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DECIPHERING THE ELEMENTS OF MIGRATION IN JASMINE DAYS

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ABSTRACT

Human migration is as old as human history. Benyamin's Jasmine Days revolves around the lives of South Asian migrants, recorded through the eyes of the protagonist, Sameera Parvin. The story unfolds around Sameera's life as a migrant and the emotional and psychological process she undergoes in adapting to the foreign land. This research article titled "Deciphering the Elements of Migration in Jasmine Days" tries to throw light over the elements of migration in the novel Jasmine Days highlighting the impact of Jasmine Revolution in the life of the migrants. It also focusses on the concepts of Hybridity and Acculturation which results due to migration.

Keywords: Jasmine Revolution, Migration, Hybridity, Survival, Acculturation.

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Human migration is as old as human history. Effectively assisted by the rapid growth in globalization, the 20th and 21st centuries are characterized by large scale migration across the world. Massive movements of migrants, refugees and exiles have made the migrant "the protagonist of the 21st century" (Frank 1). Migration has come to play an increasingly significant role in relation to basic social foundations such as politics, economics, geography and culture. Naturally, the phenomenon of migration has influenced the different aspects of social and cultural life, one of which is literature. The emergence and acceptance of the genre of the literature of migration is the result of this influence.

Benyamin's *Jasmine Days* is the latest addition to this canon of migrant literature and is woven around the lives of South Asian migrants in an unnamed Middle Eastern city where the promise of revolution turns into destruction and division. The novel is narrated in the voice of a young Pakistani immigrant Sameera Parvin who has moved to the City with her father and her extended family. Divided into six parts, the novel follows Sameera's journey as a radio jockey in an Indian radio station, her confrontation with her fellow migrants, the onset of the Arab Spring in 'the City' and the losses she suffers at the hands of the people surrounding her.

Benyamin's novel is set in the backdrop of the Arab Spring that swept over many Arab nations in 2010. It offers a deep insight into the existential turmoil that the Asian migrants have been thrown into at the onset of the political revolution. Benyamin's *Jasmine Days* presents the life of a migrant community caught amidst the political and religious struggles of a foreign land in all its clarity. Presented through the eyes of the protagonist Sameera, *Jasmine Days* is a realistic portrayal of all the obstacles that Sameera faces as an immigrant Pakistani woman. Employed as a radio jockey in a Hindi radio station run by an Indian company, Sameera is perplexed to realize that 'the City' is home to as many immigrants as there are natives. "After Arabic, Hindi and Malayalam are the most widely spoken languages in this city" (Benyamin 15).

Jasmine Days unfolds around Sameera's life as a migrant and the emotional and psychological process she undergoes in adapting to the foreign land. Sameera is part of an extended family headed by her "bade taya" (16) who have migrated to 'the City' years ago and she has followed her father to the land leaving behind her mother and siblings in Pakistan.

"Taya Ghar" (31) is the building that houses the various branches of the same extended family. It is referred to as "a place of solutions" (31) where migrants gather to seek advice and assistance with gaining employment, and as a den of men who rule the lives of the women within the household. Sameera refers to her transplantation from Pakistan to 'the City' as "human trafficking" (27), since it was her mother's wish and not hers. "I did not want to come. I even complained to my mother that it would have been better if she'd married me off to some Taliban guy" (28). The only reason that prompted her to go was the prospects of a job which is a far-fetched dream in Pakistan for a girl.

Sameera begins her story by addressing 'the City' as "A Place Not My Own" (15). She is subjected to the primary predicaments as a migrant woman in an unknown land. During the period of settlement in the new country, almost everyone in the migrant community would undergo psychological trauma. Feeling of loss, sense of alienation from society, loneliness and longing is a part of migrant literature. This sense of alienation is evident in Sameera's first days in 'the City'.

You know how it is when you arrive in a new place and feel like you don't belong there? That hesitation to reckon with a new geography. That knowledge that this place is not mine, these ways of talking are not mine, these silences are not mine, this etiquette is not mine. Till that place becomes yours, till you find your own equilibrium there, there will be a gap between you and the place. (16)

Thematically, the literature of migration portrays characters who try to cope with migration in different ways. This reaction varies from the experience of the uncertainty of the displaced characters as "destructive, agonizing, and painful" to the experience of migration as "productive, fascinating, and appealing", both of which work towards the same end of "rewriting identities in order to evoke their impure and heterogeneous character (Frank 18,19).

