

5th Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Competition for Film Criticism 2024 :  
Certificate of Merit

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*The Goat Life (2024):*

**One Man's Survival Drama, Ignorant About the Politics of Slavery**



*fig 1*



*fig 2*

In Figure 2, a herd of goats in the middle of a desert are grazing and bleating. Trapped in an unforgiving desert with little water for survival, their lives center around grazing on the sand under the harsh sun. Fig 1 shows the protagonist Najeeb bending down to sip water from the same pot where the goats drink. His frail body slurps water amidst the herd of goats. At first glance, it is easy to mistake his silhouette for a goat. These two pictures precisely sum up the premise of the *Adujeevitham* (2024), directed by Blessy. The film follows Najeeb, a Malayali labourer from a village in Kerala who comes to Saudi Arabia with dreams of a better life. Kidnapped from the airport, he ends up in the middle of a desert with less than basic food and almost no water. He is treated like a slave, forced to take care of the goats, and beaten up every now and then. Najeeb loses count of the days in the desert, and slowly his days become just like the days of any other goat of the farm. After

months of repeating the same torturous routine, he almost forgets his language and starts bleating like the animals around him. Being trapped in this hellish jail, Najeeb gets a chance to escape after reuniting with Hakeem, with whom he had left his country. But escaping from the desert is not easy. He loses Hakeem in the middle of the journey, survives miraculously in a sandstorm, and is able to come back home after a series of harsh circumstances.

*Adujeevitham* (2024) or *The Goat Life* revolves around the miseries of a man trapped in the chain of the kafala system[i] and how he survives. An adaptation of Benjamin's novel (2008) of the same name, the film is based on a real event. The title hints at the strange circumstances of a man becoming a goat and is visualized by Blessy in an iconic shot(fig1). When we visually experience the shot, it makes a shiver run down our spine. This shiver comes out of fear, a queasy, a

wave of blood-boiling anger, and a perturbed state of mind. These emotional sensations persist throughout the film with several violent visuals like that of a vulture tearing apart the flesh of a dead old man, gruesome blisters on the feet of the protagonist, Najeeb's bleeding from a violent beating, and Hakim's gruesome death by coughing blood in the middle of the desert. We can identify certain aspects if we analyze the aforementioned vital emotions that we feel while watching the film. The feeling of queasy descends from the shocking visuals, fear comes from contemplating ourselves in the horrendous situation, blood-boiling anger springs up against the egregious slavery system and emphasis on the magnitude of the crisis perturbs us, and makes us uneasy. Throughout the three hours, these disturbing visuals intensify and they eventually get worse. Najeeb and his friends keep on suffering, their suffering and violent outcry in the desire for life being the only thing to be seen and heard on the screen. The screen fixates on the barren desert except for a few dream sequences of Najeeb's homeland. The preceding emotions like fear, anger, disgust and nausea engulf the audience throughout and they are relieved after Najeeb's final survival. But what if Najeeb had not survived? What if Najeeb had died like his friend? What if he were dragged back to the cattle farm from the jail like other migrant workers? Would we be able to hear the story?

Najeeb's survival was a miracle, an individual exception amidst the inhumanity of the Kafala system. Najeeb survived, but thousands of migrant workers are still trapped and regularly abused. Blessy could have recognised that too. The three-hour-long film

didn't focus much on the ongoing heinous practice and its inheritors, rather chose to narrate an isolated story of one individual survivor. The victims who couldn't survive, their stories are lost like Hakim's body in a sandstorm. The main problem of the film is, by recreating the detailed intricate images of the suffering and survival of one man, it forgets to focus on the dark issues of current society like modern-day slavery. With the magnitude of the excruciating visuals; director Blessy and team could have focused on our anger (*one of the four major visual emotions (queasy, fear, anger, perturbed mind) mentioned above*) and channelized it politically against the systemic exploitation of the migrant workers. Manufacturing the images of violence with a lavish budget, the film forgets to address the core reason behind Najeeb's traumatic experience. Hence, slavery, the Kafala system, and misguiding the labourers for individual benefit were not argued politically but became just a loose premise on which a one-man survival drama could be produced. The political ignorance of this inhumane reality became so prominent in the film that the violent images of Najeeb's physical transformation and the extravagant images of the arid desert turned out to be a vulgar flamboyance of a big-budget production without any societal significance. In the course of narrating a real-life story on the screen, *Aadujeevitham* ends up being an apolitical survival drama of technical and performative eloquence by turning a deaf ear to the dark side of society.

