

Spatial Confinement and Existential Exile: A Study of Space Theory in Benjamin's *Goat Days*

Ms. Arshada K,

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English,
PSG College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore- 641014
Email: arshadamoideen120@gmail.com

Dr. S. Vanitha, Assistant Professor,

Department of English,
PSG College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore- 641014
Email: vanitha@psgcas.ac.in

Abstract

Benjamin's *Goat Days* (2008) is an up-close, unsettling narrative of migration, coercion, and survival: the book charts the physical and psychological confinement of Najeeb, a migrant worker trafficked into the Gulf and compelled to work on goats in the desert. This essay reads *Goat Days* through the prisms of space theory - specifically Gaston Bachelard's phenomenology of domestic spaces, Michel Foucault's heterotopias, Edward Soja's thirdspace, and Homi Bhabha's third space concept - to support the contention that Benjamin enacts confinement as an amalgamation of intersecting spatial modes that generate existential exile. Spatial confinement within the novel is more than a canvas for suffering; it is an active force that determines identity, memory, language and resistance. Through following the material, symbolic and imaginative geographies in *Goat Days*, the paper demonstrates how the novel reworks deserts, animal pens, and transit zones into heterotopic spaces that displace the self and, in a paradoxical way, create new types of subjectivity and testimony.

Key Words: Space, Third- Space, Migration, Confinement, Existentialism, Survival.

Introduction

Goat Days recounts the experience of Najeeb, who, on the lookout for work and self-worth, becomes a migrant labour trafficked in the Persian Gulf. Dispossessed of control over his life, words, and social relationships, Najeeb's existence amounts to the brutal habit of animal husbandry, water and food rationing, and traveling the dusty terrain around the goat pens. The novel has been variously read by critics as a migrant tragedy, a critique of international labour mobility, and an allegory of exile. Less examined, though, is the book's consistent probing of space: how various spatial orders (the home, the camp, the desert, the highway) co-produce a state that the paper calls "existential exile." The research brings space scholarship into close dialogue with Benjamin's novel and inquiries: how do specific spatial shapes create the psychic and social dislocation felt by Najeeb? And in what ways does spatial restriction become a form of narrative resistance and testimony?

Theoretical Framework: Space as Social and Phenomenal

Theory of space provides means for thinking about how spaces transform subjectivity. Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* insists on the imagination's habitation of familiar spaces; his attention to corners, nests, and refuges makes evident how the human psyche imbues intimate spaces with memory and security. Michel Foucault's theory of heterotopia - actual places at once physical and other, combining incompatible spaces - makes sense of sites that violate normative social order (prisons, ships, cemeteries). Edward Soja's thirdspace (the integration of spatial practice, representations of space, and lived space) places emphasis on the multiplicity and hybridity of spatial experience. Homi Bhabha's third space (cultural hybridity in zones of contact) can be remodelled to interpret diasporic subjectivities that emerge within spatial in-betweenness. Collectively, these modes enable a multi-scalar reading: from bodily practices to narrativized descriptions, and from tiny pens to vast deserts.

Spatial Forms in *Goat Days*

1. The Pen and the Micro-Prison: Domestic Confinement as Deprivation of Being

The goat enclosure is the novel's main spatial theme: a squalid, muddy enclosure in which Najeeb is confined to work and live. This micro-space functions to do much of the work of a prison without the official legal architecture of imprisonment. Referencing Bachelard, the pen is an anti-nest: instead of providing shelter, it makes interiority impossible. Where Bachelard praising nooks and small spaces as places of memory and reverie, Benyamin turns that reasoning on its head: the pen erases memory by cutting off domestic routines (preparing food, family prayer, shared talk) and substituting them with the animal's cyclical temporality. The spatial economy of the pen - sparse shelter, ubiquitous animal presence, tight lines of sight - creates a shrinking of selfhood. Temporal rhythm disintegrates: days are marked only by the number of goats counted, water rationed, or the infrequent and traumatic meeting with a visitor or camp administrator.

2. The Desert as Immense Constriction: Spatial Bareness and Psychic Pressure

Contrarily, the immense wideness of the desert increases confinement. The horizonless terrain creates a new form of enclosure: the impossibility of escape is underscored by an empty, barren space. Foucault's heterotopia is useful in this case; the desert is a heterotopic space that displaces normal social order. It is beyond the city and beyond household networks but deeply engaged in the regime of labour control. Materiality of the desert - heat, sand, remoteness - becomes a technology of power: it makes movement expensive, visibility low, and solidarity hard. Najeeb's limited mobility efforts are penalized not just by physical obstacles but by the desert's own inexorable reason. So, vastness is therefore coercive architecture: a void space that triggers compulsion and interior disintegration.

