



Exile, Violence, and the Self: Reconstructing Identity through Survival in Benjamin's Migrant Narratives and Meera's Political Realism

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Abstract

This research examines the intersections of exile, violence, and identity reconstruction in the selected works of Benjamin and K. R. Meera, focusing particularly on how survival becomes a transformative mode of self-making. Drawing on Benjamin's migrant narratives such as *Goat Days*, *Jasmine Days*, *Body and Blood*, and *The Poison Blood*, alongside Meera's politically grounded novels *Hangwoman* and *Qabar*, the study explores how characters navigate forced displacement, social abandonment, bodily suffering, and ideological conflict. The experience of exile whether geographical, emotional, or cultural emerges not only as a condition of isolation but as a critical site where the self is destabilized and reconstituted.

Using postcolonial theory, trauma studies, and identity formation frameworks, the research argues that survival in these narratives is never passive; rather, it is an active negotiation with structures of power. Benjamin's protagonists endure migrant labor exploitation, cultural alienation, and psychological fragmentation, revealing how violence operates as both external oppression and internal corrosion. Meera's female subjects confront patriarchal violence, caste hierarchies, and political authoritarianism, asserting forms of resistance that challenge institutional power and reclaim narrative voice.

The study employs comparative textual analysis to trace how narrative strategies—shifts in perspective, temporal dislocations, symbolic imagery, and testimonial modes—shape the representation of trauma and resilience. By examining how both authors depict the self in states of rupture and recovery, the research highlights the emergence of new identity formations rooted in endurance, memory, ethical choice, and defiance.

Ultimately, the project contributes to contemporary Indian literary scholarship by demonstrating how Malayalam fiction engages with global concerns of migration, gendered violence, and postcolonial subjectivity. It argues that survival in these texts is not merely a condition of living through suffering, but a profound reconstructive act through which characters reclaim meaning, dignity, and selfhood.

Introduction

Contemporary Malayalam literature offers powerful narratives that engage deeply with the lived realities of displacement, violence, and the continual negotiation of identity. Among its most compelling voices, Benyamin and K. R. Meera stand out for their nuanced portrayals of individuals caught within oppressive socio-political structures. Benyamin's migrant narratives, particularly *Goat Days*, *Jasmine Days*, *Body and Blood*, and *The Poison Blood*, foreground the experiences of Malayali migrant laborers in the Gulf, exposing the emotional, psychological, and bodily toll of exile. Through stark realism and testimonial narrative modes, his works illuminate how forced migration fractures identity, alienates the individual from home and language, and reduces the body to a site of exploitation and endurance. In contrast, K. R. Meera's works such as *Hangwoman* and *Qabar* situate survival within political and patriarchal landscapes rooted in the Indian cultural sphere. Her protagonists often confront the violence inherent in caste, gender, religion, and state power. Meera's narratives interrogate how identity is shaped through memory, personal agency, and resistance, offering a critique of systems that seek to silence dissenting or marginalized voices.

Bringing these two authors into comparative dialogue allows for a broader analysis of how exile, violence, and survival intersect to reconstruct identity. The present study argues that survival in both writers' works is not a passive state but an active process of redefining selfhood against dehumanizing forces. By analyzing narrative strategies,

thematic patterns, and character arcs, this paper examines how identity is destabilized, negotiated, and ultimately reclaimed in these contemporary literary contexts.

Literature Review

This study situates Benyamin's and K. R. Meera's fiction at the intersection of migration studies, trauma/embodiment scholarship, and theories of everyday resistance. Scholarship on Benyamin has emphasized his evocation of Gulf migrant experience as testimonial realism that documents corporeal deprivation, linguistic exile, and contested belonging. Critics read *Goat Days* as a paradigmatic migrant testimony that renders the desert as a carceral space where the body is disciplined and survival becomes quotidian endurance; Foucauldian readings and close analyses of dark humour and mysticism have been used to explain how the novel negotiates power, agency, and absurdity.

Benyamin's *Jasmine Days* and related Gulf-set fictions have drawn attention for representing how migrants' lives are entangled with broader regional politics most notably the 2011 Arab uprisings and for showing how temporary exile produces new social formations and political subjectivities. Recent comparative scholarship links Benyamin's portrayal of migrant communities to the contested public spheres of the Gulf and the ways in which diasporic radio, language choice, and informal networks mediate both vulnerability and political action.

K. R. Meera's novels have attracted a parallel but distinctive critical conversation: scholars examine *Hangwoman* and *Qabar* for their interrogation of gendered power,

necropolitical authority, and the legal/ritual apparatuses that constrain female subjectivity. Close readings frequently deploy Foucauldian and feminist frames to show how Meera's protagonists refuse or rework the roles assigned by patriarchal and juridical institutions; analyses of *Hangwoman* emphasize its engagement with state violence, the spectacle of capital punishment, and subject formation under surveillance.

