

Diasporic Dilemma and Fluid Identities in Benyamin's Novel Jasmine Days

Dr. Jagdish Batra

Professor of English, Global Languages Centre, O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonapat, India,
drjagdishbatra@gmail.com ORCID: 0000-0003-3261-4819

Abstract

The JCB award winning novel *Jasmine Days* written in Malayalam by Benyamin (translated into English by Shahnaz Habib) is the writer's second novel which takes up the life of a diasporic Pakistani family in an unnamed West Asian country – a locale that hardly finds favour with established writers. The crisis comes in the form of the political upheaval known in recent history as the Arab Spring, and the whole world is upturned. The novel is remarkable for the presentation of a woman's point of view by a male author. The love angle, made conspicuous by its absence, makes the narrative poignant. My paper studies the impact due to the failed revolution on the diasporic life of various nationalities from the Indian subcontinent and the consequent problematization of various constructs, most of all, identity in its various manifestations: diasporic, national, religious, etc. Besides, it foregrounds the interrogation of the systems of governance, patriarchal family set-up, justice and societal attitude to religion and morality.

Keywords: Indian literature, Pakistani diaspora, political fiction, Arab Spring, identity crisis.

Introduction

Malyalee language writer Benyamin (born Benny Daniel), whose novel *Goat Days* focusing on the abysmal animal-type life of an Indian migrant in a West Asian country due to the machinations of a fraudulent employer attracted readers' attention, came up with *Jasmine Days* (2013), which though has the West Asian locale again, takes up the life of migrants from the Indian subcontinent reeling under the political conflict in the host country – an uncommon theme. That the novel translated by Shahnaz Habib won the inaugural JCB prize for literature goes to underline its worth. The author has successfully presented the point of view of the young female narrator in a simple, yet potent enough language to express deep felt emotions and lived experience.

There has been a lot of outpouring on the theme of diaspora by Indian writers, but mainly the location of the diaspora is USA or UK. Very few novels in Indian English literature deal with other locations. In these postmodern times, travel-based fiction has picked up. So, we have characters going places as in V.S. Naipaul's *Magic Seeds*, Salman Rushdie's *Quichotte*, Amitav Ghosh's *The Gun Island*, etc. besides some popular works featuring restless youth hopping from one place to another, as in Karan Bajaj's *Keep Off the Grass*. There are novels in which compulsions of job take one places like Amitabha Chatterjee's *Of Wooing, Woes and Wanderings*, in which the protagonist hops between Venezuela, India and some Middle East countries. One thing common to these novels is the lack of

stress on family set-up and more on exotic experiences or in the case of senior authors, deep reflections on life and world, etc.

Benyamin has chosen Gulf countries as the location 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 as Pakistani even as characters from some other countries are also there. This lends it a universal character.

The novel *Jasmine Days* underlines the irony of diasporic existence. In the host country, the diasporic 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 diasporic community from the Indian subcontinent, the religious differences among the native people are seen intertwined with the political imbroglio. Other issues in focus 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 comradeship, generation gap, hypocrisy, etc. Besides, the novelist questions the basics of religion, crime and punishment.

There seems to be a reason behind identifying the host country as a city only. After the discovery of oil, in Bahrain, as in other Gulf countries, the population has been shifting to cities from villages so much so that 85% people now live in cities as per a study conducted by Prof. Yahya El-Haddad of Bahrain University. (El-Haddad, 2003: 2). 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. All the menfolk of the Taya Ghar work either for the government or private firms. Laws in the US or Canada do not give this kind of liberty to the immigrants and many an aspirant has to lead life as an illegal immigrant as the character Biju does in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006).

A large number of people from the Indian subcontinent flock to the City in search of jobs. Most of them belong to the lower category of professionals comprising mechanics, plumbers, carpenters or are simple unskilled construction labourers and formed the third wave of immigrants. These people have built here -- what to postcolonial theorists like Avtar Brah (1997) or Robin Cohen (2001) is a ‘mythic place’ and to writers like Salman Rushdie (1992), ‘imaginary homeland’ -- a somewhat less imaginary and apparently real home in which they feel secure because of the commonality of religion that they share with the host society and the short distance that separates them from their homeland. Sameera Parvin is the protagonist and this novel is in the form of a letter written by her to Javed, the editor of the radio station where she works.

