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# Benyamin's Jasmine Days: A Rereading of Migrant Literature

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## Abstract

Benyamin's *Jasmine Days* presents a realistic picture of the social, historical and religious context surrounding the migrant communities amidst the political and religious upheavals in an Arab nation. It also presents an uncompromising anatomy of a modern migrant society torn apart by a revolution, divided by loyalty, and exposes the tyrannical politics of citizenship, nationality and the strategic reduction of a community to a non-entity. This project is an attempt to analyse *Jasmine Days* as an example of migrant literature. It focuses on the social, cultural and psychological impacts of migration. The first chapter focuses on the basic themes and theories of migrant literature. The second chapter analyses *Jasmine Days* as a rereading of the migrant literary genre offering an overview into the migrant lives as presented in the novel. The conclusion endorses *Jasmine Days* as a classic example of migrant literature.

**Keywords:** Postcolonialism, migrant literature, diaspora

## INTRODUCTION

Literature has been a reflection of human society over the centuries. It has been the most powerful medium of provoking human emotions and thoughts. Literatures across the world have probed into human society so much so that they are the clear-sighted reflections of mankind.

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been widely accepted as an unprecedented age of migration. International migration and its political influences characterize the current era and many contemporary literary works have thematized such migrant experiences. The Middle East nations have always been a favoured choice for migration for millions over the years. This is proved by the number of migrants residing in these countries and the flow of foreign money into the native nations. In recent times, the evolving roles of migrants in the labour market of the Gulf countries have attracted many people in developing countries like India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The diasporic experience is so deeply

woven into the collective psyche of migrant societies that it has unsurprisingly entered their literature.

Contemporary migrant literatures from the Arabian Gulf implore us to examine and reinterpret the ethical-political practices of a land that is paradoxically inhabited primarily by people from elsewhere. Benyamin's *Goat Days*, Deepak Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People*, Mia Alvar's *In the Country* are some of the texts that make visible the particular anxieties of modern Arab Gulf Migratory politics through fiction. Neha Vora's *Impossible Citizens*, Andrew Gardner's *City of Strangers* and Prema Kurien's *Kaleidoscopic Ethnicity* are also examples of work that provide sociological and ethnographic perspectives on modern-day Gulf migration. Adding to this canon of migrant literature is Benyamin's *Jasmine Days* which explores the dynamics of the Arab Spring, and is about a young woman in a Middle Eastern city in which the promise of revolution turns into destruction and division.

Benny Benjamin Daniel is a leading writer in Malayalam literature. He took the pseudonym Benyamin. He has published many works including *Euthanasia*, *Irunda Vanasthalikal*, *Manjaveyil Maranangal*, *Pravachakanmarude Randam Pustakam* and the famous *Aadujeevitham*. Benyamin was born into a lower middle-class Syrian Christian family in Kerala. He moved to Bahrain in his early twenties. As a migrant to the Gulf, like millions of others, Benyamin too lived with rootlessness and displacement. There he fondly remembered his homeland, the greenery, the monsoons, the rivers and the forests. He took to reading to combat this feeling of nostalgia. Writing came much later. It is only at the age of twenty nine that he first started writing. His first story *Shathru* was published in a literary supplement in 1999 and his first book, *Euthanasia*, an anthology of short stories came out in 2001.

Benyamin became an overnight sensation with the publication of his novel *Aadujeevitham* in 2008 which has been translated into English as *Goat Days* by Joseph

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Koyippally. The novel had been first published in serial form in the Mathrubhumi Illustrated Weekly and is about the struggles of an abused migrant worker in Saudi Arabia. The novel centres on the life of a Muslim Malayali migrant working as a bonded labourer in a goat farm in Saudi Arabia. It is considered a representative story of millions of South Asian migrants working under inhuman conditions in the Gulf. The novel has won laurels for its sensitivity in the portrayal of Najeeb, a migrant worker. The English translation of the novel appeared in the long list of Man Asian

Literary Prize 2012 and in the shortlist of the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature 2013. It also won the Kerala Literary Academy Award for Benyamin in 2009. The book has also been translated into Tamil, Hindi and recently into Arabic. To date, he has three short story collections, two non-fictional works and five novels to his credit.

Displaced existence is a perennial theme in Benyamin's writing and is evident in the novels which preceded *Jasmine Days*, *Manjaveyil Maranangal*, which has been translated into English as *Yellow Lights of Death* by Sajeev Kumarapuram. It is a murder mystery but also talks about shattered lives dislocated from geographical and cultural origins.

