

Visualizing Migrant Trauma: A Lacanian Reading of *The Goat Life*

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Abstract

Adaptations of literature into films generally alter the textual narratives into visual form, catering to the needs of varied audiences. Several movies have been seen by people around the globe that have similarities, and they depict the emotions of the literary works by mirroring the feelings embedded in the lines. The paper titled "Visualizing Migrant Trauma: A Lacanian Reading of *The Goat Life*" aims to evaluate a film portraying the life of the migrants, *The Goat Life*, a cinematic adaptation of a well-known Indian novel, *Goat Days*, from the perspective of Lacan's psychoanalytic film theory. This research attempts to understand the psychology involved in the film through various cinematic elements, with special emphasis on 'Najeeb Muhammed.' Moreover, this article discusses the deliberate visual scenes adopted to capture the attention of the viewers using the story's emotional plot that deviates from the rational path. Films not only present the textual narrative but also the realism of the plot using actors and directors. This research paper analyzes the cinematic portrayal of migrants through psychological aspects, with an added emphasis on additional visual scenes adopted to keep the audience engaged in the movie.

Keywords: *emotion, cinema, migrant, audience, and psychology*

Introduction to Early Desert Scenes

Cinema, as a form of art, has a unique capability of transforming the inner world of emotions and thoughts into outer manifestations through images. *The Goat Life* by Blessy shows this unique characteristic by taking the audience deep inside the psyche of the migrant through visual representations of the psychological and existential condition of Najeeb. In spite of being inspired by the acclaimed book by Benyamin called *Goat Days*, the movie takes a different approach in its visual depiction of events and even goes beyond the rationality of the text. In doing so, the film not only exposes the extreme nature of migrant work but also leaves room for psychoanalytic interpretation of the movie. With the aid of Lacanian film analysis, it can be concluded that the movie is a representation of psychological disintegration and alienation of the migrant.

The movie starts with a visually interesting scene involving a sandstorm. There is no equivalent of this scene in the source text, but this choice of an opening is effective in setting the right psychological mood for the entire story. A storm of sand, where camels are helpless in their posture and goats scatter, becomes the metaphorical representation of the instability in Najeeb's journey ahead. Rather than introducing the desert as a geographical location, the filmmaker

makes use of its vastness, repetition, and silence to symbolize the Lacanian concept of “Real,” a realm inaccessible through language and one where symbolic meaning breaks down. As the viewer moves from day to night, experiencing both blazing sun rays and a dark sky full of stars, they are placed in the position of Najeeb, who experiences various shifts in mood throughout his traumatic journey. The opening ends with a shot of Najeeb drinking water from a goat, which, together with the herd of goats surrounding him, symbolizes the loss of his humanity.



Fig. 1: Najeeb's existence and survival among a herd of goats

Source: Screenshot from *The Goat Life*. Directed by Blessy, Visual Romance Image Makers, 2024.

At this stage, however, the structure of the movie differs drastically from that of the book. In the case of the latter, the story starts out by narrating about Najeeb's imprisonment in jail, but the former goes for a different strategy altogether by choosing a chronological storyline, beginning right from the airport. The result of this choice is that the spectator can accompany Najeeb on his journey from the hopeful immigrant to being trapped in labour. Nevertheless, there are instances where additions made to the story become somewhat incongruous. One such example would be the one where Najeeb and his friend try to phone the agent's office from the airport. It becomes confusing later on as to why Najeeb keeps begging for the opportunity to phone his family.

The psychoanalytic notions developed by Lacan assist in understanding such deviations. For instance, the airport scene depicts the last time Najeeb remains in the Symbolic Order as part of the world of communication, rules, laws, and meanings. Nevertheless, his failure to establish contact during the very same moment hints at his imminent disintegration. In other words, the fact that the boy can only express himself via gestures, uneasy looks, and naive facial expressions suggests his weak symbolic existence. Moreover, his passport being taken away by the Kafeel as a result of misidentifying him demonstrates the actuality of the symbolic collapse of his existence. After all, a passport is the Name-of-the-Father made real, and its absence means losing one's symbolic position in society.