Across both authors, critics have invoked trauma studies, embodiment theory, and subaltern approaches to understand how bodily pain, memory, and testimony function as narrative strategies. The growing literature on "postcolonial trauma" stresses that trauma in formerly colonized or marginalized communities is both historically situated and culturally mediated; this body of work provides tools for reading how violence in Benyamin and Meera is represented not only as physical harm but as disruption of social continuity and narrative authority. Similarly, scholarship on embodiment underscores how literary form (focalization, sensory detail, bodily motifs) registers experience that eludes purely discursive analysis.

Theoretical and comparative frameworks for resistance—ranging from James C. Scott's concept of "everyday" or infrapolitical resistance to studies of ritualized and symbolic contestation have been productively mobilized to read small-scale acts (language-switching, caregiving, refusal) as meaningful oppositions to structural domination. Applying Scott's lens helps scholars account for covert, quotidian tactics in migrant and gendered contexts that do not always register as formal political action but nevertheless reconfigure power relations at the microlevel.

Nevertheless, gaps remain. Much criticism treats Benyamin's *Gulf texts* and Meera's India-centered fictions in isolation rather than in comparative dialogue that would illuminate convergences and divergences in

how exile, structural violence, and different registers of agency reconstruct identity. Few studies systematically pair the Gulf migrant archive with Meera's necropolitical and gendered terrains to ask how mobility (forced and chosen) and institutional violence produce comparable modes of self-reconstitution. This project addresses that lacuna by drawing on the above bodies of scholarship testimonial readings of Gulf migration, Foucauldian and feminist analyses of necropolitics, trauma and embodiment theory, and studies of everyday resistance to map how survival operates as an active, identity-forming practice across both authors.

Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by postcolonial theory, trauma and embodiment studies, subaltern studies, and feminist literary criticism. Postcolonial theory helps in understanding the conditions of displacement, cultural dislocation, and fractured identities that shape the experiences portrayed in Benyamin's migrant narratives and K. R. Meera's politically charged fiction. The characters in these works frequently negotiate belonging and selfhood within systems that deny them stability or recognition. Trauma and embodiment studies provide an additional lens for reading the body as a site where violence is experienced, remembered, and communicated. In *Goat Days* and *Jasmine Days*, for instance, the migrant body becomes a measure of endurance and survival, while in *Hangwoman* and *Qabar*, the female body becomes a contested ground of power, authority, and defiance. Subaltern studies guide the examination of voice, silence, and agency, focusing on how marginalized figures speak or resist within structures that attempt to silence them. Feminist theory, particularly relevant to Meera's works, illuminates how power operates through patriarchal and institutional mechanisms, and how identity is reclaimed through narrative assertion, emotional resistance, and symbolic self-definition. Together, these frameworks enable a nuanced

reading of survival as not merely endurance, but as an active reconstruction of identity.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative and comparative literary analysis of the selected works: *Goat Days*, *Jasmine Days*, *Body and Blood*, and *The Poison Blood* by Benyamin, and *Hangwoman* and *Qabar* by K. R. Meera. The study is grounded in close reading, examining narrative voice, characterization, language, and imagery to trace how exile, violence, and survival shape the protagonists' evolving identities. Attention is given to recurring themes such as bodily suffering, displacement, memory, moral conflict, and resistance. The novels are read comparatively to reveal how migrant survival in Benyamin's fiction parallels and diverges from the gendered and political struggles represented in Meera's narratives. Contextual understanding particularly the socio-economic structures of Gulf migration and the embedded patriarchal and political systems in Indian society supports the interpretation of the characters' psychological and emotional journeys. The analysis is therefore both textual and contextual, allowing identity reconstruction to be understood as a process shaped by both lived experience and narrative representation.

Discussion

The selected works of Benyamin and K. R. Meera present survival not as a static endurance but as a dynamic, identity-reforming process shaped by experiences of exile, violence, and negotiation with oppressive social and political forces. Although Benyamin's fictions primarily examine the migrant body caught in transnational labor circuits and Meera's narratives concentrate on women struggling within patriarchal and state-sanctioned structures of power, both authors foreground the human body as the central site upon which trauma is experienced and resistance is articulated. Accordingly, survival becomes a deeply embodied experience, where individuals

reconstruct their sense of self by confronting the forces that seek to dehumanize them.

