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***Aatujeevitham* and Reification of Memories: Diaspora
Experiences in Malayalam Cinema**

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Abstract: The Gulf was the ultimate destination for many Indian migrants during the last decades of the 20th century, where their past experiences in the home country significantly impacted their quality of life, regardless of whether these experiences were favourable or adverse. Najeeb, the protagonist of Benyamin's novel *Aatujeevitham* (*Goat Days*) and its film adaptation, accidentally ends up in a sheep-rearing centre in the Arabian desert, seeks solace in memories by clinging to specific objects in order to survive and adapt to the harsh environment and tolerate his master's cruelties. As a vulnerable expatriate yearning to return home and enduring physical abuse and isolation, memories serve Najeeb not only as a nostalgic reminder but also as a vital force in maintaining the coherence of his past, present, and future in the unfamiliar desert. The entities, such as a pickle bottle, bag, and button, become *Lieux de Mémoire*, by which Najeeb preserves and mediates his past and overcomes the atrocities of the present. This study examines the portrayal of the reification of memories in *Aatujeevitham*, both the novel (2007) and the film (2024), using the framework of memory studies to comprehend how preserving memories aids in Najeeb's survival in the desert.

Keywords: Diaspora, Gulf dream, memory, migration, nostalgia, subjectivity, prosthetic memory

Introduction

The Gulf boom has influenced India in numerous ways, with Kerala gaining the most from it and experiencing its impact across all sectors of society. Malayalam films have attempted to represent such lives since the beginning of the Gulf migration. However, it has not been able to capture all aspects of Malayali life in the Gulf, especially the experiences of suffering, isolation, and triumph associated with Gulf migration. Malayalam cinema generally depicted Gulf migrants as symbols of Gulf money, flamboyance, smuggling, and *nouveau riche*, describing them as stock characters who oscillate between hero and fool (Osella and Osella 122; Radhakrishnan 221; Karinkurayil 10) as represented in films such as *Swayamvaram*, *Elippathayam*, *Vilkanunund Swapnangal*, *Shalini Ente Koottukari* and *Thinkalazhcha Nalla Divasam*. This characterisation began to change after the emergence of middlebrow cinema of the late 1980s, with films like *Varavelpu*, *Gandhinagar 2nd Street*, *Garshomand Kallu Kondoru Pennuu*. By the 2000s, there was an emergence of films like *Perumazhakkalam*, *Khaddama*, *Pathemari*, *Arabikatha*, *Diamond Necklace* and *Jacobinte Swargarajyam*, which tried to portray the multiple realities of Gulf life in distinctive ways. The causes and consequences of Gulf migration were not only a topic of discussion in films but also in a broad array of literary works. Benjamin's magnum opus, *Aatujeevitham (Goat Days)*, is one among them that became a sensational work grounded on the real-life experiences of an expatriate from Alappuzha. The movie adaptation, Blessy's *Aatujeevitham (Goat Life)*, released sixteen years after its publication, also offers a novel rendition of the Gulf life in Malayalam cinema, conveying the intense experiences of migration through a different medium.

Set against the backdrop of the 1990s Gulf migration, the narrative of *Aatujeevitham* unfolds the journey of Najeeb, a lower-middle-class sand miner from Kerala ensnared in the clutches of exploitation. Deceived and coerced into servitude at a remote sheep-rearing centre in an unknown Arabian desert, Najeeb's existence becomes a battle for survival, stripped of his social bonds and familial ties. In that barren landscape, Najeeb undergoes a metamorphosis akin to a primitive existence, finding solace only in the recesses of his memories. His most cherished possession, a pickle bottle from his wife, becomes a vessel of nostalgia, encapsulating fragments of his past life and serving as a beacon of hope in his darkest hours. This study explores the portrayal of Najeeb's memories, both as a migrant and a human being isolated in a desert, in Benjamin's *Aatujeevitham* and contrasts them with Blessy's film adaptation. Using the theoretical perspectives of memory studies this article examines how Najeeb recollects and preserves his memories, illuminating the role of reification in this process.

Gulf Migration and Gulf Dream of Malayalis

India, as a geographical region bordered by sea and land, has witnessed numerous invasions and migrations from all corners of the world, including those of the Chinese, Arabs, Dutch, Portuguese, French, and British (Rajan and Singh 17). Indentured labourers for European colonies such as Guyana,

Trinidad, South Africa, Surinam, East Africa, Mauritania, and South Africa was sourced from Indian states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala during the colonial period and after the abolition of slavery (Kumar²). Indians had migrated to many places, such as Ceylon, Singapore, Malaysia, and Burma, for the same reasons at the beginning of the 20th century; however, the Gulf oil reserves changed the destiny of many migrants within a short period.

