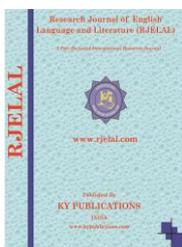




## EVADING THE POWER APPARATUS: A READING OF *GOAT DAYS*

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### ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on *Dispositif* or apparatus, a theoretical term used by Michael Foucault, and further expanded by Giorgio Agamben, with special reference to *Aadu Jeevitham* by Benyamin (translated *Goat Days* by Joseph Koyippally). The disciplinary actions are identified with Panopticism, the inaudible fear induced by persistent surveillance. Accordingly the paper encapsulates various power structures at play, elaborating on Arbab, Language, Uncharted terrain, Dreams and the Power of the Unknown. The protagonist Najeeb's attempts to evade and later yield to the machinery are discussed. The landscape is read as a microcosm of the world at large and of Najeeb, the Other.

**Keywords:** Power, Panopticism, apparatus, *AaduJeevitham*

### Introduction

Michael Foucault defined apparatus in *The Confession of the Flesh* as 'a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions- in short, the said as much as the unsaid'(194). Accordingly, any aberration from the structure will be considered abnormal and consequently punished. The power and discipline administered by these apparatus presents a parallel universe, of those without a history.

For Giorgio Agamben, a leading Italian philosopher and radical political theorist the term apparatus designates that in which and through which, one realizes a pure activity of governance devoid of any foundation in being. 'I will call an apparatus,' he writes, 'literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings'(14).He states this as the reason why

apparatus always involves the process of subjectification.

Benyamin's *AaduJeevitham* catapulted him to fame winning the Abu Dhabi Sakthi Award in 2008 and the Kerala Sahitya Academy Award in 2009. It has been translated to English as *Goat Days* by Joseph Koyippally. The English translation of the novel appeared in the long list of Man Asian Literary Prize in 2012 and in the short list of the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature 2013. The real life events of Najeeb's ordeal in the desert were recounted to Benyamin who remained faithful to the story avoiding pretentious diction over clear, lucid style. It is this honesty in the narrative that sets the work apart. "Most expatriates are hiding their lives, and people back home don't even know what job their husbands or sons are doing out there. They only know the glittering part with expensive wrist watches and cooling glasses," says Benyamin, at *The Hindu Lit for Life* 2013.

*Goat Days* presents the story of vicious ostracism undergone by Najeeb, the protagonist at the hands of an Arbab, the Arab master. His movements are controlled, supervised and

surveilled throughout the day where he is detained. The book goes on to chronicle his escape from the tyranny of the arid landscape. Najeeb, a Keralite, struggling with the meager income he earns from sand mining is elated when he comes to know of a visa for sale. By mortgaging, selling and borrowing he secures the money to reach the city of his dreams. Najeeb along with Hakeem, another boy who received visa, sets to 'the outside world' together (39). The city of dreams soon turns out to be a nightmare, when they both are taken in by the wrong arbab after waiting hours for their sponsor in the Riyadh airport. Hakeem separated, Najeeb realises what the future holds in store for him. His job is to herd and milk goats, 'Rows of goats, undulating like a sea', in addition to filling water, hay, wheat, fodder in the containers for goats and camels (59).

### **1. Arbab**

The embodiment of power in *Goat Days* is the Arbab, the Arab master. The fear he instills in Najeeb even on their first meeting is appalling and capable of silencing him forever. The Arbab, the custodian of his dreams, hopes and future is not a debonair figure as he imagined, but a rugged man with a 'severe stench' (48). When Najeeb tries to reason with the Arbab, the former is met with the blood-curling whoosh of his belt. Starvation and back-breaking work become the new norm for even an unconscious attempt to violate a rule.

Anticipating that Najeeb might try to escape while herding goats to the wilderness, Arbab exhibits the machinery through which he is to be subjugated: a pair of binoculars and a double barrelled gun. Escape being a distant dream, Najeeb realises that his life has 'become inescapably bound to those goats' (73). The binoculars and gun serve to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power in short the Panopticism. Thus power is visible and unverifiable. These two pieces of apparatus represents the way in which discipline and punishment should be enforced in the masara. It is this indeterminate array of actual and ideological machinery that surrounds and defines the human subject.

