

Resistance, Identity, And the Politics of Voice: A Postcolonial Reading of Benyamin's *Jasmine Days*

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Abstract—Benyamin's *Jasmine Days* (2018), translated by Shahnaz Habib, situates the life of a young Pakistani woman in the midst of an unnamed Middle Eastern city during the Arab Spring. The novel interrogates themes of exile, identity, revolution, and authoritarian control, offering a fertile site for postcolonial analysis. This article applies postcolonial theory to examine how *Jasmine Days* engages with the intersections of power, migration, class, and gender. By focusing on the protagonist Sameera's fractured identity as a migrant, the silencing of dissenting voices, and the contest between authority and resistance, the paper argues that *Jasmine Days* critiques both authoritarian nationalism and the neo-colonial structures that define life in the globalized Middle East. The article also highlights how Benyamin gives narrative agency to marginalized voices, particularly women migrants, thereby transforming literature into a tool of resistance against authoritarian and neo-colonial structures.

Index Terms—Benyamin, *Jasmine Days*, postcolonial theory, migration, exile, Arab Spring, authoritarianism, resistance, identity, gender.

I. INTRODUCTION

Jasmine Days is one of Benyamin's most politically charged novels, awarded the JCB Prize for Literature in 2018. The text presents the perspective of Sameera, a Pakistani radio jockey, who finds herself entangled in the political unrest of a Middle Eastern country during the Arab Spring. Set against this backdrop, the novel explores how individuals and communities negotiate questions of belonging, loyalty, and survival. The story dramatizes the struggles of marginalized voices in spaces shaped by authoritarian nationalism, global capital, and religious sectarianism. Postcolonial theory provides a powerful framework to analyze this novel, as it foregrounds themes of displacement, hybridity, exile, and the politics of

voice. Edward Said's *Orientalism* emphasizes how dominant discourses construct the East as a space of control and otherness, while Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and ambivalence provide tools for analyzing fractured identities. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous question "Can the subaltern speak?" underscores the silencing of marginalized subjects, particularly women and migrants, within oppressive structures. These theoretical frameworks help us see *Jasmine Days* not just as a political story about the Arab Spring but as a commentary on global postcolonial realities.

This article explores six interconnected dimensions:

- 1) Migration and exile as defining conditions of the postcolonial subject.
- 2) Authoritarianism and the silencing of voices.
- 3) Revolution and betrayal.
- 4) Hybridity and fractured subjectivities.
- 5) Gendered vulnerabilities and intersectionality.
- 6) Narrative as resistance.

Together, these themes demonstrate how *Jasmine Days* critiques authoritarian power while offering marginalized voices a platform through narrative.

II. MIGRATION, EXILE, AND THE POSTCOLONIAL SUBJECT

Sameera, as a Pakistani migrant in a Middle Eastern country, embodies the precariousness of the postcolonial subject. Migrants exist in a liminal space: they contribute labor and skill but are denied belonging and citizenship. The Gulf and Middle Eastern economies depend heavily on South Asian migrant workers, yet these workers remain socially invisible and politically powerless. Sameera's identity reflects this contradiction: she is an insider in the city

because of her job and friendships, but simultaneously an outsider because of her foreign status.

This condition echoes Homi Bhabha's concept of "unhomeliness," which describes how displacement fractures identity. Sameera is caught between Pakistan, the country of her origin, and the unnamed Middle Eastern city, her place of residence. Her story illustrates the hybridity of migrant identities: she speaks in multiple cultural codes, yet she remains marginal in all. Ania Loomba's *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* reminds us that global labor migration in postcolonial contexts is a continuation of colonial-era economic dependencies. Gulf economies rely on cheap South Asian labor in ways reminiscent of colonial exploitations of colonized laborers. Sameera is both privileged (compared to construction workers) and precarious (as a woman and migrant), making her a layered representation of the postcolonial subject.

III. AUTHORITARIANISM AND THE SILENCING OF VOICES

The unnamed city is characterized by authoritarian rule: censorship, surveillance, and violent suppression of dissent. For Sameera, working as a radio jockey, the question of voice is particularly significant. Initially, she sees her job as empowering, connecting people, and expressing ideas. But she soon realizes that the regime tightly controls the media. Her voice, though broadcast publicly, is shaped by what the authorities allow her to say.

