


FROM PAGE TO SCREEN: INTERSEMIOTIC TRANSLATION OF *THE GOAT DAYS*

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Abstract

The Goat Days is a much-acclaimed Malayalam novel written by Benyamin titled Aadujeevitham, later translated to English by Joseph Koyipalli in the year 2012. The novel explores the hardships faced by migrants in Middle East countries through the real-life story of Muhammed Najeeb, who emigrated with high hopes but was isolated and was treated not even with the dignity of animals in the alienated desert of Saudi Arabia. The novel is an example of Indian diasporic literature, which portrays the miserable lives of migrant labourers and offers a counter narrative to the upheld notion of Gulf as the 'land of dreams.' The novel was adapted into a film with the same title (translated to English as The Goat Life), directed by Blessy, released in 2024. An adaptation of novel to film is an instance of inter semiotic translation, which is the interpretation of verbal signs by means of nonverbal sign system, as stated by Roman Jakobson. The paper focuses on the concept of migration, identity crises, while analysing the process of inter-semiotic translation involved in the cinematic rendering of The Goat Days. It further explores the creative divergences between the novel and its film adaptation, highlighting how meaning, emotion, and cultural context are rearticulated through the visual medium.

Keywords

Adaptation; Alienation; Identity Crisis; Inter-semiotic Translation; Migration, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Stories too propagate themselves when they catch on; adaptations-as both repetition and variation-are their form of replication. Evolving by cultural selection, travelling stories adapt to local cultures, just as populations of organisms adapt to local environments. We retell-and show again and interact anew with-stories over and over; in the process, they change with each repetition, and yet they are recognizably the same. [...] In the workings of human imagination, adaptation is the norm, not exception (Hutcheon, 177)

The purpose of the present work is to contribute to the critical appreciation and offer an inter semiotic translation of a significant contemporary cinematic adaptation Aadujeevitham (The Goat Life), 2024 Malayalam film written and directed by Blessy.

Based on a real-life story, Aadujeevitham chronicles how Najeeb, a labourer involved in sand quarrying in Haripad, Kerala, is forced into a modern version of slavery in an alien country. Events take a bizarre turn when he along with Hakeem land at Riyadh airport on 4th April, 1992, lured by the prospect of a better future. Their Arab employer never turns up to receive them. Instead, an unknown Arab seizes their passports and abducts them, forcing them into gruelling servitude as shepherds in the vast, merciless expanse of the Saudi desert. Deprived of their freedom and fundamental human dignity, they endure starvation, constant abuse and severely inhumane living conditions. They were forced to tend hundreds of goats and camels in separate workplaces (masara). After three years of miserable loneliness and wretched slavery, Najeeb makes a miraculous and daring escape along with Hakeem and his friend Ibrahim Khadiri through



the deadly desert. It moves beyond the lives of the Indian diaspora in the Gulf, becoming a universal narrative that reflects every individual's existential crisis in the world.

When a work is adapted from a verbal text to a visual text, there happens not only a transfer of story or theme, but a translation of semiotic codes, which Linda Hutcheon states as transmutation or transcoding, a recording into a new set of conventions as well as signs (Hutcheon, 16). She says that adaptation is both a product and a process (Hutcheon, 9). Inter-semiotic translation is part of the process, making a selection of what will be translated and how will be translated. The famous Russian linguist and literary theorist Roman Jakobson in his article *On Linguistic Aspects of Translation* distinguished three ways of interpreting a verbal sign, which are intralingual, interlingual and intersemiotic translation. Intralingual translation is the "rewording, an interpretation of verbal signs through other signs of the same language" (Jakobson, 114), interlingual is "translation proper [which] is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language" (Jakobson, 114). He defined intersemiotic translation as the "transmutation, [is] an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems" (Jakobson, 114). The best example of intersemiotic translation is that from a print media to the screen, from a novel or short story into cinema. This view challenges the age-old tradition of considering the adaptation as inferior to the literary text on which it is based. Semiotic codes are systems of signs that create meaning according to the contexts.

Most comparative analyses of literature and film, when approached through the lens of medium specificity, tend to remain confined within the discourse of fidelity. Robert Stam has stated that "the demand for fidelity ignores the actual processes of making film, for example, the differences in cost and in modes of production" (Stam, 56). While a novel generally represents the creative vision of a single author, a film emerges from the collaborative efforts of multiple contributors. Also, the process of filmmaking is deeply shaped by economic and industrial factors. George Bluestone in *Novels into Film: The Metamorphosis of Fiction into Cinema* (1957) finds inevitable differences, leading to the conclusion that a literary work and its cinematic adaptation are two different media, each with its own unique artistic qualities. The incidents and characters are dissociated from the original novel when they are translated to the film. The filmmaker should be treated like a new author, not as a translator.