Taya Ghar

Sameera 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! She has a liberal outlook and even though calls herself a "harami" [bastard], she develops cold feet if she has to attend Justin Bieber's concert all by herself!

The term "Taya Ghar" at once evokes the stereotype of a misogynic, patriarchal set-up wherein the eldest uncle rules to the exclusion of others living under the same roof – in all, six families with fourteen children living under one roof. Baba has lived here for 20 years while others -- four chachas and mamus – have been here for varying periods. The young people are all educated and while some of them are liberal in thought, they have to keep their thoughts secret due to the conservative discourse governing the family set-up here, as in Pakistan.

Sameera seems to be going on well with Karim Chacha and cousin Farshana, besides the Taya and his wife or Sippy aunty, as she is called. 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. He is a quiet fellow whose fatherly sentiments are rarely revealed. 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.

You remember that old song we sang a lot during our college days? Aamir Khan's 'Papa kehte hain bada naam karega, beta hamara aisa kaam karega'. That's the song I sang for baba that night. Except, instead of 'beta', I sang 'beti'. When I finished, baba went to the balcony without a word. When I followed him there, wondering if he hadn't liked my singing, I found him crying. (76).

Thus, the human sentiments overcome the traditional restraint ordained by the family. The patriarchal mindset of the menfolk of Taya Ghar also shows orthodox, illogical understanding of the issues of, say patriotism, morality, etc. They simply profess something by which they cannot live because it is based on parameters of a bygone era. Hence, double standards come to the fore. So, even though they publicly proclaim Facebook to be "the ticket booth for the train to hell," (55) the uncles and aunts visit it secretly. The uncles have changed the name of the beautiful Indian singer Shreya Ghoshal as the Pakistani singer Nazia Hassan because as true Pakistanis, how could they admire a singer from an enemy country!

Similarly, aunt Bhupoma is pleased to see on Facebook the face of a youth whom she admired sixteen years ago in Pakistan. She makes it a habit to check his status regularly, though secretly. This brings her a measure of satisfaction even though she is married now and risks being given the triple *talaq* (divorce) for this crime. To Sameera, she bares her mind:

I had never thought we would find each other again. You know how young I was when I married and came here. The two of us didn't even know where the other person was. I stared at that profile photo for a long time. [...] he still had that mischievous smile that I loved so much. Since then, every day I have logged in and checked out his profile. I make sure he and his mischievous smile have not gone anywhere. (57).

The hypocrisy about appearing patriotic and “pure” in thoughts is clearly laid bare. While the older people indulge in this hypocrisy, the young people are more frank about it presenting thus, the classic case of generation gap. Ashraf chacha’s daughter Farhana, studying in 11th grade is mad after boys. She exchanges xxx-rated messages with a certain Parvin Kumar. When Sameera asks her one day, “My child, when did you become old enough to fall in love?” (37), her reply is startling that highlights the dichotomy of nature/culture: “What to do baji [elder sister], I told myself, wait for a couple of years before starting all this. But this body, fed on animal meat and muscle, does this body listen to me? After all, only the body knows what it wants. One of these days, I think I might just attack him and ravage him on the street.” (38).

The novel has snippets of professional life – how the radio programs are finalized between the Urdu and Malayalam arms of Orange Radio, the tagging of ‘cattle class’, ‘Malayalam mafia’, etc. lends an element of realism to the novel. A musical group called ‘String Walkers’ is formed which meets at the back of a café for practice and to which Sameera also goes, giving some other permissible excuse to her family. There are other interesting characters like Laila who is also a Shia but does not much care for religious practices. She is looking for a rich husband even if he happens to be much married or an old one! There are a host of secondary characters -- Viju Prasad, Philip Mathew, who play small but important roles in Sameera’s life. Most characters are seen to be “flat” in Forster’s sense; (1968: 75-81), it is only Sameera, whose mind has been explored minutely by the writer and who throws up surprises in the end.

