
**ROOTS IN TRANSIT: ALTERMODERNISM, GLOBALISATION
AND HYBRIDITY IN BENYAMIN'S JASMINE DAYS**

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Article Received: 13/04/2025

Article Accepted: 15/05/2025

Published Online: 17/05/2025

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.18.05.266

Abstract:

“‘History’s true object of study is the human mind’ says Fustel de Coulanges. Whatever objections may be urged against this definition, it certainly possesses the merit of emphasizing the psychological bond that connects history with literature. Any account of the nation’s march in bygone times must reveal to some extent its mental characteristics, just as any record of its literature must disclose some pulsing of its social life” [Rickett, Arthur Compton. *A History of English Literature* 2006].

Literature is inevitably a record of human life. Literature, more specifically a novel cannot be used as an emotional stimulant as it acquires the status of a sociological, historical and cultural document of the times represented. The place of novel in this context in the 21st century is invested with a responsibility much above than other forms of literature.

Literature, art, and history are the subject matter of the humanities. Benyamin’s work on the history of the Middle East countries finds relevance in a world where the nations and their respective civilizations are everyday brought closer by wires. In choosing this history, which becomes the original impulse of the creation, he reflects his own concern for humanity, universally.

Benyamin’s *Jasmine Days* is a disturbing but a convincing narrative documenting an unnamed Middle East city’s troubled history under the authoritarian regime and the innocent civilians who bear the brunt of each attack. Enmeshed into human relationships, experiences, the novel reflects a community and its behavioural patterns, mental structures embedded in its conscious, unconscious, adapted and forced upon ways of living, offering fresh nuances and an understanding of a culture alien to the reader.

Jasmine Days is the second novel by Benyamin that is set in the Middle East and explores mainly the lives of the South Asian migrants and the natives. *Jasmine Days* was published in 2016 in Malayalam as Mullappo Niramulla Pakalukal and was later translated into English by Shahnaz Habib. The title *Jasmine Days* reflect the backdrop of the Arab Spring, a series of pro-democracy uprising that began in 2010 starting with Tunisia’s Jasmine Revolution. The book *Jasmine Days* won the first JCB prize for Literature in India, in the year 2018.

With multifaceted developments in all spheres of life, the world received, with open arms, the concept of global interdependence. With the increase in the interdependency rate, many political, social, religious and other factors made the idea of migration initially inevitable. Migrations created new experiences which sometimes turned into constraints. People, who began to move into new regions of the world, had a taste of alien culture. Some accepted it as an experience, and some felt a culture crisis. As time witnessed accelerated growth and urging frequency in international and intercontinental migration, the literary world admired multicultural literature in its infancy. Many literary works have captured these moments of multicultural experiences with openness and authenticity. A multicultural work goes a step further to explore not just the memory and mood of the characters, but also immigration and settlement experiences. The setting becomes a rendezvous of different cultures. The writer of a multicultural work can go beyond the physical changes and psychic affectations and touch upon the interplay of external forces. This highlights the reception of multicultural experiences.

An instant identification due to cultural bonding and the feel of refinement of disapproval in the oasis of multiculturalism has made this genre very popular worldwide. Multicultural works function as transformers spreading waves of cultural currents that merge and mould the characters till the end. The effect could be in two ways. Either the characters adapt themselves to a life entwined in plural cultures or they suffer forever with an estranged heart, mourning their separation from their native lands. The former kind exhibits a broad perspective and an outlook untarnished by cocooned indigenous beliefs. The latter repeat unsuccessful attempts to synchronize and gel with their multicultural surroundings, but in vain, for, they are driven by their native ideologies, frozen hard to be struck by the blows of new thinking and modern beliefs. However, one finds the inherent affinity to roots surfacing itself often at times of crisis, giving rise to nostalgia. Thus, the characters, forcefully pull away their memories only to adjust to their new life style.

In *Jasmine Days*, Benyamin weaves a narrative that mirrors the core principles of Alter modernism, emphasizing the interconnectedness, mobility, and complexity of life in a globalized digital world. Globalisation and Digital age have transformed contemporary art, leading Nicolas Bourriaud to coin the term Alter modernism. This concept reflects a shift beyond postmodernism, embracing the hybridization of cultures and digital interconnectedness. Alter modern art explores themes like identity, hybridity, cultural exchange, boundary-crossing works that address the complexities of a globalized world. This paper discusses globalisation and hybridity from an aesthetic perspective and the new aesthetic movement that bloomed out of it, Alter modernism.

Sameera, the protagonist is a young Pakistani woman who moves to a fictional middle east city in search of a job and a better life. Her journey reflects the common migrant experience – leaving one’s roots behind and attempting to adapt to a new cultural environment. Sameera’s longing for home and her inability to fully integrate into the new society highlight the theme of roots in transit. This duality mirrors the experience of migrants who live in a

limited space, neither fully detach from their place of origin nor completely settled in their new environment.

Sameera, the protagonist's life is a mix of her Pakistani heritage and the influences of the unnamed Middle Eastern city she inhabits. This duality embodies the hybrid nature of Alter modernism, where identities and experiences are fluid and multifaceted. Sameera who is uprooted from her place of origin, finds herself in a state of displacement.