*Jasmine Days* won the inaugural JCB Prize in India. It was first published in Malayalam as *Mullappoo Niramulla Pakalukal* in 2016 and was later translated into English by Shahnaz Habib. The novel is told in the voice of a young Pakistani woman Sameera in an unnamed Middle Eastern country fictively called "the City" (Benyamin 16), who builds her life against the backdrop of the delusive Arab Spring.

Sameera Parvin comes from a family of Pakistani immigrants. The Sunni Sultan who rules "the City" inhabited majorly by disenfranchised Shias prefers to hire the immigrants to fill the ranks of his security forces. Sameera's daily life unfolds in two primary locales: home and work. Her conservative joint family setup is headed by her father's eldest brother, known to her as Taya and the larger Pakistani community in "the City" as Ashraf Sahib. As her adopted country plunges into political turmoil, an ill-informed Sameera walks both real and virtual paths to educate herself on the issues at stake. These include the ills of the monarchy, the historical conflict between the Sunnis

and the Shias, debates over censorship and the freedom of the press and battles over ideological purity when the state tries to wean its citizens away from the protest by offering subsidies. Her friendship with a male Shia who speaks Arabic is forged over a secret music group. As the political temperature rises, she finds herself torn between her family's and community's pragmatic establishmentarian loyalties and her growing empathy with the Arab protestors. The revolution which begins as a political struggle for freedom turns into an ethnic war between the two Muslim ethnicities – the Shias and the Sunnis and, drawn into the vortex of this political upheaval is the lives of millions of migrants like Sameera.

*Jasmine Days* is presented as an autobiographical narrative, a personal history that has fallen into the author's lap. Right from the beginning, the reader is led to think that the original novel was penned down by Sameera in Arabic as *A Spring without Fragrance*. Benyamin's name appears as author on the front cover, but inside, we are told that the book we're holding is his translation of Sameera's original work. In the Translator's Note appended to the main narrative, Benyamin says it is "by accident that this book ended up in my hands", and that he only gained the rights to "translate" this manuscript into Malayalam when he agreed to "ghost-write" another novel for another writer: *Al Arabian Novel Factory*. The reader is made to believe that *Jasmine Days* is Shahnaz Habib's English translation of a translated work by Benyamin.

*Jasmine Days* is set against the backdrop of the Arab Spring that begins as the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia. It throws light on the lives of migrants entangled in political struggles that are not their own. They are forced into margins and left with little or no hope at all. Benyamin has incorporated the historical and political instances from the Middle Eastern Arab nations torn apart by the violent confrontations between the two factions and the novel is at once a reflection of the region's past as well as a correspondence with the present where migrants occupy more than half of the population. Benyamin's *Jasmine Days* presents a realistic picture of the social, historical and religious context surrounding the migrant communities amidst the political and religious upheavals in an Arab nation. It also presents an uncompromising anatomy of a modern migrant society torn apart by a revolution, divided by loyalty, and exposes the tyrannical politics of citizenship, nationality and the strategic reduction of a community to a non-entity.

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**CHAPTER ONE  
MIGRANT LITERATURE**

The twenty-first century is characterized as an age of mobility and borderlessness owing to the outstanding developments in the field of transportation and communication. To Salman Rushdie, "the distinguishing feature of our time is mass migration, mass displacement, globalized finances and industries" (Rushdie 425). The traditional settler life-form has given its place to a new nomadic lifestyle and migration has become a familiar trend. Sten P. Moslund gives a vivid picture of the 21st century through the following passage: "It seems that we are witnessing a massive international and transnational defeat of gravity, an immense uprooting of origin and belonging, an immense displacement of borders, with all the clashes, meetings, . . . reshaping the cultural landscapes of the world's countries and cities"(Moslund 2).

Migrancy can be called the reigning trope of the twentieth century. In his essay, Imaginary Homelands Rushdie states, "We all cross frontiers, in the sense, we are all migrant people" (Rushdie 279). Experiences of migration differ depending on individuals, situations, and places of migration.

Migration, the phenomenon that is defined by Oxford Learner's Advanced Dictionary as "the movement of large numbers of people, birds or animals from one place to another" ("Migration"), has a history of hundreds of years. In its modern usage, it refers to the trend of displacement and movement made by individuals with the hope to find more personal convenience or better their material or social conditions. People leave their homeland for various reasons. Over the years, migration has taken different forms. Earlier people were compulsorily taken to other countries as indentured labourers, being exploited by their masters or soldiers. They were taken to participate in various wars but now they willingly leave their homeland

either in search of better job opportunities or to get maximum financial gain or under severe economic compulsions at home.