To compare and contrast the two media apparently has become an inevitable method in adaptation study. A cinematic adaptation of a novel can only succeed if the film translation or portrayal is skilfully carried out, if the film brings new insights to the novel, finding or creating new meanings of the text. A movie's success in an adaptation depends on whether it is successful in transferring the emotions that the text aroused rather than simply the dialogues.

***Aadujeevitham* in Pages:**

Written by Benyamin in 2008, *Aadujeevitham* is an emotional journey of the protagonist Najeeb battling with life in an alien land. It was later translated to other Indian languages and to English by Joseph Koyipally in 2012. The novel won the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award in 2009 and Benyamin became one of the top sellers in Malayalam. The story is divided into four parts as Prison, Desert, Escape and Refuge. Like Benyamin states in the cover of his novel *Aadujeevitham*, "the lives we haven't experienced are all fables to us..."

Written based on the real-life experiences of a person named Shukkur in Kerala, the novel reveals the other side of the Gulf dream, the lived reality in which people who migrate with high hopes are ruthlessly exploited, where they have to battle hard for survival. Exposed to the harsh climate of the desert, Najeeb spends his days and nights in the open, wearing a rotten robe lent by his master, denied water for sanitation or bathing and frequently beaten. A man of unwavering faith, his deep trust in Allah and his unwavering hope guides him through the sufferings. He bonds



with the goats and becomes one among them. A quiet observer and quick learner, he adapts to his surroundings. He picks up bits of an alien language, masters the art of milking goats and camels, and most importantly, learns the harsh art of survival in a brutal place designed to crush him. He is constantly under the surveillance of his cruel master, whom he addresses as Arbaab, who functions like a panopticon with his gun and a set of binoculars. Three years of slavery has stripped him of everything- his dignity, strength and even his sense of self. However, he gets a chance to meet his long-lost companion Hakeem who works in the neighbouring goat farm and his new found friend Ibrahim Khadiri, a Somalian worker who knows the desert well. They make a miraculous escape from the desert prison. They run for days and nights, narrowly escaping being spotted by other Arabs. Hunger, thirst and fatigue overwhelm them. They must contend the scorching sun, desert snakes, sandstorms, foot blisters and starvation. Unable to make a step forward without a drop of water, Hakeem faints down and dies. He also loses sight of Ibrahim Khadiri later. Finally, somehow the emaciated, exhausted Najeeb faints in front of the Malabar Restaurant run by a compassionate Keralite named Kunjikka. Najeeb is fed, bathed, shaven, clothed, the touch of human kindness received after years! When he is told that the date is 13th August 1995, he realizes that three years, four months and nine days have passed since his landing in Saudi Arabia.

After some months, on the advice of Kunjikka, Najeeb and another escaped farm labourer named Hameed decide to surrender to the police. Compared to what he has endured in the desert, the prison is a luxurious place for him. As he asks, “Can you imagine how much suffering I must have endured to voluntarily choose imprisonment!” (Benyamin, 6). Yet, all live in the fear of the weekly identification parades when Arab employers come to the prison looking for their runaway workers. The Indian embassy offers a free out pass to Najeeb and eighty other Indians trapped without legal documents. As they are herded into the flight back home, Najeeb remembers how he used to herd the goats together in the desert. His life has truly been a goat’s life. He has suffered the fate meant for some other worker. Yet, accepting everything as his divinely ordained inescapable destiny, he returns home to a quiet life. Najeeb’s journey is more than just a tale of suffering, it is a testament to resilience, endurance, and the indomitable human spirit. From Benyamin’s *Aadujeevitham* to the English translation *Goat Days* (Joseph Koyippalli) to Blessy’s ‘The Goat Life’, the story of Najeeb has touched millions.

***Aadujeevitham* in Screen:**

The visual adaptation of any popular literary work is an arduous task. The challenges before writer-director Blessy to transcend the imaginative boundaries of the millions of readers with his craftsmanship were not small. But he has done a brilliant work in depicting the poignant survival drama with true emotions. *Aadujeevitham - The Goat Life* is a masterpiece, the paramount of storytelling and visual craft in Bollywood Film Industry. The film evokes universal yet personal feelings of sufferings, agony and ultimately hopes that can be understood universally, overcoming the confines of language. There is an additional layer of alienation through the unsubtitled Arabic spoken by the Arabs, not comprehended by Najeeb or Hakeem.