“You know how it is when you arrive in a new place and feel like you don't belong there. That hesitation to reckon with the new geography. That knowledge that this place is not mine, these ways of talking are not mine, these silences are not mine, this etiquette is not mine. So many new things to absorb. And the place also takes a little time to accept the new person. Often you have to meet the place on its own terms. Sometimes you have to work hard to earn your little corner in it. Till that place becomes yours, till you find own equilibrium there, there will be a gap between you and the place.”(16)

Alter modernism provides a unique framework for perceiving or understanding the relationship between Ali Fardan and Sameera. Sameera and Ali embody the essence of alter modernism by navigating the complexities of a globalized Middle East city, where global modernization and traditions coexist. Sameera is progressive and modern with a deep respect for her roots, while Ali ingrained in Gulf traditions, could embrace global perspectives that enrich his understanding of identity and relationships. Despite societal misconceptions, Sameera and Ali redefine their relationship. They resist homogenization. Sameera herself admits that their relationship was dignified and mature.

“Ali and I were simply friends.... I was mystified that even after years of living lives of freedom in this big city, none of them were able to believe in an ordinary friendship between a man and a woman.”(71)

In the novel *Jasmine Days* hybridity refers to cultural, social and identity-based blending that occurs particularly in the context of the Middle East, where multicultural communities live with the natives. Thus, in the novel hybridity creates a place for both bond and conflict. Hybridity is evident in Ali's identity. Ali and Laila embody the struggles of an immigrant as they are from Iran and considered as a second class citizen. Ali aspires for acceptance but remains alienated.

“Second class! This is how a country treats its own people. Do you know for how many years we've been suffering this discrimination? The curse of not belonging to the ruling majority! You will never understand how terrible it is till you experience discrimination in your own land. But I am not sad, Sameera. I have Shia blood in my veins and nothing is worth betraying that. Someday, we will also be acknowledged as humans...”(63).

Yunus, a privileged native Arab perspective on Ali Fardan not only expose prejudice but also emphasize the lack of empathy and understanding that perpetuates their second class status. This tension is a critical commentary on the fractured hybridity within a multicultural country like the Gulf.

“He is a second-class citizen here, He doesn’t really have citizenship in this country. Their people came from Iran long ago and have been living here illegally. His Majesty pretends not to see, so they get by. Otherwise they would all have been packed off back to Iran. We Sunnis are the first-class citizens here.”(62-63)

Farhana’s and Sippy auntie’s statement highlights the complexities of identity, belonging and the process of hybridization. When women and children were asked to leave Pakistan Farhana exploded

“Why should I return to Pakistan? She asked. I was born here, grew up here, and I have every right to continue my life here. I am not going to run away, scared. This land belongs to me just as much as it belongs to the protesters (150)

Sippie aunty had always imagined living the rest of her life in the house, in that unnamed city

“Why should we have to go? And where? Who are we so scared of? This is our country too. Don’t we have rights here? I did not know your Taya was such a coward,” (168-169)

The above line could be interpreted through the lens of Alter modernism, Hybridity and Globalization in multiple ways. The speaker Sippie aunty resists forced displacement, which aligns with the alter modern idea of a nomadic life. This also reflects the experience of hybrid identities. It also states the anxieties of marginalized and oppressed communities in a globalized world, where economic or political forces displace people. It also questions whether globalisation truly granted equal rights or if power structures still favour some groups over others.

The unfulfilled dreams of Sameera’s Baba of not being buried in Faisalabad and who never applied for citizenship unlike his other brothers, symbolizes the dislocation and the loss that often accompany hybrid identities in a globalized world.

Globalization is portrayed as a double-edged sword, particularly through the experiences of the protagonist Sameera, who grapples with feelings of isolation despite living in an interconnected world. The novel highlights how advancements in technology, such as Facebook and Twitter, facilitate communication, offers her a window to the world and tools to connect with friends and family far away, they cannot fill the void she experiences.

“I am a very brave girl. What they don’t know is that my laughter and confidence and all the noise that I make is just a disguise. Deep inside, I am in pain and I don’t want anyone to know. Even so, when I feel lonely, I try to call a friend. But everyone is busy. No one has the time to talk. This house is full of people but I am like an island in the middle.” (26)

In *Jasmine Days*, globalisation is portrayed as a force that brings opportunities and challenges, particularly for women in conservative societies. Sameera’s prominence as a radio jockey bears a testimony to it. The novel also reveals the hypocrisy embedded in globalization. Women are forbidden from using platforms like Facebook as their online activity is perceived as a threat to their family’s honour.

“Facebook was a forbidden fruit in our household. The men of the house called it the ticket booth for the train to hell. But apparently, those tickets took only women to hell. Our men were free to delight in Facebook as much they wanted, while we women sat patiently in heaven.” (55)

Benyamin’s *Jasmine days* does the work of being an eye-opener. It must be whole heartedly admitted that the profound insights and inspiration from reading the novel are immeasurable. It leaves one deeply indebted to the apathy and ignorance of a neighbouring country which was closely associated with war and political unrest, has now changed into affection and reverence. It cannot be denied that Benyamin’s *Jasmine Days* is a window into the world of the Middle East city allowing an intimate look into the same needs, desires, fears, insecurities, feelings of love and repulsion as anyone is capable of. It brought home the fact that how difficult lives can be in places with less personal freedom and most important, that beneath the varied skins of race, religion and nationality lie human beings essentially the same.

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