

**Multilayered Mystical Cultures in Benyamin's *Goat Days* and *Yellow Lights of Death***

**Mr. A. Suresh Kumar**

*Research Scholar (Part-Time), Presidency College (Autonomous), Chennai, (Tamil Nadu)  
India*

**Dr. N. Bindu**

*Assistant Professor, PG and Research Department of English, Presidency College  
(Autonomous), Chennai, (Tamil Nadu) India*

Abstract

Mystical beliefs and practices are so aesthetically woven into the narratives of Benyamin's *Goat Days (GD)* and *Yellow Lights of Death (YLD)* that these two novels have nearly become records of multilayered mystical cultures. Najeeb, the protagonist of *GD*, emerges as a staunch mystic. His prayers and beliefs strengthen and capacitate him to tackle the crisis of his life. Without the mystical powers he might not have survived as a shepherd in the arid land. The narrative of *GD* makes continual references to the Almighty and registers how Najeeb exercises absolute faith in Him. The characters earnestly solicit divine grace to solve the problems of their life. In the joyful moments too, they pray to the Almighty and submit their mystical gratitude. Najeeb and Ibrahim gratefully attribute their miraculous escape to Allah. They are convinced that Allah rescues them when they are stranded in the vast desert. In *YLD*, Melvin's ancestral home Valyedathu Veedu implies mysticism in different layers. The ancient Christian House is famous for secretive beliefs and nocturnal rituals. Thaikkattamma, the goddess of Thaikkattu, is the guardian deity of Valyedathu Veedu. The goddess is believed to rule the land and water of Udayamperoor. The members of the house sincerely pray to Her so that they can get her oracular revelations and predictions on important things. The secrecies and mysteries associated with Mariam Seva clearly signify mystical creed. The Mariam Church of Diego is meant exclusively for the women to pray for the prosperity of their husbands. The Martha Mariam Little Church of Udayamperoor belongs to Melvin's family that follows the Chaldean Christian Faith and the narrative traces the evolution of Chaldean Sect of Christianity. Various accounts of prayers indicate the sway of mystical environment in *GD* and *YLD*. The present article analyses the multilayered mystical cultures which are embedded in these two novels by Benyamin.

**Key Words:** Multilayer Mysticism, Rituals, Deity, Oracular Revelations And Chaldean Faith

Mysticism is defined as the spiritual quest of men for their union with the divine. It includes seeking the mystical guidance to solve the problems of life and expressing gratitude for the divine support that one experiences and enjoys in life. Different aspects of mysticism are found in multi layers in the two select novels. Life is

mystical. What we think, speak and do often become mystical but we are unaware of the sway of mysticism. *Goat Days [GD]* is the story of man-made-tragedy- to man. The Arab (owner| benefactor) makes life tragic for Najeeb who experiences the impacts of the tragedy unflinching, continually and heavily. He looks at his

life in the desert with shock and terror which defy logic and reason and leave him baffled and helpless. He often reflects on the purpose of his existence in general and his life as a slavish shepherd in the goat farm (masara). Whenever he faces crisis he throws himself to the Almighty and earnestly prays for the holy interference. In his moments of joy too he sets out to pray. Such frequent prayers turn Najeeb a mystic and make the novel almost a discourse on mysticism. Najeeb escapes the catastrophe and lands back safely in India mainly because of his prayers to Allah. Prayers reunite him with his family.

Najeeb's crisis is that of experiencing extraordinary oppression which drives him to seek heavenly deliverance. The moment he sees the goat farm he exclaims in panic and sorrow. "My Lord, where have I ended up?" (*GD* 55). When a pregnant ewe delivers a he-goat he assists the ewe. He considers the lamb a gift from Allah and believes that Allah will reward his wife and son in India. Najeeb suffers physiologically and psychologically because of the cruel Arab. In such moments of torments, Najeeb prays to Allah in desperation.