The trip from the airport into the desert serves to exacerbate this phenomenon even further. The musical score that changes from being slightly uplifting to being slightly ominous parallels the change in Najeeb's psychological state. When the car moves off the road into the desert sands, there is a cinematic cue indicating the crossing over into a threshold experience. In the desert, the individual experiences another part of the Lacanian Real, where Najeeb's fantasy of prosperity in the Gulf evaporates. The departure from Hakeem by Najeeb at this point, through scenes of yelling and coercion, accentuates the process of fragmentation. The viewer sees through the cinematographic language how the unconscious mind of Najeeb accepts fear as an enduring presence.

Even in brief instances of relief after arrival at the masara, there exists psychological uneasiness. After enjoying the relief derived from taking his first gulp of water, Najeeb is thrown into a state of dread by the sudden appearance of a camel from out of the dark. Analytically, this is an indication that the subject has not been able to find solace in Imaginary images that give the impression of safety. Rather than comfort, Najeeb finds himself receiving a dose of terror, emphasizing the primacy of the Real over the Imaginary. Interspersed throughout the movie during this particular segment of the journey are flashbacks depicting life in Kerala, including beautiful green landscapes, rains, and family bonding.

In the book, Najeeb is shown sleeping alongside an eerie character at the masara, but the movie changes the scene to show a peaceful and more ambiguous situation. It is through such scenes in the movie that we get to understand the psychology of dreams and flashbacks. The appearance of Kerala in the midst of the desert space shows the unconscious effort of Najeeb in re-establishing a symbolic order. However, this balance is suddenly disrupted by a violent act of kicking and dragging of Najeeb by the Kafeel. Najeeb cries out in his native tongue, Malayalam, which is not understandable to the Kafeel. He uses a high angle view on Najeeb to make him appear helpless and a low angle on the Kafeel to give him dominance.



Fig. 2: The dominance and oppression of Kafeel over Najeeb

Source: Screenshot from *The Goat Life*. Directed by Blessy, Visual Romance Image Makers, 2024.

Psychic Breakdown, Flashback, Violence by Kafeel

In the morning of the following day, Najeeb wakes up hearing the barking of goats; this is how the irreversible journey to his new reality starts. What starts as normal animals soon takes on a symbolic meaning in the movie. The spooky character in charge of these goats makes the disturbing statement: "When you don't produce milk anymore, you are meat for the dogs." This sentence, although said to animals, serves as a psychic accusation against Najeeb's predicament. At this point, Najeeb finds himself in a position where he becomes an object within the discourses of the master, and his value is determined according to one aspect of usefulness only. This is the stage when the identity of the migrant starts getting broken down. The filthy clothing and stinking shoes thrown at Najeeb are symbolic weapons used in the process of transformation, during which Najeeb gets transformed from a subject into an object, from being a human being to a beast. His fear, hunger, and confusion prevent him from comprehending what is going on around him.

Tearing up of the visa note, now the only remaining document proving Najeeb's legitimate right to migrate, causes further destruction to his fragmented identity. When Kafeel tears the paper, it is not just the removal of the last elements of Najeeb's legal existence but also the symbolic destruction of his very existence. According to Lacanian theory, the Symbolic Order depends upon the use of signifiers, including names, papers, and one's social standing. With the ripping up of the one paper that could tie him back to his old life, Najeeb finds himself ejected from the Symbolic Order and thrown completely into the harsh realm of the Real.

The shame and embarrassment continue as Najeeb is taunted during his Khubus ordeal. The torturous act of swallowing the old bread slowly and painfully, tears trickling down his cheeks, symbolizes the erosion of his humanity through visual imagery. In this case, the visual depiction in the movie is more powerful than the narrative in the novel because of the psychoanalytic theory that claims that trauma is frequently inscribed on the body. This is evident in the manner in which Najeeb swallows the bread, choking on it as an attempt to rebel against the new status quo that was imposed on him. "I feel as if I am caught up in the middle of the sea, Sainu," indicates the Lacanian concept of lack in which there is an absence in the subject.



