

## DIASPORIC CULTURE AND VULNERABILITY IN *JASMINE DAYS*

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### Abstract

*This paper attempts to read Benjamin's novel, **Jasmine Days**, in a diasporic way to see how the author interacts with diasporic culture and awareness and an attempt to show how the text and characters create a view of experiences and dilemma of expatriates. Diasporic theory focuses on nostalgic dislocation from the homeland, repeated memories, estrangement, the gap between diasporic dreams and realities, the notion of imaginary homeland, alienation and fear, identity crisis in a multicultural society and so on. Benjamin selected anonymous nation as the setting of the novel. Because this is not just the conditions of the diasporas in a country, it is the situation of every expat in the world no matter which country they adopted. The novel deals the issues of diasporic people and describes how cyberspace like social media helps them to connect their homeland in a modern world. **Jasmine Days** becomes an example of diasporic literature like **Goat Days** and both these novel shake the reading experiences of book lovers. The author, Benjamin always introduces stories of marginalized that never told by others. The diasporic literature should be analysed to obtain a better understanding of diasporic life and sensibility because today the diaspora is considered as a worldwide phenomenon, but they are neglected by the society. This paper analysis how the author introduces diasporic life and sensibility in **Jasmine Days** through the characters and situations.*

**Keywords:** *Adapatation,, Alienation, Cultural conflicts, Diasporic consciousness, Discrimination, Dislocation, Humiliation, Immigrants, Language Crisis, Memory.*

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### INTRODUCTION

*Jasmine Days* is the translation of the famous Malayalam novel *Mullappoo Niramulla Pakalukal*, which is first published in the year 2014 written by the famous writer, Benyamin and it is being translated into English by Shahnaz Habib as *Jasmine Days* in 2018 published by Juggernaut Books and it addresses a global audience. *Jasmine Days* is translated by Benyamin from the original in Arabic labelled as *A Spring Without Fragrance* by Sameera Parvin. The author believes readers that *Jasmine Days* is an autobiographical work of Sameera written original in Arabic even though Sameera is a fictional character selected by the author, Benyamin. It can be assumed that it is a strategy called docufiction or realistic fiction adopted by the novelist to make an impression that it is real experience of diasporic people rather than fiction to enhance the reading effects and significances of the novel. This new method of narration will help the readers a meta narrative reading of the text. *Al Arabian Novel Factory* and *Jasmine Days* are twin novels therefore both these works deal with the same issues portrayed by two different individuals from a same host nation. These books are interconnected, but readers can read both the work independently. In the novel, *Al Arabian Novel Factory*, *Jasmine Days* is mentioned as a prohibited novel in the country where the protagonist of the novel, *Al Arabian Novel Factory* named Prathap, an expatriate Indian who visits an anonymous Arab county for his research work.

Diasporic theory is selected to analyse the *Jasmine Days* and the project is an attempt to show how the text and characters create a view of experiences and dilemma of expatriates. Diasporic theory focuses on nostalgic dislocation from the homeland, repeated memories, estrangement, the gap between diasporic dreams and

realities, the notion of imaginary homeland, alienation and fear, identity crisis in a multicultural society and so on.. So the project analysis how the author introduces diasporic life and sensibility in Jasmine Days through the characters and situations.

### **Diasporic Life and Sensibility in Jasmine Days.**

Jasmine Days is a heartbreaking story of Sameera Parvin, a young 23 years old expatriate Pakistani girl who works as a radio jockey in an unnamed Arab nation. Like every diasporic people, she also thinks that this new place is not her, and she feels it is a strange place to her in the beginning. But later by modifying herself she becomes a darling of her family and a famous radio jockey of the orange radio, especially through the programme, Rush Hour. In the new country, she lives with her relatives, specially with her father, Baba in a big house called Taya Ghar, and they are also from Pakistan moreover they have been living in that nation for decades therefore they make efforts to stay there. Her elder uncle, Sergeant Ashraf Amjad Khan called as Bade Taya controls the members of Taya Ghar. He is a senior police man in the city. But Sameera's mother and siblings are in Pakistan, and she often remembers her life in her homeland Faisalabad, which is in Pakistan.

