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Identity Crisis in Benyamin's *Jasmine Days*

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Abstract

Benyamin reflects upon the identity crisis which is haunting the lives of the migrants through the eyes of the protagonist Sameera Parvin, in the novel *Jasmine Days.* The novel *Jasmine Days* underlines the irony of identity existence. In the host country, the migrant community, once invited for their potential to contribute to development there, becomes unwanted during a political crisis. They feel riven between two factions and siding with one, even if their heart favours it, poses existential threat. While the main focus of the novel is the migrant community from the Indian subcontinent, the religious differences among the native people are seen intertwined with the political entanglement. This research article titled "Identity Crisis in Benyamin's *Jasmine Da*ys" tries to decode the ties of Sameera to her homeland and her immigrant existence. Being an immigrant in Pakistan amidst the ambience of the Jasmine Protest, adds to the turbulence, causing strain on the life of Sameera. The prevailing Sunni-Shia conflicts seeks her to be the daughter of the victim family. The upheaval of thoughts in Sameera seeks for a larger wisdom for humanity.

Keywords: Identity crisis, Existential threat, Homeland, Jasmine Protest, Humanity

Benyamin has chosen Gulf countries as the location of most of his novels, primarily because he has lived there for a substantial period of time. The state of Kerala to which he belongs is known for supplying workforce to Gulf countries since the days oil exporting countries formed a cartel to raise prices and the resultant income boom helped these countries to spend money on infrastructure. Benyamin has chosen the nationality of his protagonist Sameera Parvin of the novel *Jasmine Days* as a Pakistani. Through her eyes, he reflects upon the identity crisis which is haunting the lives of the migrants.

The novel *Jasmine Days* underlines the irony of identity existence. In the host country, the migrant community, once invited for their potential to contribute to development there, becomes unwanted during a political crisis. They feel riven between two factions and siding

with one, even if their heart favours it, poses existential threat. While the main focus of the novel is the migrant community from the Indian subcontinent, the religious differences among the native people are seen intertwined with the political entanglement.

Other issues in focus in the novel are the patriarchal mindset of the Pakistani Sunni Muslim joint family which has made "the City" (39) in West Asia - supposedly Bahrain – their home, the ethnic and religious discrimination, professional rivalry as also comradery, generation gap, hypocrisy, etc. There seems to be a reason behind identifying the host country as a city only. These cities of modern times are subject to international exposure in terms of culture that has impacted the traditional joint family system. However, the society in these countries is almost a mirror image of what exists in the Indian subcontinent. Hence the joint family of Sameera has no problem settling down here. Secondly, it appears that the laws of the City support the immigrants in bringing in their relatives freely.

Sameera Parvin, the protagonist has come to the City from Pakistan to join her baba (father) who is a security guard and stays with his elder brother in what is called Taya Ghar (eldest uncle's house). The generation gap between Sameera and her mother out there in Pakistan was the reason for her being called to 'the City'. Sameera takes up the job of a radio jockey with the government-run Orange Radio. Through her chatty style and frankness, she becomes popular with the listeners so much so that she starts getting marriage proposals from some of them. Even though she has a liberal outlook, she develops cold feet if she has to attend Justin Bieber's concert all by herself.

The life of Sameera's family back in Pakistan is described in detail and there is tender rendering of the relationship between her mother and baba who migrated and has been living alone for so long in 'the City' because he is not a rich person. His fatherly sentiments are rarely revealed through a close reading of the novel. It is only when he finds Sameera interested in playing guitar for which she had been secretly practicing with the String Walkers, he buys one for her and the reader empathizes with him as the description is powerful enough to convey the feelings:

> After dinner I went off to wash the dishes. When I returned, baba was fiddling with the strings, as if he were a little kid. He looked chagrined when I spotted him. 'Play something,' he requested. Javed, there isn't a single moment in my life when I felt prouder. That moment, I was validated by my own father. (Benyamin 76)

True to history, Benyamin goes on to recreate the ambience of the Jasmine Protest, the epicentre of which was the famous Square of Pearls in the City. As already mentioned, the major grouse of the protesters, mostly the Shia community was the 'second class' status as citizens assigned to them. Surprisingly, the Shia community is claimed to be the majority community and it also professes to be the original inhabitants of the region; only the ruling elite is Sunni. The novel mentions the lavish lifestyle of His Majesty, the ruler of 'the City' whose suppression on the opponents becomes the staple of social media.