The massive waves of population movement across the world have immense social, economic, political, demographic and literary implications in the context of post-colonialism and globalization. Immigrants face considerable hardship, isolation, alienation, and frustration as they try to find a niche in their newfound world. Migration, therefore, changes people and their mentalities. New experiences result from the coming together of multiple influences and peoples, and these new experiences lead to altered or evolving representations of experience and of self-identity. The appearance of a unique kind of writing, called the literature of migration is the manifestation of this impact. Thus migration literature refers to all literary works that are written in an age of migration or at least to those works that can be said to reflect upon migration.

For more than two centuries the authors and poets have examined in their stories, novels and poems, what it means to be uprooted, willingly or by force, from one's homeland as well as the problems of adjusting to an entirely new environment. This tradition has a long record in the history of literature and is considered to be one of the influential social and cultural issues of every society. Migrants practice their ethnic culture, give vent to their feelings, aspirations, joys, sorrows, nostalgia, and angst, in what is called the contemporary immigrant literature.

The event of migration involves many elements that provide excellent material for diaspora writing. The lived experience of migrants significantly contributes to understanding the position of social and cultural marginality, or as it is sometimes called exile. At the outset, these experiences might include hardships in the home country's political or cultural milieu, the often hard journey involved in escaping from them, the initial contact with the alternative world and the cultural conflicts that emerge during the acquisition of new languages and manners, the fading out of the original culture by the second generations, and the intergenerational conflict. The common themes in immigrant literature are invariably failed quests and thwarted dreams, nostalgia for a home that exists only in memory, conditions of dislocation and isolation, loss of identity, frustration, embarrassment, and

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humiliation at the hands of the host and attempts to preserve common cultural practices.

To be an immigrant offers a unique position to frame and tell stories. It is his dreams that take him to a promised land, and there he is confronted by adversity both mental and physical. The diversity and pluralism of the country of origin exert great influence on the immigrant writers. Globalization or transnationalism has greatly influenced immigrant writers particularly their construction of new immigrant identities. Immigrant writers invent or construct new international or hybrid identities. Immigrant characters in the literary works of the 1980s and 1990s are characterized by heterogeneity, hybridity, diversity, flexibility, and adaptability to invent/reinvent themselves. They express their sensibilities in manifold ways. They are proud of their newfound identity. At the same time, they want to cherish their ethnic connections. Some participate in and merge into the society to achieve their full potential that the new country promises. Some assert their masculine or feminine characteristics as important components of their new identities. Some demonstrate a continually shifting identity in the constant migration from one place to another. They take on new looks in every aspect of their lives. So immigrants in contemporary literary works are inventing and reinventing their identity to accommodate an open, diverse, ever-changing, multicultural, and transnational world.

As postcolonial studies, deals with "cultural contradictions, ambiguities and perhaps, ambivalences" (Shrikan 126), literature of migration is considered to be a branch of the former. It investigates what happens when two cultures clash. Post colonialism in its most recent definition shows a deep concern for the perspective of persons from regions and groups "outside the hegemonic power structure" (Kenzo 329). That is, its interest is in the oppressed minority groups whose presence is not only crucial to the self-definition of the majority group but also critical. Postcolonialism is a way to look at history from different perspectives. It studies the ideas which are represented in the writings of Franz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. It provides an alternative approach to understanding the features of a new phenomenon in the present world: migration.

The theoretical assumptions of postcolonial studies can be applied to the topic of migration because migrants are predominantly positioned at the margins of society and are subject to the hegemonic claims of the majority. As a re-reading process of the colonial past, post colonialism has always been fascinated by the art of migration.

Elleke Boehmer has tended to bring into focus the postcolonial migrant writers in her work *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature* and recorded the significant contribution of migrant writers in the field of postcolonial literature. Boehmer further notes that postcolonial migrant writing is the writing of in-between and their cultural creolization becomes one of the factors that resulted in linguistic creolization. As a result, the English language has become a process of literary transplantation. Thus, the migrant writers have become members of the 21st century "condition of energized migrancy" (Boehmer 226). Therefore, Boehmer calls the postcolonial writer in the 21st century a "cultural traveller" (227).

Migrant writings which are also known as expatriate writings or immigrant writings give voice to the traumatic experiences of the writers owing to the clash of two cultures or the racial discrimination they undergo. Immigration proves a pleasant experience only to a few immigrants who succeed in assimilating themselves with the new geographical, cultural, social and psychological environment. To most diaspora writers, immigration is not a delectable experience. They often find themselves between two cultures. The feeling of nostalgia, a sense of loss and anxiety to reinvent home obsess them, which finds an expression in their writings.