In *Goat Days*, Benyamin crafts a narrative of forced labor and extreme isolation to show how exile fractures identity. Najeeb's transformation from a hopeful migrant to a man reduced to animal-like existence exposes the violence embedded in global labor migration systems. The desert farm becomes a space of both physical captivity and psychological erasure. Najeeb confesses, "I realized that I was no longer a human being. I had turned into another goat, one among the herd" (Benyamin, *Goat Days*). The shift from personhood to bestialization is central to the novel's portrayal of dehumanization: identity is not only attacked externally through confinement and starvation, but internally through the erosion of self-perception. Yet, the very acknowledgment of this degradation marks the beginning of resistance; Najeeb's narrative of suffering becomes a mode of reclaiming agency. By telling his story, he reasserts the humanity that the system attempted to erase. Thus, survival emerges not as passive endurance, but as a reclamation of self through memory and narration.

In *Jasmine Days*, Benyamin extends the theme of identity crisis into the realm of political upheaval. Sameera, a migrant radio presenter in an unnamed Middle Eastern city, is caught in the crosscurrents of revolution and cultural displacement. Her struggle is rooted in the tension between personal voice and public silence. At one moment of reflection, she states, "I had a voice, yet I could not speak. I lived among many, yet I had no place" (Benyamin, *Jasmine Days*). This articulation of dislocation reflects not merely geographical exile, but an existential one. Unlike Najeeb's physical captivity, Sameera's exile is social and ideological; she is surrounded by communities but unable to anchor herself to any of them. The city, a site of political tension, symbolizes the unstable ground of identity for migrants who belong to multiple histories yet to none. Her

survival depends on navigating competing demands for loyalty, emotional belonging, and the desire for self-definition. In both novels, Benyamin portrays survival as a process of negotiating external pressure with internal resilience, where identity is reconstructed through reflection, speech, and self-narration.

K. R. Meera, on the other hand, situates survival within deeply gendered and institutional frameworks of power. In *Hangwoman*, Meera examines the psychological toll of inheriting a legacy of state-sanctioned violence. Chetna, chosen to become her family's first female executioner, confronts a patriarchal tradition that binds her identity to death. She declares, "I am a woman born into a house of nooses. My history is tied to the scaffold" (Meera, *Hangwoman*). The scaffold becomes both a physical structure and a metaphor for the cultural and patriarchal systems that dictate her identity. Unlike Najeeb, whose identity is erased through economic exploitation, Chetna's identity is imposed upon her by tradition and institutional power. However, her journey toward resistance lies in reclaiming narrative control. By articulating her horror, anger, and intellectual clarity, Chetna turns the identity assigned to her into one she interrogates and reshapes. Her survival is thus a psychological and ethical negotiation with a role designed to suppress individuality.

Similarly, *Qabar* examines how religious, patriarchal, and communal power structures attempt to silence female agency. The protagonist is caught within mythic, historical, and ideological narratives that attempt to define her existence. Yet her refusal to surrender to these forces becomes an assertion of survival. Meera writes, "The world wrote my story before I was born, but I continue to write myself again and again" (Meera, *Qabar*). This statement foregrounds identity as an ongoing act rather than a fixed state. While Benyamin's characters rebuild identity through confronting trauma and displacement, Meera's protagonists reconstruct selfhood by resisting narratives

imposed upon them. The act of speaking one's own story becomes central to resistance.

Across both authors, survival is represented not merely as endurance of suffering but as a reconstructive process of reclaiming identity. The body plays a crucial role in this reconstruction. Whether through hunger, confinement, labor, inherited violence, or patriarchal control, the body becomes the first terrain upon which power operates. Yet it is also the first domain in which resistance forms. Najeeb's eventual escape from the desert and his later narration of his own suffering emphasize the body reclaiming motion and memory. Sameera's struggle to speak publicly reclaims vocal agency. Chetna's refusal to internalize the ideological burden of execution challenges structural power. The protagonist of *Qabar* rewrites her identity through narrative self-assertion.

Thus, survival in these novels functions as a creative and re-creative act. Identity is not something merely threatened by violence; it is also something forged through responses to violence. In representing such processes, both Benyamin and Meera challenge dominant social narratives that either romanticize endurance or frame marginalized individuals solely as victims. Their protagonists survive not only by enduring hardship, but by reflecting upon it, narrating it, resisting its terms, and ultimately asserting new forms of selfhood.

What emerges consistently is that survival is inseparable from storytelling. To narrate one's suffering is to reclaim authorship of one's identity. In this sense, both Benyamin and Meera transform acts of survival into acts of political and ethical resistance. The protagonists in their works do not merely live through trauma they speak, write, remember, and thereby reconstruct themselves. This makes survival not the end of suffering, but the beginning of self-renewal.