The 1970s Gulf migration signalled a boom that became the decisive factor in India's economic, political, religious, linguistic, and cultural transformation (Gulati; Kannan; Kurian; Weiner; Zachariah and Rajan). Socio-political factors, including unemployment, economic instability, increasing population, agricultural loss, low wages, and poverty, fueled the migration of many skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled labourers from India. The number of Indian migrants in the Gulf was 5.01 lakhs in 1979, 12.335 lakhs in 1990, and 28 lakhs in 1996 (Prakash³²¹⁰). Most of them were not given a permanent citizenship period, but they could earn money and be part of the economic growth of both the origin and destination countries before the contract period ended. Moreover, these countries were attractive markets for Indian products and served as a second home for millions of Indian expatriates (Jain⁷⁷).

Though the Gulf migration gained momentum in the 1970s, Indians have been working in the oil companies since the second decade of the 20th century; by the early 1950s, there were about 15,000 Indian workers in the Gulf countries (56). Kerala, situated at the tip of the Indian subcontinent, had a close connection with the West Asian countries even before the Gulf boom and has played an influential role in strengthening the ties between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and India. The number of Indian workers in the Gulf was 350,000 in 1979, and "the workers from Kerala comprised over half of the Indian workers in the region"(Gulati 2216)resulting in Malayalis contributing more than half of the total remittances sent by Indians (Prakash³²¹³).According to the recent Kerala Migration Survey, there are 22 lakh migrant workers from Kerala, of whom 90 per cent live in GCC countries (Norka Roots). In the Gulf, migrants received more opportunities and higher wages than in their countries of origin and were willing to do any job they would not do at home (Jeffrey¹⁵²). These migrations also provided an escape from caste and class-based demarcations, which kept some communities from undertaking professions considered inferior or superior in Indian society. The Gulf boom became a turning point for female migration, too, as numerous opportunities in health services resulted in the rise of nursing institutes all over India, especially Kerala (Percot⁴⁴), facilitating higher education and better job prospects for women. Though Gulf migration opened the way for transforming the caste-based and gender-based job sectors (Pallikadavath and Wilson³⁰⁸⁷; Jeffrey¹⁹⁵) and saved many lowerand middle-class families from going bankrupt, the migrant life in the Gulf was not as dreamy as they imagined. The precarious nature of life in the Gulf due to linguistic, social and cultural barriers, as well as harsh living conditions, was exacerbated by the absence of

regulatory bodies such as the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) and Non-Resident Keralites Affairs (NORKA). The pattern of outflow of workers and their remittances impacted Kerala society in multiple ways. It brought in a positive upsurge in the Kerala economy, which depended highly on the agricultural sector rather than the industrial sector. Migrants started to invest heavily in fulfilling their Gulf dreams, such as building a house in their native land, buying private vehicles, educating their children in aided or private institutions, consuming durable goods, and opting for good medical facilities (Gulati; Kurian; Sunny et al.). This change, in turn, increased the demand for more labourers, increased wages and land prices, transformed living standards, and led to more developments in Kerala society. The percentage of migrants who conquered new lands of hope and wealth through their hard work and persistence was higher in the last three decades of the 20th century, and it had “a far-reaching impact on the migrant household at the micro level as well as on society and the economy at the macro level” (Banerjee et al. 1755).

The *Gulfukaran* (the Gulf migrant), who rapidly amassed a fortune by working in the Gulf, was a symbol of wealth that the Gulf countries acquired from their oil fields. The gifts they brought, such as dresses, perfumes, watches, electronic devices, and toys, to family members, relatives, and friends set a precedent in the 1970s and 1980s, playing an essential role in influencing and directing Kerala’s economic flow and lifestyle. Such *Puthanpanakkaran* (*nouveau riche*) enjoyed greater social acceptance and were highly sought after in the marriage market. The attractiveness of “social acceptance” and “better marriage prospects” were crucial in favouring migration over staying and working within the state (Zachariah and Rajan⁷⁰). Migrating to the Gulf was both an escape from unemployment and a transformation to a mature, self-sufficient individual, “as a householder, defined by the combination of marriage, fatherhood, and showing ability as a ‘provider’” (Osella and Osella¹²⁰). Eventually, the *Gulfukaran’s panavum pathrasum* (wealth and glamour) attracted the natives, who, with the help of their friends and relatives in the Gulf, flew to the Gulf, leading to a surge in the chain migration from Kerala to the Middle East. This is the contextual backdrop in which Najeed, the protagonist of the *Aatujeevitham*, emigrates to the Middle East with a bundle of dreams in the last decade of the 20th century.

Najeed’s Gulf Dream: Between the River and the Desert

Najeed was a young, newlywed, lower-middle-class man employed in mining sand from a river in Karuvatta, a small village in the Alappuzha district of Kerala. Various factors like low income, job insecurity, health issues, and social conditions influenced him to migrate to the Gulf when he got a visa offer unexpectedly from his friend. The need to secure a comfortable and safe life for his pregnant wife, unborn child and his mother urged him to accept the offer. Despite his emotional attachment to his homeland and family, he mortgages his property to save some money to get a visa from his friend. His efforts to raise the money for the visa and the impending journey for a better life at once made him

anxious and excited. He was worried about the money he gave the broker, as there were no proper authorizing bodies to monitor and verify visa procedures. His immediate financial needs and social pressure motivated him to trust his friend and choose the path everyone took in those days.