The novel describes the painful experiences and challenges in the lives of immigrants. Most of the characters in the novel including Sameera, her Baba, members in Taya Ghar, friends in Orange radio, Sameera's relatives such as Baluchi, Chamar chacha, Mustafa chacha, Karim chacha, Khalid chacha are from various countries. Thus, the novel shows diasporas are everywhere in the modern world. Sameera travels in a minibus that can seat sixteen people, and these characters are a Sri Lankan man who works in IT, a man from Morocco, Joanna and Irene from Filipina, Viju Prasad from India and other passengers are nameless and Sameera introduces them as Malayalam Mafia because all of them are from Kerala and works in the Malayalam department of radio except Yunus, Shabaz, Hasan. In the studio, Sameera works with different people from different nations and most of them are from India. Later, she joined in a guitar gang called as String Walkers and group members are also from different countries. Sameera mentioned this group as "A miniature world. Such

a gathering was possible only in cities like this, where immigrants came from everywhere” (Benjamin 50). Expatriates can be seen throughout the novel. So the novelist presents the experiences of global diaspora realistically through the novel.

Dislocation or dispersion is an important part of diasporic literature. Sameera's thoughts about displacement are expressed in the novel through her words as “You know how it is when you arrive in a new place and feels like you don't belong there?” (16). She called this dislocation and relocation as a human trafficking and complaints her mother that “It would have been better if she'd married me off to some Taliban guy” (27-28). This discomfort also can be compared to the character, Ashima who is migrated from Calcutta to America with her husband in the novel, says, “I'm saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to go back” (Lahiri 33). So, this can be considered as the initial hesitation of any diasporic people who are forced to exodus from the mother land. As a result of the dislocation, the expatriates experience many serious issues.

Language crisis, cultural conflicts, certain confusions and tendency to adapt or adjust are main issues of expatriates. Sameera's native language is Urdu, but she gets job in Hindi department in studio. She learned Urdu and Farsi in school and her third language is Arabic. But she manages it by modifying her language abilities. But she does not know about Malayalam language and Around the time I had joined, Cattle Class was completely dominated by the intensity of language conflict can be realised through her words, she explains:

Around the time I had joined, Cattle Class was completely dominated by the Malayalam Mafia. As soon as I got into the minibus, I could hear their annoying chatter, their voices like stones in a tin can. They were experts in speaking exclusively in Malayalam, without using even a single word from Hindi or English, so that the rest of us might not even guess what they were saying. Later they even started a radio programme based on this. I would plead with them, Aren't you tired of blabbing in your own language all day? Why not give it a rest now?. (19-20)

The confusions in language and other fields also make discomforts among them. These confusions are clearly indicated in this novel with a vivid narration. On the very first day, Sameera finds Indians in the studio, and she thinks that all those Indians turn against her and kill her because she is from Pakistan. She considers them as her enemies and confuses that they will kill her without any sympathy. Later she understands that it was a kind of silly notion of misunderstanding the Indians and “there are good people and bad people all over the world” (17).

The confusion of diasporic life persists throughout in her being, and she comes with a solution as she says, “And I suppose I have a small brain, but I do have some trouble saying yes to think I don't understand. You are welcome to consider it folly” (243).

The old diasporas were intolerable in their conditions of exodus, and they withdraw into place of exclusivity where not admitting others. But modern diasporas make an attempt to tune their diasporic life to a happier one and this process is called as adaptation. The protagonist adjusts with her room that is rejected by the others because of the roadside noise and she comments, “This was the small universe that baba, and I had carved out for ourselves in Taya Ghar. Even though it was tiny, I loved it from the first” (24).

By the process of adaptation and transformation, the diasporic characters find a space of their own in the adopted land. The new expats like Sameera show an optimistic mind. She makes an effort to be optimistic in any worse situations that happen in her life. In the diasporic life, she understands that national boundaries are mere illusions. Optimistic thoughts of Sameera help her to live in the city, which is not her homeland like she speaks, “I try to think good thoughts, and dream good dreams. I look at the future with hope. And, so I feel confident that tomorrow will be better” (43). Throughout the novel, she tries to think in that way and the stranger she meets in the city also teach her the importance of hope and positive thoughts as he says, “Let's be optimistic!” (226). This optimistic vision does not shatter until the novel is over.