I would raise my eyes to the heavens and ask, my Allah, what crime have I committed against you and my father to be left to wander with animals in this desert like the prodigal son? Allah would look back at me in the shape of the burning sun. He would tell me, the days of suffering you must go through are not over yet. Like a prophet in the desert, I would kneel on the hot sand and pray looking at the sky. My Allah, release me from this affliction. Send me a saviour as you sent Moses to the Israelites. Liberate me from this captivity. (*GD* 152)

This prayer is symbolic and forms an act of verbal discourse. The Islamic manners of prayer are embedded here. It also depicts how passionately Najeeb worship the God. Enunciations like, 'looking at the sky, Allah's looking back, kneeling on the floor and praying to the Almighty in the sky' are obviously mystical. The allusions to 'the heavens, Allah, prodigal son, burning sun, desert, suffering, prayer, sky, affliction, saviour, Moses, Israelites, liberation and captivity' indicate the mystical values which Najeeb holds dear to his mind and heart. "A mystic is currently supposed to be one who has mystic experience and a mystic philosopher is one who has such experience and has formed a view of life in harmony with his experience" (Aurobindo 257, 2002). Total and absolute surrender to the Supreme Will is one of the cardinal values of mystical cultures. Najeeb makes such devoted surrender voluntarily. "Allah the merciful decides everything in advance. Everything happened only according to His plans. Not even a snake bit against wish. Allah, praise be to you" (*GD* 158). The Moslem Mysticism becomes evident with Najeeb's prayerful words such as 'in the name of Allah, trust in Allah the merciful, Ahlan wa Sahlan, all glory is yours Allah, Allah, the Lord of the all the world, Rabb al alameen, the grace of Allah and the Lord. What Lachs observes on the mystics is applicable to Najeeb. He observes, "Mystics claim that for them, the ultimate becomes immediate; for the rest of us, it is enough if from time to time the immediate becomes ultimate" (Lachs 80, 2006). Najeeb makes himself a perfect mystic with his sincere supplications and prayers.

Besides the formal prayers Najeeb often has monologues with Allah. Beginning

with the greeting *Merciful Allah*, Najeeb heaps praises on the Lord accounting how He performs great miracles by empowering a beggar to win a jackpot, healing a sick man, saving an accident victim, protecting someone from a plane crash, rescuing a shipwrecked sailor and making someone survive a massive earthquake. Having sung the glories of Allah he appeals to Him, “Won’t you make such a miracle happen in my life? You just need to will it... Your will alone is required, your benevolence. I looked at the heavens. There were pale clouds floating like orphans, showing me no sign of hope” (GD 173). Such monologues with Allah are frequently seen throughout the novel. Najeeb, like a typical mystic, attributes all the prosperity to Allah. The moment Najeeb gets hopes of escape he pays tributes to Him. “I thanked Allah for remembering me. For having heard my cries. For sending the prophet Ibrahim Kadhiri to release me. Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!” (GD 179). The mystics hold that nothing is an action of chance. Every action is created by God passionately. Most of the actions are beneficial to the devotees. *The Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Mankind (IEM)* explains that *Allahu Akbar* means that “Allah is Most Great” and this is the basic statement of the Moslem Faith, the shahadah or creed. There is no God but Allah. Mohammed is the Prophet of Allah. The mystical allusion is unmistakable as Najeeb calls Ibrahim Kadhiri the Prophet who has come to the desert to deliver him from the clutches of the tormentor - Arab. “The very name, Allah, emphasises the uncompromising monotheism of Islam. It means the God and thus by its grammatical form constantly reiterates His uniqueness” (IEM 2530, 1978). No wonder that, when

Najeeb secretly leaves the goat farm he prays, “Allah, most merciful, all praises for you. All glory is yours” (GD 184). The three escapees- Najeeb, Hakeem and Ibrahim Kadhiri exercise tremendous and unshakable faith in Allah. The desert, however, in spite of their mystical beliefs and immense religiosity, proves unbearably tough for them. Najeeb is horrified to look at the boundless desert and seeks the mystical lead. He succinctly begs the Lord to save them from the desert. Whenever he is too exhausted to utter words he calls out the name of Allah in his mind and tries to establish a silent communion with Him. He survives in the desert mainly because of the divine grace.