The only human left other than Najeeb and arbab is the 'scary figure' (61). 'He had matted hair like that of a savage who had been living in a forest for years. His beard touched his belly. He had on the dirtiest of Arab clothes' (61). Though acts of dominance are perpetrated on Najeeb; the weak, the scary figure perceives the ruthlessness of Arbab and works without a moment's rest. The scary figure, an unnamed man, a man without history foreshadows Najeeb's future in its entirety. On the third day of Najeeb's arrival the scary figure escapes permeating a ray of hope in him to wait for the opportune moment. On the contrary he later finds the putrefying corpse of the scary figure thereby coming in terms with the air of resignation Arbab had when he came to know about the scary figure's abscondence and the meaning of his master demonstrating the power of his binoculars and gun. This discovery that the man vested with power can murder without a speck of remorse seals the desire for escape.

Witnessing a goat giving birth Najeeb takes it as a good omen of his wife Sainu's childbirth, pregnant when he left her. The newborn goat is named Nabeel, and his 'reward for trying to help a goat deliver her baby was severe words, a kick, enough spit, two or three belt whippings and starvation at noon' (109). Najeeb identifies Nabeel, the baby goat as his own son. Threats and harassment become commonplace but Najeeb is stupefied when the young Nabeel is castrated. Only select male goats were allowed to live with their virility, all the rest were 'castrated and made into eunuchs. They were meant for slaughterhouses' (113). For Arbab this vicious act of castration corroborated his power despite Najeeb's supplications to spare Nabeel. 'A maleness that was to the arbab a small piece of meat and a little blood' (113).

### **2. Power of the Unknown**

The hideous underside of desert life is chronicled in vivid terms. The stultifying life in the masara lasts for three years, four months and nine days, wherein loneliness, fear, social alienation and corporeal trauma are aplenty. The debilitating life is in stark contrast with the 'host of dreams' he dreamt (38). '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, AC, tape recorder, VCP, a heavy gold chain' (38).

Held captive, tortured physically and mentally Najeeb nurses hopes of abscondence. Waiting for the opportune moment and relying on God's Providence Najeeb's captivity lasts years. Finally with Hakeem and Ibrahim Khadiri from the nearby masara Najeeb sets out for the high-strung perilous journey. Crossing the desert without food is a Herculean task and menacing with zero knowledge of the 'desolate and empty' land (193). Panic and perplexity constantly stalk their tracks wherein being captured is death and not coercive mutilations. In resemblance to the torture they endured in the masara, the land exerts its viles and vices in abundance.

Setbacks assist them in their desert odyssey in the form of snakes, sand storms, gun shots, thirst, hunger, pain, Hakeem's death culminating in the evanescence of Khadiri as they both were 'about to reach the road to safety' (233). Left derelict Najeeb is aided by a 'richly dressed Arab' whose benevolence conducts him to take Najeeb to the city (236). In the city deprived of money Najeeb begs for food. 'But their owners drove me (him) away as if I were (he was) a despicable stray dog' (240). Finally he collapses in front of 'Malabar Restaurant', 'Kunjikka's hotel, a refuge for Malayalis in Batha market' (243). After spending three months in Kunjikka's care Najeeb along with Hameed, an absconded labourer from an Arab's farm decides to give themselves up to the police without delay.

Initially Najeeb was craving to evade the power apparatus represented by Arbab and later he yields to the structure so much so that 'compared to what I (he) had endured, that narrow cell was heaven to me (him)' (8). 'It was after days of deliberation, reflection and calculation 'that they resolved to come to prison' (11). Identification parades are conducted every week for the Arabs to identify the absconding workers - 'a tear filled day in prison' (21). 'The day after the inspection by the Arabs was the day of the embassy visit. Embassy officials of different countries came to the prison with release papers for the prisoners of their

respective countries. If the previous day was one of tears, the next was one of joy' (25).