Images of disgust and shock have a long history in Dalit Literature[ii]. As in any body of marginalized literature, it has the political significance of depicting the horrible

reality of the Dalits to make the non-Dalits uncomfortable. The horrid images and relentless depiction of the plights of Dalit life help to instigate discomfort and anger against the status quo and anger as a political tool is thought to raise awareness in the society. In a way, a personal account of exploitation becomes a universal account in the corpus of Dalit Studies. But in a big budget commercial film that almost harnesses a sadistic pleasure at watching the protagonist suffer on screen, this becomes futile. Here, Sunil KS's (cinematographer) relentless graphic images of shock make no effort to have a connection with the bigger picture of migrant workforce exploitation. The escape of Najeeb, the climax the film builds to, serves as catharsis. It neatly wraps up the uneasiness created through the film. The audience leaves the hall not with questions but with a sense of triumph. Instead of exposing the systemic oppression of the migrant labourer crisis in Kerala, it encourages the audience to marvel at the technical brilliance of the film. If the film cannot focus on channelling our anger politically, if it does not comment on the history of slavery and exploitation, then what is the point of showing the gruesome graphic image of a man fighting against adversity through this elongated stretch? A film that leaves us with fear, queasy, and perturbation without any historical context and political significance becomes a sadist film with sadist images that look at the survivor's tragedy from the position of a voyeur.

Apart from its apolitical stand, we must talk about the performance of the protagonist played by Prithviraj Sukumaran. Sukumaran's portrayal of the character through various physical and emotional states will always

remain an example of the actor's manual. "The actor increased his weight to 98 kilos for the Kerala part of the shoot and for the scenes where he first arrives in the Middle East. The production then paused for seven months while Sukumaran shed 31 kilos. "I surprised myself and everyone in the film crew because when I landed up the next time in Jordan, I was almost unrecognizable," Sukumaran said." [iii] In an interview with Variety Magazine, Prithviraj talks at length about his rigorous physical and mental journey for conceiving the nuances of the character and its radical transformation. KR Gokul, the actor who played the role of Hakim, had undergone a similar weight loss training to portray the character in its true essence. He proclaimed his journey of physical transformation as a tribute to the famous actor Christian Bale who lost weight to portray an insomniac in *The Machinist* (2004) [iv]. The rigorous practice of Prithviraj and Gokul reminds me of Robert De Niro's iconic portrayal of Jake La Motta in Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull* (1980) where he gained 27 kgs to depict the post-boxing years of the protagonist. The realistic portrayal of Najeeb's story in *The Goat Life* would have been impossible without the performer's dedication and excellence in the craft. The Hindu published a review of the film titled: *All about Prithviraj Sukumaran's 'Aadujeevitham – The Goat Life'*. [v] I feel this is an accurate expression to remember the film in the name of the central actor, more than the name of the director. Being a politically ignorant film with no social significance, *The Goat Life* will be remembered for the performer's excellence on the screen.

**End Notes:**

[i] **The Kafala System** meaning "sponsorship system" is a system used to monitor migrant labourer, working primarily in the construction and domestic sectors in Gulf Cooperation Council member states and a few neighbouring countries, namely Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The system requires all migrant workers to have an in-country sponsor, usually their employer, who is responsible for their visa and legal status. This practice has been criticized by human rights organizations for creating easy opportunities for the exploitation of workers as many employers take away passports and abuse their workers with little chance of legal repercussions. (source: [Wikipedia](#))

[ii] Naik, Purnachandra. "Baby Kamble to Bama: Dalit Women Write Differently" (Economic and Political Weekly, Vol 51, No 42 (October 15, 2016), pp. 16-19  
URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44165812>

[iii] Ramachandran, Naman. 2024. "Prithviraj Sukumaran on His Transformation for 'the Goat Life,' 'Salaar,' 'Lucifer' Sequels and 'Bade Miyan Chote Miyan' Franchise Plans (EXCLUSIVE)." Variety. April 9, 2024. <https://variety.com/2024/film/news/prithviraj-sukumaran-goat-life-salaar-lucifer-bade-miyan-chote-miyan-1235963756/>.

[iv] "Aadujeevitham Actor KR Gokul Shares His Shocking Transformation Picture: 'I Offer This Tribute to Christian Bale's Talent.'" 2024. The Indian Express. April 8, 2024. <https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/malayalam/aadujeevitham-actor-kr-gokul-shares-his-shocking-transformation-picture-9258639/>.

[v] Bureau, The Hindu. 2024. "'Aadujeevitham – the Goat Life': All about Prithviraj Sukumaran's Survival Drama." *The Hindu*, April 4, 2024, sec. Movies. <https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/all-about-prithviraj-sukumaran-aadujeevitham-the-goat-life/article68027054.ece>.

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