Results and Findings

The analysis of Benyamin's and K. R. Meera's selected novels reveals that survival and identity formation in contexts of violence, exile, and political instability emerge as complex and ongoing processes rather than definitive outcomes. In the migrant narratives of Benyamin, particularly *Goat Days* and *Jasmine Days*, survival manifests through the negotiation of psychological, cultural, and physical boundaries imposed by systems of labor exploitation and authoritarian structures. Najeeb's transformation in *Goat Days* illustrates how survival is not merely a physical endurance but a reconstruction of the self under dehumanizing conditions. His confinement in the desert, where he states, "I was not a man there. I was just another animal among those goats" (Benyamin, *Goat Days* 143), signifies the collapse of human identity under forced servitude. Yet, the endurance he demonstrates, rooted in memory, faith, and hope, reflects the capacity of individuals to reclaim selfhood even within oppressive environments. Similarly, *Jasmine Days* foregrounds the precarity of identity for migrants who exist within political conflicts not of their making. The protagonist Sameera experiences fragmentation as she navigates between belonging and alienation in a foreign land. Her narrative highlights that survival in migrant contexts entails not only physical safety but also emotional and ideological negotiation within socio-political tensions.

Comparatively, Meera's novels *Hangwoman* and *Qabar* expose how gender, history, and state power intersect to shape the conditions of survival in a patriarchal and politically charged society. Meera situates her female protagonists in environments where violence is structural and symbolic. The protagonist of *Hangwoman*, Chetna Grddha Mullick, represents a woman forced into a role historically tied to masculine brutality and authority. Her gradual psychological endurance demonstrates resistance as a process of re-

signifying inherited identities. Meera writes, "My name was already a verdict, one that I had to serve" (*Hangwoman* 52), illustrating how identity is socially predetermined but not immutable. Meanwhile, in *Qabar*, Meera uses magical realism to depict how systemic oppression permeates cultural and spiritual spaces. The narrative reflects how women resist by transforming spaces of trauma into spaces of narrative control, suggesting that survival can also be a reclamation of voice over dominant histories.

Across both authors, a key finding is the prominence of memory as a survival mechanism. Whether through recollection of home, family histories, or cultural belonging, memory becomes a tool to resist erasure. The protagonists' resilience is rooted not in external support systems but in inner reservoirs of meaning that challenge the forces attempting to silence or redefine them. This indicates that survival in oppressive circumstances is inseparable from narrative self-reconstruction, where storytelling becomes a means of asserting humanity.

The study also finds that both authors critique institutional power—whether state, religious, or patriarchal by highlighting how these systems normalize violence and silence dissent. However, their approaches differ. Benyamin exposes external geopolitical structures that render migrants voiceless, while Meera interrogates internal socio-cultural mechanisms that oppress women. Together, their works provide complementary perspectives on how power is exercised and resisted in contemporary society. Resistance is shown not always in overt rebellion but often in subtle acts of endurance retaining dignity, memory, compassion, and moral conviction even when stripped of agency.

Furthermore, the novels underscore that identity formation under duress is a dynamic and relational process. The protagonists' identities evolve through interactions with

spaces of displacement, oppression, or violence. Their survival is not represented as triumph but as a continuous negotiation between vulnerability and strength. This challenges the binary narrative of victimhood and agency, suggesting instead a spectrum in which individuals oscillate between submission, adaptation, and assertion.

Ultimately, the study finds that Benyamin and Meera articulate survival and resistance as intertwined acts rooted in the human capacity to imagine futures beyond oppression. While their characters do not always escape their circumstances, they carve out modes of existence that reject total erasure. Their narratives emphasize that even in the most constrained conditions, the self remains capable of reclaiming space, meaning, and identity. Through suffering, silence, memory, and voice, the protagonists forge survival as a form of resistance—and resistance as a means of preserving the integrity of the self.

Conclusion

The selected novels of Benyamin and K. R. Meera demonstrate that survival in contexts of exile, violence, and systemic oppression is inseparable from the continuous reconstruction of identity. Benyamin's migrant narratives reveal how individuals endure physical and psychological dehumanization by anchoring themselves in memory, hope, and the determination to reclaim agency. In contrast, Meera exposes how women navigate deeply patriarchal and politically charged environments, transforming inherited histories and imposed identities into spaces of resistance. While the external forces differ—geopolitical conflict in Benyamin and socio-cultural power structures in Meera—both authors emphasize that resistance is not always overt rebellion; it often resides in the act of enduring, remembering, and narrating one's selfhood. Ultimately, these texts reveal survival as an evolving process and resistance as the refusal to be erased. Together, they foreground the

resilience of the human spirit in the face of structures designed to suppress it.

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