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## ‘If I have to compromise, I cannot continue writing’: Benyamin



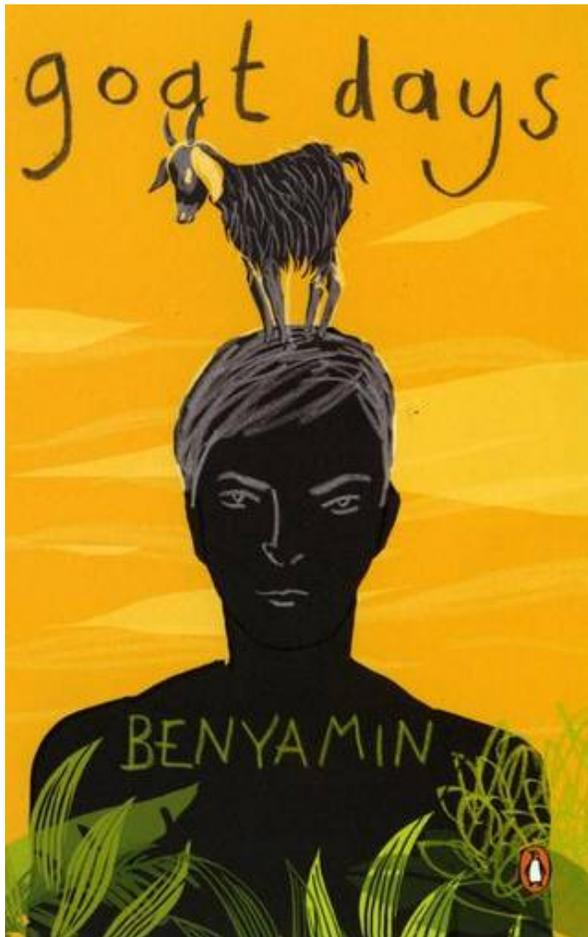
**When a dictatorship, with its many unfreedoms, collapses, what comes next? Benyamin ponders upon such questions**

Malayalam writer Benyamin's *Jasmine Days* won the 2018 JCB Prize for Literature. That's not the only reason the novel has proven to be extraordinary for him. It's the book that made him decide to quit his day job as an engineer in Bahrain, where he'd lived for 21 years, to preserve his integrity as a writer.

*Jasmine Days* is set in an unnamed West Asian country, against the backdrop of the Arab Spring. In this conversation, he explains what writing means to him, how a migrant mind adapts to the lack of freedom in a dictatorship, and the acute sense of homelessness a migrant worker feels. Edited excerpts:

**There are so many different strands to the story — the Shia-Sunni conflict, gender rights, migrant lives. What is the story you set out to tell?**

First of all, the thing is, why you write a novel. Something is really haunting us and we want to tell something to society. So we choose a medium. I chose the novel. Because I was in Bahrain for almost 21 years, I have many Arabic friends from both the Shia and the Sunni sides. As you know, Bahrain is a Shia majority country being ruled by the Sunnis. I heard both sides, I know their feelings, the lives they led, the discrimination they faced. Then the Arab revolution happened. That's when I thought I want to tell the world this story. I have to share the political ambitions of the Arab world.



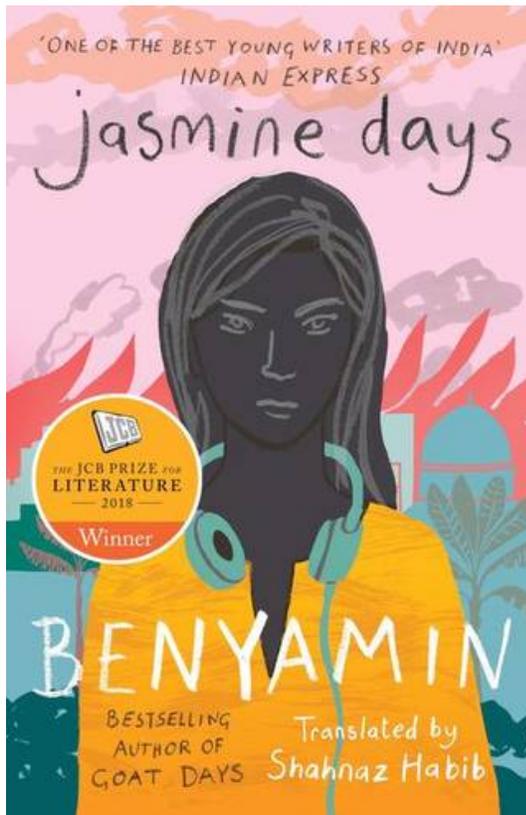
**This novel was also the reason you decided to quit Bahrain and return to Kerala. What led to this?**

This is because the earlier book, *Goat Days*, is banned in both the U.A.E. and Saudi Arabia. It was strange because I wrote something that wasn't against Arab countries but still they thought it was. *Jasmine Days* is more political than *Goat Days*. So I thought that I can't write this one from an Arabic country. I would have to censor myself. (It comes to the question of) why I write. I have to write very openly and I have to tell all the things I want to tell. If I live there, I can't write as I wish. So I thought I have to leave the country. That was a crucial decision. I had been there for the last 21 years with a good job. I had to leave all of it. I am passionate about my writing, and felt if I have to compromise myself, I cannot continue writing.

**The book brings up the question of whether living in a dictatorship may be a better compromise than allowing religious extremism**

**to take shape. Your views?**

It is complicated and debatable. When you are in a dictatorship, you may lose so many things. You may not have a right to say things openly. But when it collapses, what is next? In countries such as Egypt, or Tunisia or Libya, the situation got worse. The society collapsed, law and order collapsed. If the situation is to get worse, why should we think about getting rid of dictatorships? If it has to go, it should be for a better society. Otherwise, let it be as it is. This I experienced in my own life.



Under a dictator, life goes smoothly at least for some. But when it falls, there's chaos, nobody is in a safe zone. It may be debatable, but when you think of the Arab world, this is what happened after the revolution in many countries. Nowhere did they get democracy. In most places, Muslim extremists hijacked society.

#### **How does the migrant, who has lived in a democracy, adapt to the lack of freedom?**

It's so complicated, the situation when you are going from a democracy to a dictatorship. Ninety-nine per cent of such [people](#) I have met have supported dictators. They are thinking only of their own comfort. They are not bothered about the people who are living there. This is what happened in Bahrain. The protest was happening, and all of a sudden the migrant community started to support the regime and started another protest against them (the protesters).

**At the same time, the migrants feel a sense of homelessness. They may have lived in these countries for decades, but are always the foreigners. The Shias, even if second-class citizens, can still demand their rights since they believe it is their country.**

In Gulf countries, this is a little bit more evident than in other countries. If you migrate to Europe or America, you would be a part of the society in some years. But in a Gulf country, even if you are there for 30-40 years, you are never part of that society. You are paid labour. You have to renew your visa every two years. You will not get a permanent visa or permanent residency. So you would be a temporary person in that country, as author Deepak Unnikrishnan wrote.

The Shia majority felt that because of this huge migrant community, they didn't get proper jobs, were not treated well, and these people needed to be thrown out. But the migrants have been living there maybe for the last 40 years, they have built their lives there, their children are born and brought up there, the kids think they belong to this country because they don't know India

or Pakistan. An identity crisis arises. When life is normal (you don't think about it). It is when a crisis comes that you start to think where am I from, what is my identity.