One aspect that deserves all praise is the actors Prithviraj Sukumaran’s and K.R Gokul’s massive transformation and remarkable performance who ‘lived’ Najeeb and Hakeem on screen. Prithviraj has portrayed the despair and hopelessness of Najeeb with ease through his gestures, subtle expressions, voice modulations and his body. The efforts taken by the crew, the challenges endured during its filming that included a prolonged period of being stuck in Jordan during the Covid were all testimonies to their goal of attaining perfection, making a huge contribution to the film industry. Every frame is an art, crafted with care and precision.



The film won nine state awards including The Best Director Award for Blessy and The Best Actor Award for Prithviraj. It has also been shortlisted for the 97th Academy Awards. The ensemble cast features Prithviraj, Taib Al Balushi, K.R Gokul, Jimmy Lean-Louis, Amala Paul, Nasar Karutheni, Shobha Mohan along with others.

The title font of *The GOAT LIFE* in the movie poster creatively incorporates the image of a limping man in place of the letter “I,” accompanied by the tagline “Every breath is a battle.” This visual design symbolically reflects Najeeb’s struggles and his relentless fight for survival. The gradual decrease in the boldness of the letters symbolise his physical and emotional exhaustion as he limps through the hardships of survival.

The film’s visual authenticity is powerfully reinforced through the meticulous work of makeup artist Ranjith Ambady and costume designer Stephy Zaviour, whose creative collaboration vividly captures the physical and psychological ordeal of Najeeb, Hakeem and Ibrahim Khadiri during their desperate journey across the desert. The parched skin tones, sunburnt complexions, and tattered costumes effectively mirror the characters’ suffering and gradual depletion, transforming their appearance into a visual metaphor for endurance and dehumanization under extreme conditions.

AR Rahman’s music intensifies the character’s journey and connects us with the emotional turmoil endured by him. The song *Omane* captures the blossoming love between Najeeb and Sainu, while *Periyone* is a soul stirring melancholic spiritual song, his cry to the Almighty in the face of complete despair. The background scores throughout the film echo the confinement and become a portal into the character’s inner world.

The film employs a non-linear narrative structure. It opens with an introductory scene showcasing the vast desert, the serene night sky, and the reflection on water, introducing the disheveled Najeeb as he drinks alongside the goats surrounding him. The narrative then shifts to the past. The flashbacks show Najeeb and Hakeem waiting for their employer at the airport in an alien place. The language is a barrier for them. They are taken by a Kafeel (Arabic word for boss or sponsor) seizing their passports, without any explanation and are led to a truck. When Najeeb asks some drinking water, the inhumane Arab rejects it as blabbering. Thus, the motif of thirst is introduced in the first scene. The viewers get immersed in the journey of Najeeb, his initial struggles in the desert as a slave, how he adapts to the cruel circumstances and his final voyage of escape. As years go by, Najeeb becomes disconnected from the outside world. Losing all sense of time, his life akin to the desert becomes static, with mute desperation and loneliness. He gradually becomes one among the animals he tends. He eats what he feeds them and even forgets how to speak. We witness the slow disintegration of a human becoming desensitized to the nature of his existence.

The transformation of a happy and healthy Najeeb swimming freely in the Kerala backwaters to a starving, desperately thin and unkempt one in the desert among rugged goats, is captured beautifully through the stunning visuals. Whether it be the transitions, from arid desert landscape to fertile backwaters of Kerala or day turning into night, the film has a powerful language of its own. Most of the frames in desert are broad strokes of brown and nothingness in the horizon. This is juxtaposed with the beauty of Kerala, abounding in the hues of green and blue, giving it a dream like dimension. There is a stark contrast in the background score too while depicting the desert and in the flashback scenes that show his homeland. The element of water is tremendous in the scenes depicting Kerala, contrasting with the barren and dry desert. Blessy uses the desert as a motif for loneliness and alienation. The imposing circle of rock formations around the shepherding area suggest that Najeeb is in a prison literally and metaphorically. When the novel relies on the interior monologue and first-person narration of Najeeb, the film portrays alienation through the silence that engulfs Najeeb, which transcends language.



There are many scenes, which stand out and reveal the acting prowess of Prithviraj. The scene, for instance, where Najeeb is reed-thin and walks naked to the water tank to take a bath after years hits us emotionally. As Najeeb prepares to leave the animals behind with the hope of escaping from the haunting desert, he gently bids farewell to the goats and camels that had become his silent companions. In a striking shot, his reflection appears within the eyes of a camel. The crew later revealed that the capturing of this poignant shot required great precision and reportedly took seven days to get the desired shot.

However, not every page or every conversation can be encapsulated in a two- and half-hour movie. There are time constraints along with other limitations. The artistic liberty exercised by the director and the crew often leads to noticeable changes, ones that ardent readers may not always welcome. Although the film is based on the novel, which in turn is inspired by the lived experiences of a person, both the author and the director exercise creative freedom in shaping their individual portrayals of Najeeb's story.