Shifting Identities

All this goes to indicate the interesting play of identity formation and re-formation. The issue of identity which Edward Said¹ 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) is something that comes into play in the diasporic situation normally due to the majority-minority, ruler-ruled binaries. The diasporic is in a weak situation having been dislocated from original moorings and looking for relocation in an alien society, and so is prone to flux in identity. Apart from identity crisis, diasporic existence also shows other traits: “The psychological and cultural experience of diaspora can be one of hybridity, exile, nostalgia, selective adaptation or cultural invention.” (Hartley, 2004: 66). However, the family depicted in *Jasmine Days*, does not evince sentiments of exile or nostalgia and does not seem anxious, believing the religious uniformity takes care of adaptation – an illusion that is broken later.

Right now, it seems to be passing days as it used to do back in the home country. The family keeps intact the orthodox Muslim lifestyle. The novelist has his eye on the individual character traits and the relationships that emerge within the family with all their little problems. Outside the family too, the friendships are forged by Sameera and other young people. 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 diasporic Pakistanis or, let's say, Indian subcontinental diaspora, which tries to be stable, there being no sign of movement towards hybridity thereby "becoming" as Stuart Hall (2003: 236) would say. The individual identity, however, moves along another axis and is malleable and prone to buffeting from different quarters. In Sameera's case, this takes place in a big way and she evinces "roundness" in the Foresterian sense. (Foster, 1968: 81-85). We shall take up this aspect a little later in detail.

Diasporic life has brought change of outlook for some people which they openly profess. Take Karim chacha, for example, who shows no bias against girls – something uncommon in Muslim families – and what is more, wants lovers for his daughters!

According to his philosophy, a household without girls was like a tree without flowers. And the more the flowers, the prettier the tree. Smiling gently, he would say, 'When my beautiful daughters grow up, young men will circle the house like honeybees, eager for a taste of nectar. I'll be a proud father then. It won't be too long now before [...] But they will all be disappointed. I want to see them wandering through the streets, sick with love, muttering the names of my daughters like Punnu in the tale of Sassi Punnu. (34).

Even though most West Asian countries practise Islam, the intra-faith prejudices come to the fore here. Religious discrimination was 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 (74)! 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 below the other faith. (72).

We have the opposite scenario also. Mustafa chacha works in a Shia-dominated village in the country. A friend of his is beaten up for being a Sunni by the Shia crowd. So, Mustafa comes to Taya Ghar and begs to be taught about the tenets of Shia faith so that in such a situation, he feels safe. Similarly, Laila, Ali and Nazar beat up Yunus, who is a Sunni. (169). 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 in his definition of 'liquid modernity'. Bauman, as we know, avers the contemporary times as 'late 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. Bauman defines some of the basic impulses of man as liquid whether it is love, fear, life and times as the titles of his books unambiguously suggest. (Bauman, 2001: 267-275).

Religion as a cementing force of humanity has always been suspect. The two world wars that divided the Christian West into opposing camps are a testimony. Quite often, the ruling establishments project themselves as devout Muslims, but Ali's uncle was never infatuated by the Islamic revolution that occurred in Iran. At times, the rulers flaunt the Sharia law to entice the gullible Muslim subjects but how it is operated by the powers-that-be is exposed rather ludicrously, by an Iraqi youth:

We might be able to comprehend why barbers are killed for cutting hair in un-Islamic ways. Why mobile phone shopkeepers are killed for selling phones with Western music for ringtones. [...] But vegetable vendor? Their crime was that they had displayed cucumbers and tomatoes side by side in their store. Tomatoes are like vaginas and cucumbers represent penises, so it is now a crime to set them next to each other. [...] Bananas have to be sold in plastic covers now. Male goats have to wear underwear. (96).

Indeed, the bigots can stretch their voyeuristic imagination to whimsical limits! "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" as T.S. Eliot said in his poem "Gerontion." (Eliot, 1969: 38).