Memory and nostalgia are the main characteristics that can be attribute to all diasporic writings. Memory is the recollection of thoughts include both happy and melancholic events about the past and nostalgia is a feeling of longing for the past because of fondness. Both these features can be find in various parts of the novel. After the death of her father, memories about her father gnawed her like buzzing of wild bees that had built a hive inside her head. So she played baba's favourite song with her guitar that was presented by baba. This deed of the protagonist suggests that she lives in the memory of her baba and her old charming days. In many times, memories kept awake and haunted in her sleeping. She remembers one incident in particular as she elaborates:

One day at home when we, including ma, were teasing him, baba burst into tears. He felt small about his ignorance and helplessness. I was twelve or thirteen then. For my birthday, baba had sent me a card that played music when you opened it. It was the first time in my life that baba had sent me a greeting card. He had no interest in 'fashionable behaviours like expressing love, sending greeting cards or paying compliments. But perhaps some friendsnof his had fired him up: Your daughter is growing up fast, if you don't show her love if you don't show her love now, when will you? And so he had eagerly gone to some shop and bought a card and sent it to me on my birthday. That's not why we laughed at him. The card baba had sent me for my birthday was a Christmas card! (78-79)

In the host region, nostalgia has significance because they survive the diasporic life through nostalgia. The theme, multiculturalism is also illustrated in the novel because it exists in everywhere in a modern world of globalisation and a part of diasporic literature.

Multiculturalism influence the identity of individuals, especially in the case of diasporic people. Sameera and her family relatives in the host nation have a strong influence of their homeland even though they are in another country. But they are not completely the by product of mother land in additional they are also influenced by the adopted land, therefore they are in an in- between state. The cultural background

of one country is entirely different from others. So diasporic characters in the novel exhibits a hybrid identity or a fused identity. The character, Viju Prasad always boast his nation but for the first time ever he criticizes India and Indians, lamenting their own lack of community spirit. Taya, older brother of Sameera's father is from a strict Muslim family, but he allows Sameera to work as a radio jockey when others do not support it as well as baba is very lovable but initially he keeps a distance to her. Her cousin, Farhana loves a boy who is from a Punjabi family. Women in her family had married Arabs, Parsi and English men, and all this increases the chance of identity change. But diasporic identity is much more strong in the main character of the novel, Sameera. In her home, she ignores scolding of mother and responds with twelve words for every word mother spoke, and she never shows too much obedience to others. But in a foreign country, she suppresses her rude attitude and obeys the rules of Taya Ghar. It shows how the native country and the host country shape her identity. She is puzzled with her native identity as she remarks, "For the first time in the life, I was afraid to reveal that I was Pakistani" (173). She has a collective identity because she lives in a multicultural society. She gives equal greatness to all cultures and values it.

The novel shows diasporic people have to face a good deal of discrimination not only from foreign country, but also from motherland. The internal protests against government that held in the country is just a symbol of any problems that occur in the hostland. This is the case of expats no matter what the country, and what the problem is in the nation, protesters are targeting foreigners to gain worldwide attention, and they show their hate towards foreigners. They think that foreigners workers made the government so arrogant, so the foreigners must go for the government to fall. The poor Pakistani cobbler, friend of Mustafa chacha, and Khalid chacha were attacked by the protesters. They face discrimination in the hospitals because the medical college is under the control of the protesters, and they won't let foreigners and others get treatment. It is excruciating that these diasporic people feel discrimination in the homeland too, and the novel how the family discriminates diasporic people as Sameera says, "We isolated that man who arrived once in a while

as a guest and tried to slip into his father role. We teased him. We baited him with our words. We laughed at his clothes and his poor English” (78). So these discriminations lead them to feel loneliness and alienation and both the countries consider them as others only.