Fig. 3: The wide shot highlights isolation and alienation in the desert

Source: Screenshot from *The Goat Life*. Directed by Blessy, Visual Romance Image Makers, 2024

However, his failed attempt to write a letter is a symbolic resistance and an attempt to get back to the Symbolic world through language. However, the wide shots of the desert show how futile it is. Moon, which he remembers as an object symbolizing love to Sainu, now reminds him of the outside world, which is forever lost for him. In Lacanian film analysis, such motifs usually point to the gaze of the Other, a sign from the outside world reminding the subject about its lack. Hence, the moon is both a symbol of love and a reminder of his helplessness.

There are romantic scenes with Najeeb and Sainu included in the movie, although they were not in the novel. However, in a Lacanian context, they play an important psychological role by reinforcing the Imaginary order, which provides him with some comfort for his descent into madness. The romantic scenes, kissing, playful interaction, and ritualistic actions provide the viewers with rich images that symbolize warmth and passion. They create a stark contrast against the desolate desert landscape. From a Lacanian perspective, they symbolize an idealized ego – the Imaginary ego as opposed to his broken identity.

A further horrifying scene depicts Najeeb trying to wash himself using water, only to be brutally beaten for doing so. The warning by the Kafeel that he will break his hands if he tries washing himself using water shows domination not just of Najeeb's body but also of the fundamental right of man to be able to keep clean and maintain his dignity. The element of water, which is generally seen as a symbol of cleansing, is completely stripped away from him. This is symbolic of total lack of any autonomy.

This act of violence by the use of the water tanker serves to further exacerbate Najeeb's mental breakdown. The musical score accentuates the fear as the Kafeel beats him with a rope and even with a gun. As Najeeb tries to grab hold of the rope for his own safety, he provokes an excessive reaction in the form of fury from the Kafeel, who displays an excess of power through

his acts of violence. The shift from the excessive water in the desert to the peaceful river in Kerala brings more meaning to the psychoanalytical interpretation of the film. The sudden flashback scenes not only evoke nostalgia but also bring out the comparison between the Real and Imaginary. The images of the rivers are those of Najeeb's escape from reality into safer territory.



Fig. 4: Overhead angle depicts the subject's state of trap between past happiness and present misery
Source: Screenshot from *The Goat Life*. Directed by Blessy, Visual Romance Image Makers, 2024.

In time, as Najeeb slowly wakes up, his consciousness comes back to life accompanied by an expression of sorrow. This is a musical motif that comes back over and over again in order to mark the return to the present and suffering once more. As goats then attack Najeeb and he faints due to the pain, the film deviates from the book one more time to make the viewer feel the emotions more. A goat showing affection for Najeeb becomes a disruption of the violent scene. It may symbolize a Lacanian Imaginary moment.

These sudden changes in time in the desert symbolize the breakdown of Najeeb's sense of continuity. In the absence of quantifiable days and routine, he finds himself unable to comprehend time, which is a fundamental element of the Symbolic Order. After seeing his image in the mirror of a truck, he is surprised by how he looks. In this instance, the mirror acts as the opposite of the Lacanian mirror stage. Rather than assisting him in developing an ego, it fractures it. He sees a foreigner who has a disfigured face with sunburn and dirt. The statement, "How many days has it been? I can't remember anything," perfectly sums up his state of confusion.

The spiritual crisis of Najeeb does not take much time either. The desperation of his words: "If there were God, I would not have such a fate" expresses that Najeeb realizes that the last symbolic system fails to exist for him – the faith. Many immigrants find solace and comfort in their beliefs. However, even this symbolic system falls apart for the protagonist in the desert. Filled with despair, Najeeb begins to run desperately through the sand only to come across a dead body of the terrifying man who used to scare him so much. The half-eaten carcass of the man by the desert eagles represents the inevitable destiny of all those who happen to end up in this hellish place.



Fig. 5: The animated Eagle battle shows the struggle for survival

Source: Screenshot from *The Goat Life*. Directed by Blessy, Visual Romance Image Makers, 2024.

