

Home Exists Only in Memory: Nostalgia and Psychological Alienation in Benyamin's *Goat Days*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores nostalgia and psychological alienation in Benyamin's *Goat Days* by utilising Jerome Bruner's Narrative psychology. It emphasizes the psychological struggles of Najeeb rather than the physical and social issues. This paper contends that Najeeb Muhammed's alienation stems not only from his physical alienation in the desert, but also from the disintegration of his sense of identity. In the desert, Najeeb loses his words, his link to society, and his acknowledgment as a human. As a result of these losses, Najeeb undergoes a significant deterioration of identity. It suggests that identity diminishes when a person is unable to create a significant narrative of their existence. Nostalgia is essential for Najeeb's survival. In a void setting, recollections of his family, his native place, and his previous life assist him in maintaining his mental resilience. Nostalgia is perceived not as a weak emotion but rather serves as

a means of resistance. By recalling his past self, he safeguards his identity from being erased. Narrative psychology suggests that individuals construct their identity through the stories they share about their lives. When Najeeb tells his story later, his pain is structured into a significant narrative, turning his disorder into clarity, restoring his fractured identity, enabling him to take charge of his life story and articulate the experiences of the migrant workers who have been muted.

Keywords: Nostalgia, Psychological alienation, Narrative psychology, Dehumanisation.

Introduction

Benjamin's *Goat Days* was originally written in Malayalam (2008) and translated by Joseph Koyippally. It tells the story of a man named Najeeb, a migrant labourer from Kerala who travels to the Gulf seeking a better life but ends up trapped in the desert as a slave-like shepherd. This novel primarily focuses on the perspective of the exploitation of poor workers, promises of false agents, and severe working conditions. This study examines the mental suffering experienced by Najeeb. It is based on the Theoretical framework of Narrative Psychology. According to Jerome Bruner, human identity is shaped through narrating our experiences. When individuals are unable to express their stories, their identity becomes fragile. This novel not only addresses the experience of physical suffering, it also emphasises how the human mind alters when an individual is excluded or isolated from society, language, and interpersonal interaction. In the desert, Najeeb loses all that defines his humanity: his name, dignity, voice, and sense of self. By incorporating Jerome Bruner's concept, this research analyses that the identity is restored through storytelling. He endures in the desert solely through his cherished memories of the past. These recollections of his past memories act as a powerful narration within his thoughts. The novel suggests that the human mind can shatter from trauma but can also be healed through storytelling.

Alienation as Narrative Collapse

In *Goat Days*, alienation is not defined by distance from others. It also pertains to how it influences your thoughts and how you perceive yourself. Jerome Bruner states that a person understands his identity by narrating the stories of his lives. When an individual is prohibited from interacting with others or engaging in a community, they begin to lose their identity. "I didn't know anything about what was happening outside world" (Benyamin 176). Najeeb perfectly exemplifies this. When he is in the desert, he is isolated from everything. "I lived on an alien planet inhabited by some goats, my arbab and me" (Benyamin 125). He is not given the opportunity to converse with others or be regarded as an individual. No one refers to him using his name. This causes him to feel as if he no longer embodies his true self. It feels as if he is fading away from his true self. An important moment occurs when Najeeb mentions that he has forgotten his appearance as an individual. This concerns more than just his external appearance. It is regarding how he experiences his emotions internally. He forgets his physical appearance and does not have the opportunity to converse with others or have others converse with him. "I had not looked in a mirror since I had entered the desert. If I had, I might not have been able to recognize myself as well" (Benyamin 137). He never has the chance to hear his name. "He usually called me 'himar' or 'inti'" (134). Everything about this leaves him feeling disoriented. The desert is a space where he is unable to share his story or exist authentically. Being in extreme isolation causes him to lose his identity. It shows that Jerome Bruner's statement is accurate. Extreme isolation does not just isolate a person from society it also destroys the narrative through which a person understands their own existence. Alone in the desert, he feels forgotten, his name and voice are left behind. In the profound silence he gradually starts fading away.