Spivak's question "Can the subaltern speak?" applies here with urgency. Protesters, migrants, and women all struggle to articulate dissent. Even when they do speak, their voices are silenced by censorship, co-opted by propaganda, or drowned in violence. Sameera's gradual realization of her limited agency dramatizes how authoritarian structures suppress not only political voices but also individual subjectivities. Literature, however, allows Benjamin to reassert these voices, making *Jasmine Days* itself a counter-discourse.

IV. REVOLUTION, BETRAYAL, AND HYBRIDITY

The Arab Spring provides the novel's historical and political context, but Benjamin portrays it with

ambivalence. The revolution begins with promises of justice and freedom, but soon dissolves into betrayal, sectarian violence, and division. The protesters are fractured by religion, ethnicity, and class, revealing the difficulty of sustaining unity in the face of authoritarian repression. Sameera's loyalties are split between her employer's family (who benefit from the existing system) and her sympathies with the protesters. Her fractured identity reflects Bhabha's notion of hybridity and ambivalence. She is both an insider and an outsider, sympathetic to resistance yet fearful of instability. This tension reflects the larger postcolonial condition: revolutions often reproduce old hierarchies even as they attempt to dismantle them. By showing the fragility of revolutionary ideals, Benjamin critiques both authoritarianism and the contradictions within resistance movements.

V. HYBRIDITY AND FRACTURED SUBJECTIVITIES

Sameera's hybrid identity extends beyond her political loyalties. As a Pakistani woman in an Arab society, she embodies cultural hybridity. She shares linguistic, religious, and cultural ties with the host country but remains marked as foreign. This hybridity creates ambivalence: she belongs yet does not belong, speaks yet is silenced, participates yet remains marginalized. This fractured subjectivity mirrors the experience of countless migrants in postcolonial contexts. Hybridity, while often celebrated as a site of creativity, here becomes a source of anxiety. Sameera's ambivalence highlights the psychological costs of displacement. Bhabha's theory emphasizes that hybridity destabilizes fixed identities, but in *Jasmine Days*, this destabilization produces vulnerability. Benjamin suggests that while hybridity opens possibilities, it also exposes the fragility of migrant lives under authoritarianism.

VI. GENDERED VULNERABILITIES AND INTERSECTIONALITY

As a woman, Sameera faces additional layers of oppression. In patriarchal societies, women's voices are often dismissed or silenced. Sameera's struggles to assert herself professionally and personally illustrate the gendered dimensions of postcolonial marginalization. Feminist postcolonial scholars such

as Chandra Talpade Mohanty argue that women in the Global South experience “double colonization”: by patriarchy and by global systems of inequality.

In *Jasmine Days*, Sameera navigates male-dominated spaces where her independence is constantly questioned. Her gender limits her freedom of movement and makes her more vulnerable in times of political unrest. Yet Benyamin avoids portraying her as a passive victim. Sameera demonstrates resilience, using her role in media to amplify voices and assert her presence. She embodies what postcolonial feminism calls “agency under constraint”—exercising power within oppressive structures.

VII. RESISTANCE THROUGH NARRATIVE

Ultimately, *Jasmine Days* foregrounds the role of narrative as resistance. By telling the story through Sameera’s perspective, Benyamin gives voice to a marginalized figure: a young migrant woman in a politically volatile city. Her story becomes a counter-narrative to both authoritarian propaganda and global discourses that erase migrant lives.

Edward Said emphasized the role of literature in “speaking truth to power.” *Jasmine Days* exemplifies this, offering readers an alternative perspective on the Arab Spring that highlights the vulnerabilities of migrants and women. By amplifying Sameera’s voice, Benyamin challenges both local authoritarianism and global indifference to migrant struggles. Literature here becomes a political act, reclaiming space for the silenced.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Jasmine Days demonstrates the power of postcolonial literature to critique contemporary systems of domination. Through Sameera’s story, the novel explores the precariousness of migrant lives, the silencing of voices under authoritarian regimes, and the fractured subjectivities produced by displacement and hybridity. It also foregrounds the gendered dimensions of exile, showing how women face intersectional oppression but also resist through resilience.

By applying postcolonial theory, we see how the novel situates itself within larger debates about voice, identity, and resistance in globalized contexts. Benyamin not only critiques authoritarian nationalism

but also highlights the complicity of neo-colonial economic structures that sustain inequality. Ultimately, *Jasmine Days* insists on the necessity of listening to marginalized voices and recognizing the resilience of migrants and women. In doing so, it transforms literature into a site of resistance, reminding us of the political potential of narrative in postcolonial societies.

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