As night descends upon the stage, Najeeb eats a pickle made by his mother emblematic of home and identity. Food becomes the link to his lost sense of self. As his desire to leave takes him once again, it is no longer fueled by mere fantasy but rather by a basic need for survival. Yet, what follows on the next morning crushes all of that newfound willpower. The physical pain inflicted upon him by breaking his foot and mashing his hand symbolizes the breaking down of his very capacity to act.



Fig. 6: Highlights the exploitation and dehumanization

Source: Screenshot from *The Goat Life*. Directed by Blessy, Visual Romance Image Makers, 2024.

Brought close to the masara during night, Najeeb experiences the most psychologically insightful moment in the film. As he drags his injured body to the water tank of the goats, he drinks the same water with them. In a way that is already seen during the prologue of the movie, the symbolism of the initial scene materializes. By drinking the water with the goats, Najeeb

enters the state of existence that is fully animalistic. Such a sequence reflects Lacan's concept of the subject's entrance into the Real.

Escape, Hakeem, Ibrahim, Dissociation, and Identity Collapse

An unexpected hailstorm disturbs the life of Najeeb, an extremely rare event when nature seems to rebel against the uniformity of the desert landscape. The storm overwhelms him, hitting his body with hailstones while he is desperately looking for somewhere safe. However, what initially seems like a devastating event becomes a trigger of one of the most important transformations in his life: he meets Hakeem. The setting in which they meet, portrayed through an emotional tone, is among the added scenes in the movie that are not present in the novel. The hug they share conveys despairing relief, showing how humans have a tendency to connect when shocked.



Fig. 7: A temporary moment of relief and empathy

Source: Screenshot from *The Goat Life*. Directed by Blessy, Visual Romance Image Makers, 2024.

The appearance of Hakeem rejuvenates Najeeb with life, but this happens not out of any hopes but due to empathy. He tries to save himself from the hail stones that fall on them under a rock formation where they take refuge. The cinematography of this movie utilizes very close-ups of hands trembling and breath that make their pain visible. His crying mixed with the melted hail stones show the combination of his physical and emotional suffering. The storm is the image of the mental storm in Najeeb's soul the same one that rages within a migrant's mind. This aggressive intervention in the empathizing between two people proves that the power of the Real is above everything else.

Very quickly, this movie introduces a new character called Ibrahim, which becomes the turning point in this story. The peaceful behavior of this person and his advice can be viewed as a kind of psychological support to a young man because unlike Kafeel, he does not want to dominate and intimidate this boy. As Ibrahim tells Najeeb, "The master usually leaves after a few days" – this phrase can serve as some form of psychological support. Here, the character of Ibrahim plays the part of the missing Symbolic Father for Najeeb. To use the terminology of

Lacan, he serves as a kind of crutch for Najeeb, giving him some advice, knowledge of the area, and company.

This is demonstrated in various ways in the movie as Ibrahim looks at things suspiciously, breathes heavily when remembering past events of torture, and confesses that those who try to run away get killed. The emotions portrayed make Ibrahim appear as someone who has experienced life under his own real world, coming out of it alive but mentally traumatized. Ibrahim's insistence on getting Najeeb to eat, rest, and avoid conflicts reflects his experience of survival tactics learned over many years spent in the desert. In his cautioning of Najeeb not to run away when he sees a dead body of a stranger, it becomes evident how Ibrahim fears such a thing could happen to him.

Nevertheless, despite Ibrahim's efforts to persuade Najeeb, his urge to run away becomes stronger. His nostalgic thoughts about Kerala are depicted using flashbacks that make his life even harder because he feels both attracted and repelled by them. Lacan's idea of desire-as-lack becomes crucial here since the farther from reality his goal is, the more Najeeb wants to achieve it. Throughout the film, we see scenes of Najeeb gazing at the horizon, tears in his eyes, and muttering Sainu's name as if calling back the lost world. Thus, the horizon, which he can never reach, turns into the embodiment of desire.

After Najeeb makes the final decision to escape and is joined by Hakeem and Ibrahim, the mood of the film changes dramatically. An existential and suspenseful air emerges in the story. The protagonists slowly and carefully tread on the sand, coming nearer and nearer to the distant horizon. Darkness with moonlight becomes the transition between the state of imprisonment and freedom. The emptiness of the desert enhances the impression of vulnerability, as each step may either take them to freedom or cause death.