For Sameera, this process of coping up takes place at two levels – domestic space and her workspace. Her father has been a distant figure throughout her life "who arrived once in a while as a guest and tried to slip into his father role" (78). Her initial day following the transplantation to 'the City' was emotionally demanding as "Life in the house was boring. Imagine a father and daughter who did not really have much of a relationship, alone with each other in a flat. We had nothing to talk at first. Our flat felt like a quiet, stern military camp. We breathed freely only when we joined the rest of Taya Ghar at mealtimes or when we visited the other flats" (25). Her sense of feeling out of place is further heightened by the presence of Indians at her workplace. Her identity of being a Pakistani adds to her alienation and Sameera is reminded of the long-held rivalry between the two nations over decades.

Till I arrived in the City, India was something I had feared. I had always seen Indians as my enemies. Enemies who were lying in wait to attack my village, my Lahore, my Faisalabad, my Peshawar…. Each and every Indian terrified me. (17)

Sameera's alienation is in part effected by the continuous taunts aimed at her nationality by her colleagues, a group of migrants from Kerala whom she sarcastically refers to as the "Malayalam Mafia" (15). Infamous for their attitude towards other fellow migrants, the "Malayalam Mafia" resorts to mischiefs "to smoke out someone they didn't like" (20). This sense of alienation is short-lived as Sameera copes with her surroundings and she even outsmarts the sly "Malayalam Mafia" in heated discussions. As Salman Rushdie points out:

To migrate is certainly to lose language and home, to be defined by others, to become invisible or, even worse, a target; it is to experience deep changes and wrenches in the soul. But the migrant is not simply transformed by his act; he also transforms his new world. Migrants may well become mutants, but it is out of such hybridization that newness can emerge. (Rushdie 210)

Sameera's transformation is partly effected by her deep engagement in the occupation as a radio jockey as she begins to "…belong in the studio. I started looking forward to every day and every moment I spent there" (18). Sameera opening up to her baba also had positive effects on her life. "Within six months, I charmed him. Baba started melting before my eyes. He began speaking openly and laughing freely" (25).

The traditional theme of homesickness or a longing for the past that dominates migrant literature is absent in *Jasmine Days*. Although Sameera refers to her reluctance to move to 'the City' as "I did not want to come. I even complained to my mother that it would have been better if she'd married me off to some Taliban guy" (28), never once does she talk about a wish to return to the homeland. The City, in the initial phase, provides her with everything that a young girl aspires for- a secure job, freedom and an identity of her own which is unimaginable in her homeland. The only thing which held her back was a sense of alienation which gradually dissipates and later returns with more intensity as the novel progresses. This false sense of belonging has enabled Sameera to completely obliviate her native land from her thoughts.

The migrant writer reflects a "transnational" tradition in his works' which means neither the superiority of national traditions nor the universality of human traditions, but a representation of those in-between spaces that go beyond the existing binaries and makes a bridge "between the home and the world" (Bhabha 13). Benyamin emphasises this transnational identity of the modern migrant through the voice of Sameera. Sameera is portrayed as the archetype of a modern migrant who values the in-between space that she has created in the adopted land than the identity she exercised before.

Another distinguishing feature of contemporary migration literature evident in *Jasmine Days* is cultural "hybridity" which manifests itself in the experience of "cultural in-between's, processes of intermixture, fusions or doublings of two or more cultures or two or more systems of significations" (Moslund 4). Sameera, a Pakistani Sunni Muslim, by virtue of her migrancy, comes in contact with numerous cultures and the fusion of these mixtures of cultures gives rise in her a sense of hybridity. Her loyalty lies with neither of them and she creates in herself a skeptical attitude towards religious fanaticism which was absent before. Her cultural in-between's is evident when she is overcome by a fierce eagerness to question the religious principle she was brought up in and side with the natives fighting for their rights. "This harami is confused- why is God silent, like a guilty criminal, when the contradictions of religion are exposed? Who are your followers, in a world where each person claims to be right?" (72). *Jasmine Days* elucidates "the formation of a hybrid selfhood from the heart of cultural conflicts" (Pourjafari and Vahidpour 34) as experienced by Sameera.