Postcolonialism and its prominent theorists have contributed to a great extent to migration literature by identifying a framework of features and principles for it. The inherent characteristic of this literature, namely its primary focus on the marginal group of every society – here the migrants – brings it under the shadow of the postcolonial theory. Moslund justifies the above association through this statement: "post colonialism is, admittedly, an important element of the overall image of the twentieth century as the age of wandering"(11).

The two prominent proponents of post colonialism are Edward Said and Homi Bhabha who have made a lot of contributions to shape the migration

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literature principles. The most significant characteristic of this literature is taken from Bhabha's "hybridity" principle as stated in *The Location of Culture* (42). Human identity, the ways migrant characters cope with their new life places, the uncertainties and insecurities they suffer from and the communication problems are regarded as the major themes of migration works. Here, the important matter to note is that the happy memories of the lost homeland and the nostalgia the migrant characters experience for their past life are of very little emphasis in the migration literature. The protagonist of the migrant work endlessly recreates himself. Through his encounters with cultural complexities and discriminating experience of being among the minorities, his identity goes beyond the memories of the past and reaches a sort of maturity.

Postcolonial concepts such as mimicry, hybridity, the other, ambivalence, centre, margin, creole, diaspora, ethnicity, liminality, mestizo, metonymic gap, rhizome, syncretism, and identity are all relevant to the immigrant experience. Notions more specific to immigrant experience are assimilation or acculturation, transnational's, fitting in, cultural or imaginative schizophrenia, in this sense, a state of divided identity divided by culture, history, and circumstance. These recurring themes are used at random by immigrant Asian writers to voice their identity crisis, intergenerational conflicts, and nostalgia to counterbalance their memories of past and present and of here and there.

Another major theme associated with migrant literature is the theme of acculturation. Defined as "the process of cultural change that occurs when individuals from different cultural backgrounds come into prolonged, continuous, first-hand contact with each other" (Redfield et al.146), acculturation results in changes at both individual (i.e., values, attitudes, beliefs and identities) as well as group level (i.e. social and cultural systems).

The characters of migration literature invariably "cope with migration" in different ways, from the experience of migration and the uncertainty of displaced identities as "destructive, agonizing, and painful" to the experience of migration and displacement as "productive, fascinating, and appealing", but in general, the migration novel works from a perspective of "rewriting ... identities in order to evoke their impure and heterogeneous character" (Frank 19). Most of the postcolonial concepts are plainly evident in the portrayal of migrant characters

thus underlining the relationship between these two branches of literature.

Migrant literature has several purposes. It helps immigrants to remember their past and culture. It also serves the purpose of giving voice to hitherto silent people with an ignored and hence unknown history and to correct stereotypes of an exotic or foreign experience. It also establishes the identity of the thousands of immigrants whose Asian faces frequently deny them a legitimate place in their country of residence.

**CHAPTER TWO**  
**JASMINE DAYS: A REREADING OF MIGRANT LITERATURE**

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.

Benjamin'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.

Benjamin'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. Benjamin'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.

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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 processes 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

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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 obliterate 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). Benjamin 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 Benjamin'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.

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“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 turmoils. Even when the migrant communities stays 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 White's 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).



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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).

Jasmine Days excels 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.

**Conclusion**

Literature of any age reflects the society of that particular age. "Art grows out of life; it reacts upon life" (Hudson 170). More than any other art form it is the novel that has been giving much emphasis to the social background of the writer. The novel has firmly established itself as the most effective medium for social criticism and diagnosis (Prasad 198).

By creating the possibility of a critical re-reading of migrant writing, Jasmine Days excels as a modern-day reflection of migrant lives. Benyamin's Jasmine Days comes from his own experience of living in a Middle East country for so many years. Several of the characters in the book – Sameera's family that had settled in the City for many years, the youth in her office and others – are based on real-life people that the author has met.

In themes, the book peeps into the life of migrants who have always been on the margins and the effects of a revolution on their lives in which they have no say. It is a naked exposure of the evils of both majoritarianism and dictatorship; the prosecution of humans on sectarian divisions and above all the question of belonging faced by migrants in a foreign land.

The protagonist of Jasmine Days, Sameera come to terms with herself as a migrant, enduring every experience she had during the revolution and, simultaneously invoking a kind of universal experience of her condition of exile. The double marginalization she experience sets apart the novel as an outsider's story set in

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the background of a revolution. *Jasmine Days* by Benyamin thus emerges to be a rereading of modern migrant literature offering us deep insights into the themes of migrant literature.

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