As they attempt to flee, Hakeem falls to the ground, overwhelmed by tiredness and dehydration. His frail body falls to the sand as Najeeb struggles to get him up. This particular addition is one of the most compelling scenes in the movie. The shaky voice of Hakeem as he confesses that he can no longer walk, the whisper of his cry for help shows the mental toll that suffering takes on a person. As Najeeb declares, "I'm not leaving without you," the utterance captures the struggle of being torn between emotions and survival.



Fig. 8: Lacan's concept of Real screamed through the sands

Source: Screenshot from *The Goat Life*. Directed by Blessy, Visual Romance Image Makers, 2024.

Najeeb's trauma of his next death will forever divide his psyche. Najeeb's hands tremble as he attempts to shut Hakeem's eyes. Symbolically, this shot represents a perfect example of isolation through composition as the figure of Najeeb is shown huddled next to the dead body with nothing but the vast desert landscape around him. This is the point where Lacan would call upon the Real as the death of Najeeb's friend can never be explained through symbols. All that remains is the scream into the empty space of the desert.

Now that both Hakeem and Ibrahim have departed, the fantasies of Najeeb increase, showing that the Imaginary Order is falling apart. Najeeb imagines some images from his days in Kerala – hearing the voice of his mother talking to him, seeing the face of Sainu and feeling the coolness of the river flowing in Kerala – but these brief visions fail to make sense of his mind that is rapidly deteriorating. Apart from the comparison of the harsh light of the desert with the cooling colors of Kerala, one of the symbolic representations of the destruction of the mind of Najeeb is portrayed visually. During this stage, he begins addressing himself in an attempt to ask for water, forgiveness, and cleansing.

As Najeeb kneels before a car with a number of Arab men inside it, he asks for some water. As soon as they recognize how dehydrated he is, the mutual distrust at the onset turns to pity. Here, the Arabs join yet another group of external saviors who rescue Najeeb from being involved in violence any further. By letting him board and giving him some water, they help re-integrate him into the world of civilization. It is evident that even as he takes a sip of water, his trembling body reflects the dominance of his subconscious experiences.

Najeeb's journey to the police station becomes another turning point as it signals a change from his experience of physical torture to that of emotional turmoil. While being treated with compassion by the policemen, Najeeb seems to struggle with social norms, as evident from his hesitation while talking, the way he flinches from loud noises, and his inability to keep eye contact with the officers. Even though he can access the Symbolic Order once more, Najeeb finds it impossible to fully merge into it.

In the hospitalization of Najeeb, there is a space for healing. There is the sterility of the atmosphere, the sheets of the bed, and the soft lighting of the room. These elements contrast with the harshness of the desert. Even at this point, Najeeb has been unable to escape from his haunting experiences. In the phone call with Sainu, there is evidence of his troubled condition since his voice shakes with nervousness. There is a mixture of happiness and sadness in the sobs coming from the other side. Although the call represents an imagined reunification, the mental process has not been achieved. Najeeb is unable to recognize who he is because of the fragmentation of his identity. His lack of answers to Sainu's cries reflects the distance from his desire to return to a safe world of love and home.

Reunion and Meaning Making

While Najeeb's return from the desert could be considered a homecoming victory, on the contrary, it is shown as an emotionally heavy process for the protagonist, who must integrate himself into a world that has changed since his departure. The reunion in Kerala, with its subdued coloring and lack of music and fast-paced camera work, symbolizes the state of weariness that the man experiences. The images that represent the natural beauty of greenery and river waters create a stark juxtaposition with the dryness of the desert, which had been taking up so much of his time. At the same time, what used to make Najeeb feel a sense of belonging now seems to push him further away, according to Lacan's Imaginary coherence of the self.

However, in the early parts of the novel, when Najeeb remembers his time in jail, his recollections are presented in a detached manner. In contrast, in the last parts of the movie, the camera captures the painful moments of his long journey home as he approaches his family members. The physical weakness of his appearance, the pallor of his skin, the slumped shoulders, and the way he holds onto the airport railing convey the sense that he is a prisoner between two realms. Though he may be back physically, mentally, he is still in the desert.