Political Crisis

The gaily-gliding boat of this diasporic community is rocked following the outbreak of protests against the ruling establishment. It all started in Tunisia in 2010 where people, dissatisfied with the oppressive regime and economic deprivation started demanding substitution of autocracy by democracy. This agitation got the tag 'Jasmine Revolution'. The protests quickly spread to other countries like Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain – the supposed location of Benyamin's novel. Although the governments in these countries tried to forcibly suppress the uprisings, the protests did not stop and took a violent form, bringing down the rulers in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. Other countries like Iraq, Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon also saw widespread unrest. This kind of unrest took the form of a protracted civil war in Syria and Yemen which are continuing even now. The entire domino effect was subsumed under the rubric of "Arab Spring". So far as Bahrain is concerned,

Protests were violently suppressed by Bahraini security forces, aided by a Gulf Cooperation Council security force (composed of about 1,000 soldiers from Saudi Arabia and 500 police officers from the United Arab Emirates) that entered the country in March. By the end of the month, the mass protest movement had been stifled. In the aftermath of the protests, dozens of accused protest leaders were convicted of antigovernment activity and imprisoned, hundreds of Shi'i workers suspected of supporting the protests were fired, and dozens of Shi'i mosques were demolished by the government. (Britannica, 2021).

True to history, Benyamin goes on to re-create the ambience of the protest movement, 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. (90-91). The novel mentions the

lavish lifestyle of His Majesty, the ruler of the City whose suppression of opponents became the staple of social media.

The Square of Pearls witnesses daily gatherings of protesters who stay put there, raising slogans, singing songs and debating issues while government helicopters dubbed “national bird” hover over the site. The protest site was well provided with food and drinks and presented a sight “like a carnival,” notes Sameera. (133). This kind of protest, much different from the Gandhian Satyagraha based on fasting, not only portrays the reality of our times but also lays down roadmap for future. In fact, the long-duration farmers' protests which started near Delhi region in India in 2020 followed this model, what with installation of weather-proof huts and food kitchens complete with machines to make food for a large number of protesters, laundry services, essential commodities, large LCD screens for entertainment programs, medical facilities and even massagers for fatigued legs! And all this was free for the protesters supposedly financed by NGOs. (“Farmers”).

Back to the narrative, we find that in the City, the Sunni-Shia conflicts begin everywhere. Neighbourhoods are barricaded and people become skeptical of one another. Widespread violence is seen. You never know where you 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!

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 agitationists 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). So, alongside the Sunni establishment, the Asian diaspora becomes the next whipping boy and the illusion of having a safe common Muslim identity lies shattered.

Dilemma for Diaspora

The diasporic people 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 don't, 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).

The atmosphere of violence created by the protests brings into focus the precarious situation of the diasporic people. One can easily appreciate similar situation which forced the East African Indian characters in M.G. Vassanji’s novel *No New Homeland* (1991) to leave Dar-es-Salam, Tanzania, due to the rise of so-called national sentiment there as it followed the domino effect in other East African countries like Uganda, Kenya, etc. following their freedom from colonial rule. How Nurdin Lalani, who belongs to the same socio-economic and religious category to which Sameera’s family belongs, had to face similar situation when his native African subordinate employee became his boss in the newly independent country and the Indian diaspora settled there for decades was now declared a usurper of jobs and therefore unwanted. (Vassanji, 1991).

Leaving one’s hearth and home is no simple task, but the diaspora in a politically disturbed country naturally feels threatened. The normal excuse to harass and expel the immigrants is the belief that they are usurping jobs which should go to the native people. This plea is held forth across the continents from Africa to America. In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s novel *The Mistress of Spices* (2005), we find it in the outburst of the protagonist: “Standing behind the counter of dim motels where we must smile as we hand keys to whores. Yes. Always Smile, even when people say, ‘Bastard foreigner taking over the country stealing our jobs.’” (Divakaruni, 2005: 62).

Sameera, the youthful protagonist of the novel is rightly in the throes 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 a mullah’s 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 described in detail in the chapter titled “Religion,” wherein she mulls 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. (145). However, group comradery among the diasporics – 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 diasporic 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.