Back to the narrative, the readers can find that in 'the City', the Sunni-Shia conflicts begin everywhere. Neighbourhoods are barricaded and people become sceptical of one another. Widespread violence is seen. The people never know where they might be attacked if you are an alien, an immigrant on the street. At this point, the national-racial identity overtakes professional identity. The surprising thing is that even the doctors and nurses in hospitals start identifying the wounded and attend to them only when they are sure of their being Sunni. The

immigrants have little chance of getting treatment. When a wounded person was brought by Sameera to hospital, the nurse at the nurse station "looked at me as if I had committed some crime. 'He didn't get wounded doing anything good, did he? He was attacking our people. Let him lie there. We'll bury him when he dies,' she said." (154). When an Indian nurse tries to dress his wounds, she is threatened by a fellow Arab staffer of consequences.

All this goes to indicate the interesting play of identity formation and re-formation. The issue of identity which Edward Said found in his masterpiece *Orientalism* to be significant in the colonization phase and a relative one thereafter, and which Homi Bhabha found to be hybrid in his famous essay "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" (1984) and further refined ten years later in his book *The Location of Culture* (2004).

> Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is con-structed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. The authority of that mode of colonial discourse that I have called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mim-icry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power. (122)

The issues of subjugation due to the result of migration is normally due to the majority-minority, ruler-ruled binaries. The family depicted in *Jasmine Days*, does not exhibit sentiments of exile or nostalgia and does not seem anxious, rather it believes the religious uniformity will take care and indulge in adaptation to the new environment – but it becomes an illusion as it is broken later.

Initially the migrated family seems to be passing days as it used to do back in the home country. The family keeps intact the orthodox Muslim lifestyle. The major issues that finally bother them, come up in the public-private domain after the political agitation starts. This is the collective identity of the migrated Pakistanis. They try to remain stable, there is no sign of change towards cultural hybridity which is a common factor that results due to displacement.

Even though most West Asian countries practise Islam, the intra-faith prejudices come to the force here. Religious discrimination is felt by Sameera for the first time when her colleague Ali, a Shia, whom she liked very much, told her that people belonging to his faith were treated like "second class" citizens in their own country because the rulers were Sunni Muslims. This hurt has radicalized him to an extent. He has in his room, the poster of Kadhim al-Jubouri, the man who led people in breaking Saddam Hussain's statue in Iraq. He also favours Hizabollah and is believed to be its member himself, which means being a suicide bomber. This is a puzzle for Sameera who is not able to justify how a youth from a wealthy country can have such a mindset. The Taya Ghar inmates are also Sunnis. The question of relationship with a Muslim of another shade – a Shia in this case – is not acceptable to them. When Sameera returns from office and is seen alighting Ali's car, all relatives scold her for friendship with a Shia who is supposed to follow the other faith.

To Sameera, who is of liberal views, this kind of discrimination is outrageous, particularly when she finds that the hunter and the prey, terms which can be interchanged for Sunni and Shia, have same slogan. Taya Ghar is situated on the roadside and Shia protesters march down after they are dislodged from the Square of Pearls, shouting 'Allahu Akbar'. A

little later, the soldiers representing the Sunni administration come down the same street. "Rows of hundreds of soldiers walked behind the vehicles. They raised their guns and chanted zealously, 'Bolo Takbir…Allahu Akbar'" (193).

The situation deconstructs religious identity which is seen fragmented and fragile. Moreover, the national identity now overpowers the religious identity underlining the fluidity of all identity markers. The idea is better defined by Zygmunt Bauman, a Polish sociologist in his definition of 'liquid modernity'. He claims "Liquid Modernity is the unstoppably rising volume of 'uprooted' people - migrants, refugees, exiles, asylum seekers: people on the move and without permanent abode"(35). Bauman, avers the contemporary times as 'liquid modernity' in which the subject is constructed against the backdrop of a fragmented world. The liquid or fluid social relations impact identities which enter into a competitive relationship with one another. "Family workmates, class, neighbours are all too fluid to imagine their permanence and credit them with the capacity of reliable reference frames" (59). Bauman defines some of the basic impulses of man as liquid whether it is love, fear, life and times.

The individual identity with the precious tag of allegiance now gets highlighted. Sameera's Taya, being a police official, sides with the establishment. He praises His Majesty for providing freedom for women and foresees oppression if the ruler is dethroned. Benyamin dramatizes the narrative by alternating events with positive and negative vibes as when Sameera teases Taya for his faithfulness to His Majesty and the chicken-hearted policemen – "As soon as they saw a few protesters, they ran into their holes" (128). This sympathy for the agitators is offset soon thereafter when a stray person in the street shouts at Sameera standing in her balcony: "You shameless foreigners, you are dogs eating the leftovers of this government. Till you leave, this country will not get better" (129).