The blank look on his face and sunken eyes reflect much about the sense of emptiness brought about by years of dehumanization. It is evident that their reunion is bittersweet as is indicated by the fact that his wife is clearly distraught and sobbing profusely. The scene shows the deep emotional strain between them, as she attempts to bridge their gap by talking to him in a shaky voice. Despite his loving wife's warm welcome, his replies are brief and monosyllabic. This is because he lacks the words to communicate the depths of his soul.

The Lacanian gaze is crucial in this final reunion scene. While everyone else around him gazes at Najeeb, he is unable to return their looks, thereby highlighting the gap between himself and the community that sees him as someone familiar. He is no longer able to identify himself according to the rules governing Imaginary identification within family and community circles. For the community, the gaze that meets Najeeb is full of tenderness, but it signifies his difference to him because the identity that it addresses is now different from the one he had before entering the desert.

The ending lines in which the narrator refers to the story as "not just the story of Najeeb" and "the grief of many thousands" place the narration in its wider socio-political context by switching the focus from the single story to the story of all the others. It gives this narrative a

cultural dimension that allows us to see in the character of Najeeb something more than just a single case – something more than just one man. The desert is no longer just geography but a metaphor for exploitation and alienation. The final scenes do not help Najeeb recover from his trauma. Instead, the film ends with Najeeb in a psychological limbo, not completely healed but not permanently scarred either. This method adheres to the Lacanian approach in the sense that a trauma can never become part of the Symbolic Order. It will keep recurring, disrupting one's routine life. The way Najeeb stammers in his conversation, his awkward gestures, and his silent tears are examples of such unhealed trauma.

Conclusion

In turn, the movie reveals the connection between all three orders described by Lacan, namely: the Real order – revealed through desert severity, violence, physical pain, and close-to-death moments; the Imaginary order – represented through recollections about his native place Kerala, dreaming about home, remembering Sainu and hallucinating; and the Symbolic order, which suffers throughout the movie because of Najeeb's inability to speak, problems in communicating, disintegration of the self-image, and then gets restored through contact with his relatives. As Lacan himself argued, these three orders are inherently interconnected, and the disruption of any of them automatically results in ruptures in others (Lacan, *Ecrits* 145).

Hence, it could be argued that the hero of the movie faces both psychological and existential metamorphosis. The latter left his homeland and moved to the Gulf, motivated not only by economical ambitions but also by his feelings towards his beloved ones. In turn, Najeeb returned home as an altered man, who will never be the same thanks to his experiences in the Gulf. In addition, the problems faced by the character make the viewer aware of the bitter reality of life on the margin, breaking their dreamy idea of Gulf success stories. First of all, it needs to be mentioned that cinematographic treatment makes it possible for *The Goat Life* to be much more than a mere film adaptation of a novel. Some alterations in the plot are made, which leads to the creation of a new narrative, narrated from an emotionally charged perspective. Furthermore, various cinematic devices such as close-ups, sounds, settings, silence, and switching from memories to the present time are employed in order to engage the audience in the progressive psychological destruction of Najeeb. Kaplan emphasizes that, in general, the cinema often employs fragmented temporality and sensory disruption to mirror the nature of traumatic experience (Kaplan 23).

Moreover, it needs to be mentioned that *The Goat Life* highlights how migration involves not only physical displacement, but rather a separation from one's identity and history. Najeeb is expected to cross the desert, symbolizing the psychological distance that migrants need to overcome throughout their journey, involving hardship, difficulty, and moments of despair combined with brief instances of hopefulness. According to Bhabha, migrants occupy a liminal "third space" between their origin and destination, creating instability and uncertainty with regard to identity and self-concept (Bhabha 36). The state of being in between is captured vividly by the film, where the endless desert represents the external metaphor for the psychological state of being displaced that Najeeb feels. In a psychoanalytical reading of *The Goat Life*, this element will be evident clearly. As Lacan has pointed out, the subject exists because of the symbolic order, and when the symbolic order breaks down, identity breaks down (*The Four Fundamental Concepts* 203). The story contained within the film lends itself naturally to interpretation through

Lacan's tripartite framework, precisely because Najeeb's experience enacts, in visceral cinematic terms, what it means for a subject to be stripped of the linguistic and social structures that ordinarily hold the self together.