Alienation cannot be ignored in the diasporic literature. Sameera initially thinks it is best to be alone when she feels sad for finding her strength, and she does not allow Farhana to accompany when she goes outside. But then she admits, “There is a pain in my chest. I feel as if I have no one” (206). She cannot tolerate this kind of solitude, and she finds that the house, Taya Ghar is an island of loneliness. Everyone disappeared into their rooms and everyone in Taya Ghar isolated her for the reason that she stood steadfast in her truth. But loneliness is harrowing condition as she explains:

And so I became an island within Taya Ghar. No one would talk to me. Though no one said it out loud, it was that they wanted me to move elsewhere, In the kitchen, they stopped counting me for meals. Can anything hurt more? I, too, wanted to move out. But Khalid chacha and Aisha auntie told me that if I didn't stick it out there, things might not go well. There is no bigger tragedy than becoming a stranger to your own family. (214-215)

Fear is a recurrent topic in the novel. It is natural to feel fear when a person comes to an unknown place, but, in the case of diasporic people, these fears does not end. Sameera's fears are portrayed in the novel in several times. Sameera feels strong fears in the new place, and she began to fear even her close friend, Ali as if he was an alien from another planet. Sometimes she feels fear crept up her spine, like a little yellow lizard. She says, “Fear started gnawing at me. Quickly I got back into bed and got under the blankets” (189).

The diasporic people have a strong feeling of returning homeland. Taya and his family find peace and comfort by leaving the host nation and settled in homeland, Pakistan. Sameera also wants to leave this country before this country hears about



the novel she wrote and recaptures her old charismatic Sameera by opening the door to a new life. Like Jews, each diasporic people have a strong sense of returning to their motherland even the host nation provide all modern facilities, and they find ultimate peace in the land where they called as homeland. The unlucky people who didn't get an opportunity to coming back to the homeland in the modern age, they trace their homeland using modern facilities and social media like the character, Aisha auntie in the novel. So all these features make the novel, *Jasmine Days* is a successful work in portraying diasporic life and sensibility. The hard life of expatriates and their psychological issues are portrayed in the novel enable the readers to experience a new face of diasporic life. The novel shows that the diasporic life is like a spring without fragrance because others think that diasporic life is gorgeous but as concerns to expatriates it is easy for an outsider to think that, but it is uneasy to lead a diasporic life. If the flower has no odour, the flower is only good for sight. The novel portrays expatriates are forced to live a life without any aroma.

### Conclusion.

*Jasmine Days* is the novel that mapped the diasporic life and sensibility of expatriates in an unnamed country and the author used the strategy, docufiction to highlight it. Benyamin selected anonymous nation as the setting of the novel. The novel shows a miniature world because most of the characters are from various nations. They came in contact with each other and make a multicultural society there so, it represents the modern globalized society. The protagonist provides equal importance and respect towards culture, beliefs, and practices of others.

Benyamin successfully depicted diasporic identity in the novel through the characters like Sameera, Farhana, taya, baba, Viju Prasad and so on. He presents diasporic identity as hyphenated, hybrid and collective one because they are in an in-between state. The diasporic characters in the novel shows a diasporic consciousness because they know that their life are scattered in a host nation. So they construct an imaginary homeland in the adopted land. Alienation, memory, nostalgia, rootlessness, discrimination from both nations, different perspectives and fears are

repeating features of diasporic literature. These all feature can be trace in the Jasmine Days.

Victor Hugo called exile as the “long dream of home” (Peters 142). The expatriates in the novel also have a strong feeling for their homeland. Baba wants to reach his mother country before he dies, Sameera desires to go back from the adopted land, Taya and his family find peace in Pakistan. But the people who cannot return, they trace their motherland using social media like Aisha auntie in the novel. So, the study explores the diasporic world in Jasmine Days and one of the major finding is that the novel provides the vivid images of inner and outside feelings, sensibility and lives of diasporic people. So, Jasmine Days can be considered as a gift for the world diasporic literature from Malayalam literature.

The novel, Jasmine Days has a significant role in portraying the unknown lives of expatriates. This diasporic writing will help to change the pathetic situations of expatriates as well as allow people to look through the lenses of others. There is a lot of possibility in this diasporic field of study over the coming period. Jasmine Days is a literary work that took advantage of those possibilities. The novelist succeeds in exposing the diasporic life and sensibility of the character’s lives and circumstances throughout the novel.

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