To Najeeb's horror Hameed is identified and captured by his Arbab. Contrary to his firm belief Najeeb's Arbab comes in search of him. Though terrified to the core Najeeb stands audaciously waiting for his doom but Arbab relinquishes his claim on Najeeb. Praising Allah's mercy and Arbab's kindness for sparing him Najeeb realises the stark truth that he was taken under someone else's visa. The Arbab wasn't his sponsor and had illegally held Najeeb captive. Three weeks later Najeeb secures 'free out pass to India ... a government project to deport unauthorized residents the countries of their origin' (252). The sight of the group walking towards the plane reminds Najeeb of 'herding a flock of goats back into the masara' (253). The novel ends on a poignant note wherein Najeeb reaffirms his existence. 'I was one of the goats. Mine was a goat's life' (253).

God as a leitmotif runs throughout the novel. The protagonist's unwavering belief in the Providence is worth mentioning. The long array of disciplinary machineries could only perpetrate physical harm and could not tamper his absolute faith in God. It was this 'faith and confidence that helped us (them) bravely walk through the desert' (202).

### **3. Language**

Language becomes an apparatus for subjectivity with Najeeb's lack of knowledge of the spoken language undermines his desubjectification. 'Then he asked something in Arabic. There was anger in his tone. Luckily, I didn't understand anything'. Even the Hindi spoken by the scary figure seems alien even though Najeeb comprehends the '...pity in those words, and also sadness, resentment, scorn' (61). Years later Najeeb portends the meaning of the words, '...he was lamenting my fate and wailing. Compassion doesn't require a language' (61) so does power. The only time the strange language could communicate precisely is when accompanied with violence. Najeeb is hit ferociously when he uses water to clean himself after defection. This first lesson that water is 'a very rare liquid to be carefully used' is learned from the

arbab's angry words in between lashings (96). Violence too doesn't require a language.

#### 4. Uncharted terrain

Space is pivotal in any exercise of power. The physical space itself is existential in nature, with the desert terrain equally divergent like the language. The city of his dreams casts a veil of shadow on his journey from the airport to the masara. An 'unknown fear', 'an irrational doubt', 'a whiff of danger' is what the sand dunes offer (52). Breaking free from the confinement becomes equally difficult because of the terrain. 'If I run... how long will I run? Which way...? In which direction? To which place? I don't know anything' (62). The destination he has reached after hours of travel from the city kindles in him morbid fear. The magnitude of this thought and the power which the alien land exerts chains him to the very place.

In the open expanse consumed by the gruelling fatigue of travel, hunger, thirst and exhaustion Najeeb is benumbed without a place to sleep or sit. Just like the arbab, the landscape reflects and reinforces the coercion. 'It was all hard soil and boulders.... Unlike in our place, where vines spread through the rocks and sand, there was not a speck of green here. It was a sterile wasteland' (74). Though antithesis of Najeeb's earlier life, the parched, dry land however mirrors his miserable existence in close proximity, a sterile wasteland. The desert has nothing to offer Najeeb though 'writers in every language and religion have seen desert as a space for enlightenment and spiritual revival... But the desert did not revive me in any way. I lived in the desert for more than three years. Then I tried crossing it. All through, the desert gave me nothing but grief and frustration' (215).

Even the desert is compelled to shed all vestiges of its arid nature during winter wherein the life concealed in the 'womb of the earth' sprouts filling Najeeb and likewise the readers with optimism (144). One of the exquisite passages in the novel casts off despondency offering the glimmer of hope.

'Those plants taught me life's great lessons of hope. They whispered to me: Najeeb, adopted son of the desert, like us, you too must preserve your life and wrestle with this desert. Hot winds and

scorching days will pass. Don't surrender to them. Don't grow weary, or you might have to pay with your life. Don't give in. Lie half dead, as if meditating. Feign nothingness. Convey the impression that you will never resurrect....And finally an opportune moment will come for you. This hot wind will blow away. This heat will dissipate. The cold wind of time will beckon you. Then, only then, should you slowly raise your head from the earth, announce your presence and, then, quickly, spring to freedom' (145).