By the end of the movie, the spectator witnesses an image of a traumatized Najeeb standing at his home, vulnerable, weakened both physically and mentally. Indeed, by the end of the movie, Najeeb seems changed. Caruth reminds us that trauma is not fully assimilated at the moment of its occurrence but returns repeatedly and intrusively, inhabiting the subject long after the original event has passed (Caruth 4). This is precisely the structure of Najeeb's experience — the desert does not remain behind when he leaves it; it continues to live within him, surfacing in his silences, his fractured speech, and his hollowed gaze. In fact, he seems completely broken and is unable to restore himself by means of his own strength; however, it appears that with the help and support of his family members, he might still be able to rebuild his life and come back to it step-by-step and gradually.

This cinematic portrayal of a migrant's disintegration and tentative reconstruction is precisely what positions *The Goat Life* as a landmark film in the discourse surrounding migration narratives in Indian cinema. What the film does not do is provide the comfort of the hero's triumphant return, since, in reality, it is much closer to the fact that those returning migrants will never again be the person they were before leaving. The desert landscape changes them physically, emotionally, linguistically, psychologically, and no return can change that. Through this means, the film refuses the mythological lure of the Gulf dream and instead gives the far more realistic representation of what migration entails. As Naficy notes, exilic and diasporic films always use nostalgia and longing as a means of maintaining identity, since displaced individuals require those mechanisms to hold together something of themselves that displacement tore apart (Naficy 152).

In terms of the Lacanian analysis presented throughout this paper, the cinematic depiction of Najeeb's migration is a long metaphor for subjectivity itself. The migration process, as represented in *The Goat Life*, is more than just the physical act of passing through geographical boundaries; rather, the migrant has stepped into a place that Lacan would call the realm of the Real, which is a place where the usual structural support of language, recognition, and desire no longer holds (Ecrits 167). This is because when Najeeb stops communicating in ways that the Symbolic Order dictates, when his name is taken away and he becomes a mere number or entity, then that order, which used to define him, is no longer there. All that is left of him is a subject stripped of all social constructs, left to survive on instinct, on memories and on a nameless desire of the world to which he belongs. According to Fink, every time the subject encounters the Real, it is an experience that can only be seen as a crisis point for the fiction of self created by the Symbolic Order (Fink 25).

This cinematic grammar used in the film, especially the depiction of the desert, makes this point clear. But it is only here that he may find refuge in the Imaginary, even if the imaginary comforts become more and more unstable and delusional with each passing moment. His recollections of Kerala, of Sainu, of his homeland's lush and rainy lands, operate not as a simple matter of nostalgia but rather as a psychological lifeline that allows him to cling on to a fragile semblance of his identity. As Hall notes, diasporic identity is never static but always in the

process of formation and reformation as it is informed by the experience of being displaced (Hall 222).

At the end of the day, *The Goat Life* can be said to contribute greatly to the cinematic representation of migrant life not through the dramatization of migrant suffering but simply in giving it the seriousness it deserves. With the application of Lacanian theory to the film, it is hopefully clear now how migration stories that are properly treated artistically and intellectually allow one to delve into profound questions regarding the nature of identity, desire, language, and humanity itself. As Žižek says, “ideology operates through filling the gap opened by the Real” by providing its subjects with an ideology of completeness and satisfaction, which ultimately conceals the impossibility of satisfying desires (Žižek 45). In this regard, the Gulf dream can be considered another ideological comfort, and *The Goat Life* can be understood as a deconstruction of the Gulf dream as well. Najeeb’s story, therefore, is not only a personal journey of struggle for survival in the Arabian desert. It is a story of displacement not only from one’s home country but from oneself. And it reminds us that behind each statistic of migration, each employment contract, and each transaction of money sent back home there is always a person struggling with the most difficult journey one may experience: staying whole despite a world trying to break them.

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