The migrants are placed in an unenviable position due to the domestic politics of 'the City'. They are like between the devil and the deep sea. If they favour His Majesty which they have to do, being government employees, they incur the wrath of the agitators; if they do not do so, then the government would be after them and they stand good chance of losing employment, and maybe life too. The domestic political crisis takes its toll on the immigrants who are accused of poaching on jobs which otherwise could have gone to the natives of the City. The Arab staff of Radio Orange and Tunes Malayalam refuses to talk to the Indian and Pakistani members. On the other hand, those like Farhana who were born there in the City, don't want to return to Pakistan. She says, "I was born here, I grew up here, and I have every right to continue my life here. I am not going to run away, scared. This land belongs to me just as much as it belongs to the protesters" (150).

Sameera, the youthful protagonist of the novel is rightly in the trail of a fierce mental debate about what she ought to do under the circumstances. Her sympathies lie with the protesters but her Baba and Taya and other male members of the family are servants of His Majesty. She examines the issue from the standpoint of Islam. Hearing the invocation to the protesters to fight against His Majesty as it was Allah's war, she wonders how could he be certain about God's will. The mullah told the protesters that Heaven would be their home. But Sameera thought "Who was he to promise all this?" (133). Her views on religion are explained as she ponders as to why God is silent when the contradictions of religion are exposed.

> Who are your real followers, in a world where each person claims to be right? Who did you give your spectre to? … If there is only one truth, why didn't we all follow that one truth?... If only you had given us a set of final instructions,

> just as you had sent other messages to the world, your children would not be swimming in rivers of blood, from Karbala to Kandahar. (73)

This indeed is the unsophisticated viewpoint of a youth but it does contain utmost wisdom.

The political conflict here in 'the City' has its impact on the String Walkers group also. When Ali wants to play a revolutionary song, others in the group – Irfan and Salman object. However, group comradery among the migrants – whether Indians or Pakistanis – is evidenced when the question of existence comes up. During curfew, the members of the Orange Radio and Tunes Malayalam forget their differences and there is constant messaging between group members, giving requisite information so that everybody stays safe. Thus, the migrant identity has the better of national identity, and of course, religious identity.

Finally, when the agitation is quelled, Taya Ghar is in a celebratory mood as the jobs of the menfolk are presumed secure. But soon the news of baba's death arrives. Sameera is broken and the mood at Taya Ghar is somber. Since baba died serving the crown, he was awarded good bit of money, called blood money. Sameera is rightly shaken when she learns that her friend Ali had mercilessly crushed her Baba under the wheels of his car. Even though he might not have known baba's identity, killing an unarmed policeman in such a cruel manner made her hate Ali no end. Sameera's epiphany dawns when the old man reveals Ali's experiences while growing up. He, like many others, had been fed on "Fictions" (which is also the title of a chapter) dished out by moulvis (Muslim priests) or politicians. (233). There is a long discussion on this aspect between the old man and Sameera wherein he is able to bring home to her the point that society was responsible for Ali's crime. Why, then, should Islam inculcate hatred is the question to which he replies:

> I don't know how Islam became a religion of hatred and anger for Ali and his friends. Who taught him to interpret Islam like that? It was not any outsider's work. Insiders were responsible for it. A person's morality doesn't develop by itself, it is nourished by society. But if that was so, society was responsible for Ali's crime. The society of Prophet Muhammad's time did not criticize him for forgiving Hind. But today if I decide to forgive Ali, a thousand of the Prophet's followers in this age would point their fingers at me. (247)

So, it is the orthodox moral identity that Ali has formed on the basis of inputs from the religious preachers in his society. After long ruminations and discussions with the unidentified "old man," Sameera refuses to accept the money from the government. Thus, the analysis of religious precepts and practice lays bare the difference which the enlightened can only see.

To conclude the research article titled "Identity Crisis in Benyamin's *Jasmine Days*" is to be seen as a testimony on the struggles that arise in the lives of the migrants. After a close reading of the novel, one can conclude that Sameera comes from Pakistan which is a Sunni dominated country in which other religions are not tolerated. Though Sameera family becomes a victim of the riot between the Shia and Sunni community, she chooses to forgive a Shia for a crime that would hardly ever be condoned by the daughter of the victim. To the question if her migrant situation have a part to play here, the answer is yes. The ties of the immigrants with the home country are strong. However, in the case of migration or immigration one has a divided self, a fractured consciousness, in the sense that you may equally belong or not belong to more than one place. But what is to be remembered is humanity should triumph in all situations.

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