Sameera comes from Pakistan which is a Sunni dominated country in which other religions are not tolerated, but here she chooses to forgive a Shia for a crime that would hardly ever be condoned by the daughter of the victim. Does her diasporic situation have a part to play here? Yes, if the observation of a critic is to be believed. The ties of the immigrants with the home country are strong, "However, in the case of migration or immigration or diaspora one has a divided self, a fractured consciousness, in the sense that you may equally belong or not belong to more than one place. This, then, becomes a ground for universal belonging or belonging to all. There [...] are thus three strands, one is the local, the country where the diasporic is present; two, there is the root or origin element, the place of birth, their ancestral habitus; three, an element of universality, because there is a sense of belonging to not one but more than one place" (Sareen, 2004: 19).

Sameera's pardon of Ali was not taken kindly by His Majesty's government. It was taken to be a rebuff. Taya even showed Sameera the video of a woman protester who was mercilessly ravaged by the cops and later trampled upon by His Majesty himself (195), but Sameera was not moved. What followed was that while Baba's status as a faithful servant of state was firmly established, Taya, as Sameera's guardian was demoted and Sameera placed under house arrest pending her deportation to Pakistan. All this because Sameera had been observed to be in favour of the protesters. One can deduce the trajectory of the diasporic existence in any society in the following observation: "It is seen that the interface progresses along the trajectory of initial prejudices, culture shock, economic hardships, nostalgia and sense of loss, creation of imaginary homelands, adjustment with host culture to the extent possible, shaped finally by the politics which decides if the adjustment will be favourable to the native or the migrant." (Batra, 2019: 223-237). Indeed, politics is the most powerful factor in deciding human existence in any society in our times!

A word about the style of the novel. The novel uses two frontispieces to create the impression that Benyamin has translated from the original written by Sameera Parvin in Arabic under the title *A Spring without Fragrance*. Thus, to start with, it appears to be a book within a book. At the end of the book also, the writer tries to create a twist, albeit a confusing and unnecessary one, in the form of ‘Translator’s Note’ by Benyamin declaring that he got the book *A Spring without Fragrance* from a certain Mr. Pratap, who laid down a condition that Benyamin would write Pratap’s story also as a novel, and so the sequel to *Jasmine Days* is announced. (261-264).

Conclusion

The dilemma of the diasporic writ large in this novel is with regard to their participation in the politics of the host country. It is the binary of existence/morality that is seen emerging as the agitation proceeds. Their existence demands being on the right side of authorities in this dictatorial set-up, while morality beckons in the opposite direction. The moral question relates to the legitimacy of His Majesty’s rule – he being from the minority which does not have the authority to rule over majority according to democratic principles. Besides, his personal lifestyle and cruel character divests him of the moral authority to rule.

This binary further leads up to another binary, viz., nature/culture, and since culture is differentiated in the world, we can liken it to nature/nurture. The left-hand term still has an edge over the right hand term because natural instincts like fear of death and survival related to food, etc. are more powerful than what we learn in society through our nurturing or acculturation process. The Shia and the Sunni of the City unite in demanding the expulsion of the migrants because they think their jobs go to the latter. Material existence overshadows abstract moral and cultural concerns. Again, within the Taya Ghar, lines are drawn and money becomes more important than relationship or moral stand when it comes to getting the blood money for baba’s killing.

But surprisingly, Sameera retains her cool and her analytic acumen, and so she stands for human values and has the guts to resist the pressure of the family and of the state. This is the moral vision of the writer and his message as well. Great writers have always stood for human and moral values which transcend space and time and the imminent selfish concerns. The novel *Jasmine Days*, in that sense, has a potent message even as one may not agree to poet and critic C.P. Surendran’s criticism of the publishing industry for its interest in projecting a “debut author” [Benyamin]. One would, however, support his assessment that this novel is “a rather leisurely effort in espousing the pointlessness of religion — the violent strife in this instance between the Shia and Sunni factions of Islam; the futility of the urge for freedom in a kingdom that stifles it by means of terror, rewards, and money; the privations of Sameera, a girl with a spark unable to catch fire under the wet blanket of a joint, conventional Muslim family; and a furtive love affair whose defining moment occurs late...” (Surendran, 2018).

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