a setting. It operates as what Fanon (1963) described as a space of colonial division, a zone where the colonized subject is reduced to pure function and stripped of interiority. Najeeb arrives with a dream familiar to millions of South Asian migrant workers. He ends up somewhere nobody warned him about.

His first night on the farm is telling. He arrives hungry, thirsty, and unable to communicate. The arbab points toward the goat enclosure and disappears into his tent. Najeeb writes: "Inside me, something burned to cinder. If my arbab lies down in a tent in the middle of the desert, where am I going to stay?" (Benyamin, 2012, p. 67). There is no answer. He sleeps on the sand, using his bag as a pillow, laughing quietly at the distance between the life he imagined and the one he has arrived inside.

What makes Benyamin's portrayal so precise is its refusal to sensationalize. The desert does not perform cruelty. It simply persists. And in persisting, it does its work. The violence here is structural and cumulative: the relentless heat, the prohibition on water, the belt across the back, the absence of any language in which to protest. These are not dramatic events. They are conditions. And it is conditions, not incidents, that ultimately reshape a person.

Mimicry Without Choice

Bhabha's (1994) concept of mimicry describes the process by which colonized subjects adopt the behaviors and mannerisms of the colonizer, often as a survival strategy, but always incompletely, always with a remainder that unsettles the authority it appears to confirm. In Goat Days, Najeeb's mimicry operates on an unusual and deeply human register. He does not mimic his arbab. He mimics the goats.

This is not metaphor. It is the literal arc of the novel. Najeeb learns to milk goats by watching the man he calls the "scary figure," a long-enslaved worker who has already made this passage. He is shown how to approach a goat not from behind but from the front, how to "caress it like a child by tenderly touching its cheeks, ears and back," how to ease its discomfort before drawing milk (Benyamin, 2012, p. 92). He practices. He fails. He tries again. And slowly, across weeks that blur into one another, he becomes competent. Then fluent. Then something closer to natural.

The scary figure himself is the novel's most disturbing image of what this mimicry produces at its endpoint. Najeeb describes him on first sight: "Dust had transmuted into scales on his body and dirt matted his beard and hair. His dirty fingernails had grown crooked and looked hideous. It must have been five years at least since his last bath" (Benyamin, 2012, p. 55). Najeeb is horrified. Then, without quite realizing it, he begins the same journey. He stops washing. He eats khubus without thinking about it. He learns to read the goats' moods before the arbab's. The horror becomes, gradually, the ordinary.

Bhabha argued that mimicry always contains within it a slippage that unsettles the authority it seems to confirm. Najeeb's mimicry of the goats is perhaps the most radical version of this idea. By assimilating into the life of the animals, he places himself outside every category the system has prepared for him. He is no longer simply a failed migrant worker, nor a productive laborer, nor even quite a human subject in the eyes of the arbab. He has become something the system cannot easily manage. And in that ambiguity, however painful, there is the smallest possibility of survival.

Fanon, Subjectivity, and the Cost of Staying Alive

Fanon (1963) wrote about the psychological cost of colonial subjugation with an intensity that still holds. He argued that the colonized subject who survives by suppressing their own interiority does not emerge intact. The survival is real, but something is lost in it, something that cannot always be recovered even when the external conditions change.

Najeeb articulates this cost with a clarity that is almost unbearable. After only a few days on the farm, he finds himself lying awake not thinking about Sainu, his wife, or his unborn child, or his mother, but about the goats. "Can you imagine what I had been thinking about that night as I lay down? About going to the masara early in the morning and milking the goats; controlling the goats as the scary figure did and coming out with a vessel full of milk" (Benyamin, 2012, p. 103). He is not broken. He is focused. He has, by necessity, made the masara his entire world. "I neither bothered about yesterdays nor worried about tomorrows. Just focused on managing the todays. I think all my masara life was just that" (Benyamin, 2012, p. 103).

This is not acceptance in any peaceful sense. It is the cognitive narrowing that survival demands. Fanon described a similar process in colonized communities, the way sustained subjugation forces the self to contract around what is immediately manageable, abandoning the wider territory of desire, memory, and belonging. Najeeb does not choose this contraction. It is chosen for him by conditions he cannot alter.

The moment that perhaps best captures this is the birth of Nabeel. Najeeb assists a goat through labor in the middle of the desert, catches the kid as it falls, cleans its face. And in that moment, the walls he has built around himself crack open: "My mind shook free of all its shackles and everything I had been trying to forget hit home. My Sainu is pregnant" (Benyamin, 2012, p. 117). He names the baby goat after the son he hopes has been born at home. Then the arbab kicks him away from the animal. The moment closes. The work continues.

Conclusion

Goat Days is a novel about what it costs to stay alive when the conditions of your life have been stripped of everything that normally makes survival feel worth pursuing. Najeeb's assimilation into the desert is not a cultural exchange. It is not integration in any sense Berry's (1997) framework would recognize. There is no choice of strategy, no host society offering even minimal recognition, no community of fellow migrants to buffer the transition.

What there is, instead, is the bare fact of Fanon's colonized subject: a man reduced to his usefulness, who survives by accepting the terms of his reduction, and who pays for that acceptance with pieces of himself he can never fully recover. That he survives at all is, in its quiet way, a form of resistance. That he is changed beyond full recovery is the novel's most honest and most painful truth.

Benyamin does not offer comfort here. He offers something rarer: precision. The slow, granular detail of Najeeb's adaptation, the khubus eaten without cutlery, the stones used instead of water, the Arabic words memorized at night, the goats whose rhythms he learns to read before he learns their names. These details are not background. They are the process. They are what forced acculturation actually looks like, not as a theoretical category, but as a life being lived, one day at a time, in the desert.

References

[1] Benyamin. (2012). Goat days (J. Koyipally, Trans.). Penguin Books. (Original work published 2008)

[2] Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation. Applied Psychology: An International Review, 46(1), 5–34.

[3] Bhabha, H. K. (1994). The location of culture. Routledge.

[4] Fanon, F. (1963). The wretched of the earth (C. Farrington, Trans.). Grove Press.