Spring for Najeeb materialises in the form of Ibrahim Khadiri, a gigantic figure from Somalia, co-worker of Hakeem. The piece of paper Hakeem places under a stone sprouts the desire for escape. It reads 'Ibrahim Khadiri has been in this country before this. Knows all places and roads.Plans to abscond' (178). The power which the hostile land exerted on Najeeb and Hakeem could be annihilated only through someone from the same land and it is through Khadiri they escapes. The arduous journey is vividly portrayed; moreover Khadiri's knowledge of the land and physique saves them.

#### 5. Dreams

The romanticized dream one has is also questioned. Najeeb's dearest wish is to work in Gulf and when it takes shape he is stupefied by the horrors of it. The childhood ambition of Najeeb was to become a goatherd fuelled by the movie *Ramanan*, a testament of romantic love wherein Ramanan sings, plays the flute as he herds his flock to the pasture. 'When I finally got the chance to live the life of a shepherd, I realized how painfully distant it was from my dreams. We shouldn't dream about the unfamiliar and about what only looks from afar. When such dreams become reality, they are often impossible to come to terms with' (124). He even 'longed to live in a beautiful desert, a desert where sand stretched out like sea. But when I finally came upon a beautiful desert it terrified me' (208).

It might be to ward off his inarticulate existence or for survival that Najeeb identifies himself with the goats in the masara. There is no pre-conceived self, self changes with the environment Najeeb therefore changes his identity for companionship and thereby survival. He even names the goats based on some character traits,

their gait, the sounds they made. Thus he has AravuRavuthar, Marymaimuna, PochakkariRamani, Pinki, Ammu, Chakki, and public figures like Jagathy, Mohanlal all in the masara. Najeeb showers more care and affection to Nabeel than any other goat in the masara only because Nabeel was born into his hands, 'the gift that Allah had given me (him) in the place of my (his) son'. Najeeb's virility vanishes the day Nabeel is castrated.

The scary figure, Najeeb are all goats trapped in the masara emasculated of their identity. 'I spent the winter as a sheep among the sheeps' (140). The metamorphosis becomes congruous when Arbab forces Najeeb to consume the meat of a goat. Najeeb feels nauseated as if he was 'devouring my (his) own brother's flesh' (149). He couldn't eat any of it and since then he has never eaten mutton. When Arbab locks him up in the masara for days without food or water, Najeeb accepts without complaint devouring the wheat grains left uneaten by the goats. After eating the wheat and drinking water to his heart's content, he was finally at ease. 'By then I had indeed become a goat' (150).

Even when Hakeem's isolation ended with the arrival of Ibrahim Khadiri, Najeeb 'remained a goat in the masara of goats.... With nothing to hope for. Nothing to dream about. A goat's life' (180). When the long hoped for and half-forgotten escape was imminent the goats become restive inside the masara as if they have sensed him leave. Najeeb bids farewell to the goats, which helped him survive the hardships of the desert prison. Saved by Ibrahim Khadiri, he hands himself over to the judicial system and later emancipates himself from the clutches of his misfortune.

The apparatus is always linked to a play of power and certain coordinates of knowledge which condition it. A perfect disciplinary apparatus would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly. Arbab with his pieces of power apparatus exerts tremendous constraint on his subject. The tribulations undergone by the subject in an alien land adds to the plight. The land possessed its own instruments of punishment and used them in a hysterical manner. The landscape plays a central role in subjectification that it can be read as a character in itself. Silenced by the language, hanging

between life and death, Najeeb finds a voice in the company of goats. It is in their presence that he redeems and reclaims his life. Strangled by Arbab, land and language his steadfastness and perseverance in God's will in all circumstances saves him from plunging into despair. The novel criticises the idealised vision of Gulf as exalted in popular culture. Through Najeeb, the author vocalises the dark underside of the predicament of undocumented people. Power on most occasions permeates in silence.

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