There are many moments of deadly desperation in the exodus. Najeeb is pushed into disbeliefs which are caused by the waterless, infinite, hostile and directionless desert. He believes that his boundless faith in Allah can save them. At one of the torturous moments Najeeb appeals to Allah, “Please, Allah, don’t kill us by roasting in the desert” (GD 209). This prayer for survival hints at the existential issues of life in the desert. Marcel and Jaspers rightly “took the existence to be a gift from God who Himself does not exist, since existence is something that only a being in the world can experience, whereas God is outside the world, eternal” (Simms 15, 2003). The existential implications are deepened as Hakeem is dried to slow death. Najeeb’s prayer is pathetic this time. “I cried, ‘Allah, My Lord, Lord of all the world,...Let nothing happen to my Hakeem! Please, protect him. I prayed beating my breast...I looked at the Heavens. The flaming sun met my eyes” (GD 217). This prayer is singularly expressive of the religiosity of Najeeb.

Here, the mystical symbolism is implied through the gesture of beating the chest and the bearing of the burning sun. Destiny is, however, otherwise. The prayer is unheard and Hakeem dies. Najeeb does not hold the Lord responsible for the misery. Yet, he submissively hints at the divine indifference by asking for the same fate of Hakeem. "Allah, save us, as you saved Hakeem from this Hell" (GD 222). Thus, Benyamin cleverly blends mysticism and existentialism and allows them to co-exist. At moments one philosophy illuminates the other and at other moments one contrasts with the other. This variant relationship between these two philosophies highlights the mystical moments which dominate the narrative. As Najeeb and Ibrahim Kadhiri are flickering between life and death they sight an oasis. Najeeb's beliefs are doubly recharged immediately. He speaks of his jubilation in mystical terms. "A tiny oasis. God's own Garden of Eden. I often wondered if God had created the oasis only for us"(GD 228). An imminent disaster surprisingly gives way to unbelievable survival. The ruthless desert turns benign to them. Najeeb repays his gratitude saying "Allah, thank you. A thousand thanks. A billion thanks" (GD 230). The strength and simplicity of mysticism is implied in this verbal display of gratitude. Najeeb establishes a direct relationship with God. He is thoughtful and alive to the miracles that Allah has brought about in his life. The moment he spots water he realizes the propinquity of God and cries "Allahu Akbar! Water! Water! Allahu Akbar" (GD 224). "It is the Will of the Cosmic Divine which is manifested in each circumstance, each movement of this world" (Aurobindo 25, 1991). Like a seasoned mystic Najeeb conveys his gratitude in an elaborate and

intense pattern. His thanksgiving acknowledges the value for mystical blessings. When Najeeb reaches the main road a rich man gives him a lift in his car. Najeeb considers him Allah. "Allah occasionally travels even in a luxury car" (GD 238)

*Yellow Lights of Death (YLD)* is abundant with strong mystical beliefs. The novel depicts the mysterious aspects of indigenous Christian mysticism. Virgin Mary has been incarnated as Thaikkattamma, the Goddess of Thaikkattu. The Goddess looks like Virgin Mary. But, her skin tone is dark. Her face displays fury and expression of love is missing. A wick lamp is glowing in front of her. The prayer for Thaikkattamma is elaborate and rigidly formal. The Goddess can give guidance only to those who affirm absolute faith in Her. Meljo asks the visitor- devotees to attest their faith in Her with a barrage of mystical questions that have to be answered in the affirmative invariably. However, Thaikkattamma will not cause misfortune on any one and hence the devotees should not approach Her wishing to harm someone. There is an exclusive hymn for Thaikkattamma and the devotees should recite it faithfully. The hymn runs, "Hail gracious Mother, almighty Thaikkattamma, To thee we pledge our body, our soul and our thoughts, And our actions, our life and death. O Mother, Thaikkattamma, queen of the Nazarenes, Beyond anything, with all our heart, we hold thee close to us..." (YLD 7) The hymn is sincere and earnest. The mystical beliefs in Thaikkattamma form the core of Christy Andrapper's connection with India. Andrapper of Diego Garcia belongs to a noble family. He loves Melvin who has come from Kerala and is working as a nurse in Diego. Certain