The novel clearly portrays the bond Najeeb shared with the goats, how he names them after people back home, an act out of nostalgia for his homeland. It also reveals that language is not always required to communicate. The novel also details the attack of desert snake, the death of goats including a pregnant goat and Nabeel, the goat he considered like his own son. Najeeb resonates with the dead pregnant goat, "Goat, your stars were unlucky, you were condemned to die before you could even look at your child. I am twice as doomed. I too must go through hell in this masara. I too haven't even seen my child. What a wretched life!" (Benyamin 86).

Najeeb's aversion to eating mutton in the prison plays a vital role in establishing his symbiotic relationship with the goats. But the film excludes such important narratives, failing to portray the strong bond Najeeb shared with the goats. The film focuses more on their ordeal escape from the desert. Thus, the title of the movie is not justified. The life with the goats is not completely explored in *The Goat Life*.

The physical as well as the psychological effects that torment Najeeb are vividly depicted in the novel. Loneliness, isolation and melancholy of solitary confinement haunt him. He shares the intense loneliness he experienced after the 'scary figure' has gone from the masara, even though Najeeb was unable to communicate with the man. It is evident when he expresses his happiness when two men come to his masara for some jobs, he says,

Filled with the joy of meeting people after a long time, I followed them around like a puppy. But they didn't understand much of what I said and neither did I make sense of what they said. But it was with broad smiles that they remained uncomprehending of my words (Benyamin 79).

These people do not even talk or smile at him, but just the presence of a third person brings positive energy to his mind. In the absence of other humans around him, Najeeb suffers an identity crisis and becomes one among the goats that surround him. But the film shows it only on a surface level and the real emotions beneath are not captured to its full essence.

The prison section in the novel was reduced to just the identification parade. Another touching episode that was excluded in the movie was the story of Hameed, another migrant worker who shared the similar experience of being enslaved and tortured in another masara.

It is to be noted that in the midst of all the hardships, Najeeb had faith in God that helped him endure the hardships, providing him with resilience in dire circumstances. In the film too, he cries calling Allah. While telling Najeeb about Khadiri, Hakeem tells that "I feel like he has been sent to us like Allah sent Prophet Moses." Ibrahim Khadiri is represented in the movie as a God-like man, leading Najeeb and Hakeem throughout their long voyage in the desert, who exhorts



them to walk till they die. Khadiri tearing his jacket and wrapping it around Najeeb's feet or giving his boots to him and walking barefoot are Blessy's own creative additions, which enhance the mood and theme of the story. Ibrahim Khadiri, in essence, is sharing his body through his clothes and shoes. Like Najeeb, the viewers are also shocked when we come to know that Ibrahim Khadiri is a wanted criminal. There's spirituality in a person, who is accused by others; a hint of virtue. A criminal, who is being searched by the police, doing such sacrifices give those sequences an entirely new dimension (Sidhardhan).

The film also sheds light into the overlooked aspects of the struggles underwent by Najeeb. The marital relation between Najeeb and his wife Sainu was deeply explored, intensifying the alienation he endured in the desert. The profound impact of love and warmth between lovers is a common theme in the films directed by Blessy. His films *Thanmathra*, *Bhramaram*, *Pranayam*, *Kalimannu* etc vividly depict the marital affection and attachment. This aspect is explored in *The Goat Life* film too, different from the novel.

Through the story of Najeeb Mohamad, the novel and the film mirror the brutalities experienced by millions of labour migrants in Saudi Arabia who came in search of better pastures. *The Goat Days* not only serves as a captivating tale of survival but also invites us to reflect on existential questions, cultural identity and the transformative power of human endurance.

Conclusion:

To conclude, Blessy's film *Aadujeevitham* is praiseworthy in terms of its powerful performances, screenplay, cinematography and the poignant portrayal of human resilience. He has delivered a brilliant work in bringing life to the pages of the novel. When the real life is turned into a work of fiction, the writer makes changes as per their imaginations. When that book is adapted to a film, the changes are further reshaped to fit into the cinematic medium considering visual storytelling, narrative pacing and audience engagement. Some elements that work well in a book might need to be restructured or omitted in a film to ensure a coherent and impactful narrative within a limited time span. Blessy's adaptation of *Aadujeevitham* exemplifies this process, as he carefully selects moments that encapsulate the protagonist's struggles, loneliness and resilience, making the journey both compelling and cinematic. Ultimately, the transition from literature to film is not just about retelling a story but about reimagining it through a different artistic medium. Adaptation is not a kind of rereading, but a new and imaginative construction. Blessy's work in *Aadujeevitham* stands as a testament to how a filmmaker can honour the essence of a novel while transforming it into a visually and emotionally powerful experience.

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