"The protagonist of the migrant work endlessly recreates himself through his encounters with cultural complexities and discriminating experience of being a minority, which results in his identity to go beyond the memories of past and reach a sort of maturity" (Pourjafari and Vahidpour 6). "We must wash our eyes with darkness to see what we want to see". This line from Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain,* quoted in the epigraph to *Jasmine Days* might be a way to understand Benyamin's project in this novel. The process of recreating herself is rather painful for Sameera as her journey in the foreign land takes her out of the darkness of ignorance, as she witnesses governments toppling down, friends turning foes and ultimately experiences the pain of losing dear ones.

Sameera's encounters with the cultural and religious complexities in 'the City' take the novel forward as she is burdened with her identity as a migrant, an outsider. Sameera's friendship with Ali Fardan, which starts with a shared love for music, draws her into a more empathetic understanding of the people she shares the City with. It will eventually force her to extend herself to perilous limits. Ali is a "second-class citizen" (62) in his own country where the majority are like him-Shias disenfranchised by a Sunni elite. "Shias were not just second-class citizens in the City, they were kafirs to be detested like hell" (72). Ali despises the ruling class who have made him a stranger in his own land and venerates Kadhim al-Jubouri who is an Iraqi wrestler and weightlifter who is famous for his attempt to bring down the statue of Saddam Hussein at the Firdos Square in Baghdad. His anger derives from a long history of being denied citizenship and enduring violations of human rights at the hands of the Sunni majority.

"Ambivalence, as the character's reaction towards any complex, confusing or emotionally charged social phenomenon, is another theme of the migration literature" (Pourjafari and Vahidpour 36). Here Sameera experiences ambivalence at dual degrees. Her constant strife to belong in 'the City' turns out to be a mammoth struggle as she battles divided loyalty and conscience. By focusing on the theme of ambivalence, the writer chooses to tell the readers that the migration event does not end when the individual leaves the homeland and enters the host society. Sameera, realizes the paradoxical situation of 'the City' where her father and his brothers are employed for "protecting His Majesty's administration. Their job was not to defend the country from foreign invaders, it was to protect His Majesty from his own people, in the name of law and order" (81). Sameera finds herself caught in a double bind of the family loyalty-her family serves His Majesty – and her empathy with Ali, who she knows is not a rebel without a cause.

The City which holds grudges against the Sunni ruling class is thrown into the midst of a political revolution when a young man immolated himself in front of the mayor's house in protest of the injustices imposed on him. "That incident was the germ of a revolution that spread like a fever from city to city" (86). The doors of Sameera's closeted life are blown off their hinges when protests start to take root in the City. As protests turn into rage against.

Indians and Pakistanis, and as her family defends the monarchy on the streets, the role immigrants have played for years in the citizens' powerlessness dawns on Sameera. Though 'the City' remains unnamed, the events in *Jasmine Days* play out in Bahrain, which in 2011 saw massive protests by Shia residents against the Sunni monarchy. The protests were in congruence with the Arab Spring which had its origin in Tunisia and swept across all of the Arab nations. Named as the Jasmine Revolution, the protest movement of 2011 was, at its core, an expression of deep-seated resentment at the aging Arab dictatorships.

Protests gave way to public demonstrations and marches. Alluding to the Tahrir Square in Cairo which witnessed mass rallies and demonstrations, *Jasmine Days* presents the Square of Pearls as the centre of action where the rest of the novel unfolds. Migrants are targeted for mistakes that are not their own and are accused of taking away the opportunities that the natives deserve. The lives of migrants continuously on the periphery of the society are further brought under misery when their adopted land is thrown into political or religious turmoil.