mysteries are clustered with their unfulfilled love. If Andraper marries Melvin he will have to migrate to Kerala and settle over there. This is the custom of Melvin's family, the Valyedathu Veedu, the ardent worshippers of Thaikkattamma. The Goddess is believed to prefer the eldest of girl of the family to lead the prayers for Her. Andraper is unaware of this custom but is informed of it only when he comes to Kerala after Melvin's death. Melvin is said to have slipped while trying to board a boat and have her head injured. She dies of head injuries. Andraper comes to learn that Melvin's death is not accidental but someone wantonly shook the boat slightly and Melvin fell down in the impact. Andraper's father could be behind that cruel trick that killed Melvin. Perhaps, he did not want his son to marry Melvin and migrate to Kerala. Though Melvin's death is popularly believed to be an accidental one the secret implications are widely known to Andraper's friends and they reject him completely. The mystical belief deepens the crisis of Andraper's life as Melvin's family requires him to marry Melvin's younger sister in order to maintain the mystical custom. Melvin's family also follows the tradition of making secret and nocturnal prayers called Mariam Seva. This arouses the suspicions of Andraper. He assures the members of the Valyedathu Veedu to get back to them but disappears untraceably. The mystical implications are laced with the political stunts. It is also probable that Melvin is killed as she is passing vital information to Andraper on the cold blooded murder of Senthil.

The Mariam Church of Diego is another of instance mysticism. The Church is etched with a myth which runs how a Hindu prince converted to Christianity, married a

Christian princess called Maria and withstood the ordeals of life to be reunited with his separated wife. The church is a haven for the women to pray for the welfare and prosperity of their husbands. The women devotees gather there in the mass and seek the blessings of Goddess Mary for their Men. This church stands as a spot for the mystical gifts to the husbands of faithful women. "All of Diego's married women are the devotees of Mariam Church. They believe that all their husband's achievements are the result of their prayers" (YLD 81).

The mystical peculiarities of the Christian sub-sects are recorded. The Martha Mariam Chaldean Little Church belongs to Melvin's Family. Melvin's funeral prayer is conducted in this church. "For the ceremonies inside the church, only relatives were allowed"(YLD 238). However, when her body is taken out for burial Andraper visits the vacant church and derives solace there. "What I yearned for was the serenity of the church. Its silence offered me great relief" (YLD 239). When Andraper is about to leave the cemetery Melvin's father coerces him to come home for a meal. Andraper is hesitant. An old man mediates and talks of a custom: "Son, never leave a cemetery without coming home. According to the traditions of us ancient Christians, it is customary to come home after a funeral, and share some food with the family. It's a sign of love for the dead" (YLD 257). Andraper changes his mind on knowing the mystical custom and goes to Melvin's home. During his second visit to take part in Melvin's forty-first- memorial- day Andraper revisits the Little Mariam Martha Church. He sees the priest in prayers. "When I went close, he held my hands and made me sit beside him. and

then continued his silent prayers. I felt a strange power of tranquillity flowing towards me” (YLD 285). Andrapper requests the priest to explain the tenets of the sub-sects of Christianity. The priest gives him an elaborate discourse on Christian theology. He speaks on “What

are the basics of these [Christian] beliefs? What’s Christian theology? What are the contradictions in it?”(YLD 286) The discourse illuminates the readers on Christian mysticism and the differences between Catholic and Chaldean faiths.

## **Bibliography**

### **Primary Source**

Benyamin. *Goat Days*. Penguin Books: Haryana, 2012. Print

---. *Yellow Lights of Death*. Penguin Books, Haryana, 2015. Print

### **Secondary Sources**

Aurobindo, *The Hidden Forces of Life*. Sri Aurobindo Trust. Pondicherry 1991. Print

---. *Letters on Poetry, Literature and Art*. Sri Aurobindo Trust. Pondicherry, 2002. Print

*Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Mankind, The*. Marshal Carendish, London, 1978. Vol.19.  
Print

Lachs, John. *On Santayana*. Cengage Learning. Australia, 2006. Print

Simms, Karl. *Paul Ricoeur*. Routledge. London, 2003. Print