3. Zones of Transit and Liminal Spaces: Airports, Roads, and the Labor Market

Benyamin also notices the liminal spaces that Najeeb traverses: the bus terminals, border checkpoints, and labour-recruitment offices that act as mediators of migration. These transitional sites are formally distinct from the pen or desert but continuous in their function: they are points of commodification and erasure. As Soja's spatial triad promises, these spaces are at once sites of spatial practice (labour's movement), representations of space (maps, contracts), and lived space (fear, hope, disorientation). Transit zones do an erasure of narrative continuity - identities rewritten, documents confiscated, and names replaced - creating existential exile prior to physical confinement starts.

Space, Language and Memory

Confinement in *Goat Days* is not entirely physical; it deforms language and memory. Alone and bereft of stable interlocutors, Najeeb's language is impoverished - lowered to commands, animal noises, and repetitive prayers mumbled half-heartedly. Bachelard maintained that intimate spaces cultivate poetic reverie; in Benyamin, the lack of intimate spaces results in a contraction of poetic capacity. But the story itself - the recounting of his ordeal to a listener in Kerala - gives some linguistic agency back. The narrative act is spatial: it returns memories from the cramped pens back into shared space. This movement reflects Soja's thirdspace: the story weaves together the physical, representational, and lived aspects of exile, turning solitary torture into public witness.

Memory in the novel is evoked by tiny spatial triggers - the scent of goat dung, the texture of a certain stone - which draw Najeeb back into traumatic moments. But memory also resists the pen's effort at erasure: smells, sounds and ritual fragments from home serve as heterotopic intrusions within the captive space, momentarily unlocking psychic escape. Thus, memory is spatial, alternately constrained and mobile, creating a topography of loss and retrieval.

Spatialized Power and Agency

Space in *Goat Days* reenacts relations of power. The recruiter, the overseer, the owner of the camp - all control through spatial deployment: proximity to monitor, distribution of food, and right to move. Spatial discipline, as Foucault would say, is performed without juridical sanction but with identical effects: bodies are governed, time is regulated, and resistance is spatially punished. But spatiality also facilitates agency in mini-deeds: Najeeb's efforts to nurse sick goats, to break bread with a friend, to whistle an old tune at dusk - these are spatial acts that temporarily regain subjectivity within imposed boundaries. Homi Bhabha's third space is in such micro-resistances: hybrid actions that do not merely reproduce the oppressor's order but produce ambivalent spaces of negotiation. In a certain way, the pen is a site of death; in another, it's a workshop of new, unstable subjectivities.

Describing Space: Form and Structure

Benyamin's writing style imitates spatial disintegration. Brief, blunt sentences imitate the truncation of temporal course within the pen; abrupt excursions to family memory mimic efforts to overcome enclosure. The frame of the narrative - likely a retelling to someone at home - is itself a spatial device: it moves the traumatic location into a space of narration, making possible social acknowledgment. The novel's shifting focalization (from immediate sensory description to reflective recollection) performs Soja's thirdspace: textually blending physical reality and imaginative reconstruction. The temporal disjunctions (flashbacks to childhood, sudden returns to the present) transpose onto spatial disjunctions (home vs. pen vs. desert), creating an embodied cartography of exile.

Existential Exile: Beyond Physical Displacement

The word "exile" typically refers to geographical distance; Benyamin's novel insists on exile as existential - a state caused by space regimes that break relations, ritual, language and sense of the future. Najeeb's personhood is not just displaced; it is reduced into a survival calculus. The novel implies that contemporary migratory capitalism enlists conditions where geographic displacement is irreducible to ontological dislocation. Space becomes the medium to produce and maim modern subjectivity.

But the novel is also suggesting the possibility of return not just to place, but to self: the testimony of the narrative, the keeping of memory, and small acts of care (for animals, for other people) preserve an ethical kernel which resists complete erasure. This ethical residue is space-produced - it is stored in the slow rhythms of care and in the relational micro-geography of the pen.

Conclusion

Reading *Goat Days* via space theory uncovers how Benyamin deploys spatial forms as engaged entities in the generation of existential exile. The goat pen, the desert, and transit spaces are not static backgrounds but ordering forces that discipline bodies, compact time, and slacken language. Using Bachelard, Foucault, Soja, and Bhabha serves to describe how intimate, heterotopic, and third spaces blend together in the novel to create the migrant's life as a perpetual geography of suffering and tiny resistances. Benyamin's accomplishment is finally to make spatial confinement readable not just as physical lack but as an experienced topology of exile that persists to form memory, identity, and narrative.

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