Even when the migrant communities stay for a long time in the settled society and follow the settled society's culture, the settled society still views the migrant community with suspicion and derision. Rage towards the government is directed towards the migrants and they fall victim to the communal strife. Sameera experiences outright threats from a man who declares "Get ready to leave this country. The end is coming for you and your kind. You shameless foreigners, you are dogs eating leftovers of this government. Till you leave, this country will not get better" (129).

Paul White in his well-known article "Geography, Literature and Migration" (1995) claims that migration literature foregrounds the complex worlds that we all inhabit. It can provide important insights into the way in which self-identity is enacted and the context which shapes identity formation: "Creative or imaginative literature has a power to reflect complex and ambiguous realities that make it a far more plausible representation of human feelings and understandings than many of the artefacts used by academic researchers" (White 15).

Migrant literature, in Whites idea, is of special interest because it makes explicit the way in which our sense of self can be destabilized by such great changes as moving from one country to another. Sameera's knowledge of the self is questioned not only as a migrant minority but also as a member of a privileged religious community. She refers to herself as a "harami" (72), a name which she adopts due to her conflicted questions on matters of identity and religion.

The context which shapes Sameera's ambiguous identity is not only her position as a migrant but also the political upheaval which throws her into a whirlwind of thoughts regarding her existence:

Having weighed both sides, I should be on His Majesty's side. The survival of his administration was the key to my livelihood and that of so many other foreign workers like me. The day the administration fell, we would be kicked out of this country. For my own sake, it was best for the revolution to fail. But even after thinking it all through, my heart secretly hoped that the revolutionaries would win. (185)

Even when the migrant lives are under threat, Sameera is surprised beyond limits on witnessing the indifference of the migrant community to mass movements of political and religious significance around them. This indifference emerges from deliberate political disengagement that the people have adopted to survive in a foreign land. Benyamin ascribes this to people's willingness to surrender their power of questioning to the regime in return of material wealth.

The theme of acculturation is prevalent throughout the novel as the process differs for every single character in the novel. Acculturation orientation, the way immigrants prefer to relate to the society of settlement varies from individual to individual. Informed of the decades of oppression meted out on the underprivileged Shias, Sameera identifies herself with their plight and irrespective of her doubtful future, nurses deep hatred for the dictatorship regime. Sameera, who has found a sense of empathy towards the Shias of 'the City' is in stark contrast to her other family members for whom their own existence in the land matters the most. "We are a police family. We eat His Majesty's rice. How can we be not loyal to him?" (132). Similar are the attitudes of her colleagues in the radio station:

As we all know, this adopted land of ours is going through a dangerous time. Anarchic forces have poked their heads out, like snakes in a desert, to hiss at our beloved Majesty, who protects us and takes care of us. It is our duty to prove without doubt that we stand with His Majesty who has nurtured us like his own children. (141)

Sameera's whole world comes crashing down at the news of her father's murder at the hands of a revolutionary. Shockingly the murderer turns out to be Ali, Sameera's friend. She is pushed into a whirlwind of emotions and left alone to "cross the river of grief" (208). Her misery is further worsened by her relatives' fighting over the reward recognizing her father's service to the country. The politics of their adopted land brings out the worst in each and every family member of hers. Sameera, sucked into the vortex of despair, struggles to come to terms with her loss and pacify her mother in Pakistan who is refused the chance of seeing her husband's face one last time.

Sameera's anguish is pacified when she decides to forgive Ali as she realizes that he too was a victim to the political and religious agendas of a few. "Both Ali and my father were prey-one was the prey of death and the other the prey of the law" (234). But more struggles follow Sameera as she is left with no one to depend in 'the City', where her relatives turn against her for disregarding the wish of their ruler. The misery of migrants on the margins is clearly stated when her Bade Taya states: "Remember that we are immigrants and we don't have any rights and whatever we do have is a gift from these rulers. Do not anger them. Stop worrying about justice and injustice, let them do what they want in their own country" (253).

The research article can thus be concluded by perceiving that the novel *Jasmine Days* has excelled as a realistic portrayal of the migrant lives in the Arab nations where the migrated communities are left alone not only to tend to the impacts of their migration but also to the ethnic and political revolutions that shook the nation. They are forced to fight battles that are not their own and in turn, risk everything they value at the prospects of a good future.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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