Dehumanisation and Fragmentation

Extended isolation can lead to issues for our mental health. Being alone for a while can lead us to lose our sense of identity. In the narrative, grief does not equate to merely feeling sorrowful. It concerns the loss of the elements that define our humanity. In the desert, Najeeb is treated as less than human. Najeeb has to coexist with goats. He lacks the essentials to be tidy, communicate with others, or feel positive about himself. As time passes, he begins to sense that he is no longer a human. He begins to believe he resembles the goats. "By then I had indeed become a goat" (Benyamin 150).

Najeeb claims he has turned into one of the goats. This indicates that he is quite uncertain about his identity. He is unsure whether he is a human or an animal. This is quite unfortunate as he is losing his identity. When hunger compels him to eat with the goats, the distinction between man and animal fades away. He no longer eats with dignity; he eats to stay alive. Humanity is not shattered instantly; it is gradually diminished. What remains is a living body and a self softly breaking. In times of deep loneliness and sorrow, a person may begin to lose sight of his identity.

The concept of Narrative Psychology holds significance in this context. It suggests that when individuals face negative experiences, they attempt to understand them by constructing narratives about those experiences. When the negative elements become overwhelming, their minds may become bewildered. This is what occurs with Najeeb, as he struggles to share his own story due to all the unfortunate events that have occurred in his life.

Nostalgia and Memory as Survival

When individuals experience disconnection, nostalgia helps them in maintaining their sense of identity. In *Goat Days*, nostalgia serves not as a sentimental emotion but as a means to endure

psychologically. Narrative Psychology states that a person's sense of identity remains whole when they can connect their past to their present. As life becomes overwhelming, memories serve as a refuge where identity persists. When the desert strips away Najeeb's name and his identity, memory softly whispers it back to him. Najeeb frequently recalls his wife Sainu, his mother, and the stunning scenery of Kerala. He claims that remembering them 'sustained his life.' These recollections resemble tales he narrates to himself. Even when he's unable to voice them, he narrates these stories silently in his mind. By recalling, he re-establishes his connection with his former self, prior to the desert. Nostalgia serves as a means to oppose erasure. It holds the memories of those who are alive when our present existence is crumbling. Memory is double-sided for Najeeb. Both bad memories and good memories. His bad memories are of his isolation in the desert, hunger, beatings and being treated like an animal. His good memories are of his wife Sainu, his mother and the place Kerala. The good memories protect his sense of identity. Memory keeps Najeeb's human identity alive. When the desert strips away Najeeb's name and his identity, memory softly whispers it back to him.

Narrative as Reconstruction

In *Goat Days*, Najeeb's storytelling serves as the crucial action in restoring his sense of self. While in captivity, he becomes a muted and objectified being, diminished to a point where his identity almost evaporates. Yet, as he subsequently narrates his pain in the first person, he changes from an unheard victim into an individual who speaks with awareness. In narrating his story, Najeeb not only recalls his experiences in the desert but also re-examines it from the position of an author shaping his own identity. In the desert, Najeeb's arbab controls Najeeb's identity. But by narrating his own story he takes back the control of his self and identity. By arranging disordered and distressing memories into a cohesive story, he brings unity to his broken mind. Narrative allows him to reframe trauma, regain control, and reaffirm his

humanity. Telling his story is not just a retelling of occurrences, but a deep process of psychological healing and self-renewal. In telling his story, Najeeb not just remembers the desert, he survives it again but this time as the author of his own existence.

Conclusion

This study shows that alienation is not just a physical separation but also a mental fragmentation. From the perspective of Narrative Psychology, the story illustrates how the breakdown of language, belonging, and recognition disrupt Najeeb's narrative identity. Sorrow enhances this fragmentation, driving Najeeb toward figurative dehumanisation. Nonetheless, nostalgia serves as an essential internal narrative space that maintains continuity between the past and the present. Memory supports the self when actual experiences pose a risk of erasing it. Alienation fractures Najeeb's identity, while memory safeguards his inner self and sustains his mental vitality. Narration gives him power and voice. Storytelling acts as a psychological survival in Najeeb's life in *Goat Days*. The novel shows that when home exists solely in memory, storytelling serves as the crucial method through which identity persists and is reshaped. In the vast quietness of the desert, memory and remembrance become home, narration becomes defiance and storytelling becomes a means of psychological survival.

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