The material desires and dreams of Najeeb, like buying a golden watch, tape recorder, air conditioner, and gold chain after getting rich, dictated by the distinguishing features of a *Gulfukaran*, exemplify the society's influence on its members. Najeeb and Hakeem, a fellow migrant, leave for Riyadh on a train from Kayamkulam railway station to Bombay, as there were no direct flights from Kerala to the Gulf countries and as such, migrants used to take ships or flights from major ports in other states. For the Malayali migrants, Bombay served as a transitory destination where they would stop to exchange money and obtain visas for their journey to the Gulf. These intermediate points played a pivotal role in shaping the futures of many individuals aspiring to go abroad, as it was not uncommon for people to reach Bombay only to return home empty-handed after a few months (Gulati 1983). Sasi, who helps Najeeb and Hakeem by providing lodging and food in Bombay, is an example of a man who spent many months waiting for a visa and led a miserable life in Bombay without any potential opportunity.

Upon arriving, Najeeb and Hakeem found themselves stranded at Riyadh airport as there was no one to receive them, which exacerbated their nervousness. As they anxiously pondered who their sponsor was and what they would do if he did not show up, a rough and untidy Arab arrived and noticed Najeeb and Hakeem. The unknown Arab, whom they later call 'arbab'—a boss or a person in a position of authority, at once seized their passport and led them forcefully to his truck. After a long journey into the desert, the arbab hands over Hakeem to another Arab and takes Najeeb to his sheep-rearing pen, called 'masara'. Right from the beginning, Najeeb had apprehensions about the arab, but he did not get a chance to talk it over. However, as the journey progressed, Najeeb realized there had been a mistake and that this was not the job they had been promised. By then, his struggles to convince the arbab and efforts to escape waned, and he lost all hope and understood they were in the wrong place.

The masara was the place where the arbab kept his goats and camels for milk, meat, and wool. Najeeb's duty, along with that of a strange, Hindi-speaking worker who had already been there, was to rear goats, feed them, and collect milk from them. The hot and dry desert was unforgiving, and enslaved by the arbab, Najeeb was denied the right to use water, bathe, and sleep inside the shed. When the stranger at the masara disappears, his work doubles. Without proper food, sleep, shelter, family, and social bonding, he eventually transforms into a goat, metaphorically. He forgets about his family and his dreams of becoming rich and returning home because the exhausting work at the masara and his life among the animals gradually assimilate him into their world, weakening the connection between his past and future. In an attempt to hold on to his family and the social life at Karuvatta, he tries to

reconnect, recall, and recreate their memories through unique objects, events, and names. The following section examines how Najeeb takes deliberate measures to preserve his memories from decay and oblivion with the aid of external objects, as well as the role of reified memories in maintaining Najeeb's mental stability and life at the masara.

Reification of Memories and Memory Works at the Masara

Memories are one of the fundamental components of human consciousness that determine an individual's identity and existence. Either individual or collective, memories have multiple roles in individual growth, decision-making, social bonding, and a better understanding of life; hence, "feelings of love, the longing for attachment, hate, anger, distrust, pain, shame, and guilt are inseparable from memory" (Keszei808). Besides, memories can unify and influence a population or community by relating to the day-to-day activities of individuals (communicative memory) and sharing a common past (cultural memory), creating a common shared feeling for their culture, art, history, literature, and nationality (Assmann and Czaplicka126). Expatriates, whether forced or voluntarily departing from their home country for various reasons, rely heavily on the process of memory work, which involves recollecting and interpreting the memories to shape their existence at their destination. As "a conscious and purposeful staging of memory," memory work involves "an inquiring attitude towards the past and the activity of its (re)construction through memory" (Kuhn186). In essence, memory work in the lives of expatriates and in the diaspora literature that documents their life experiences and narratives is of great significance.

A migrant—the person who temporarily or permanently changes their place of residence in search of better opportunities—is frequently displaced, and their past experiences in the country of origin significantly influence the quality of life in the destination country, regardless of whether they are favourable or adverse. As a helpless expatriate longing for his return to his homeland and more so as a human being enduring physical abuse and loneliness, memories functioned not only as a source of nostalgia for Najeeb but also as a critical element in sustaining the continuity of his past, present, and future at the masara. The entrapping nature of the desert and the inescapability of the arbab's surveillance is foreshadowed by the Hindi-speaking stranger singing a song from the 1973 film *Bobby*:

Bahar se koi andarna aa sake

Andar se koi bahar na ja sake

Sochokabhi aisa ho tohkyaho(Pyarelal)

(No one from outside can come inside

No one from inside can go outside

Imagine what would happen in such a situation)

This song briefly, but precisely, demonstrates the situation at the masara to Najeeb, even though it does not make any sense to him at first. The stranger's words, coupled with the conditions at the masara and the relentless instructions from the arbab, make him realize that he is trapped in the desert, and the chances of the arbab sending him back to Hakeem and the airport are slim. Najeeb's despair over the betrayal, the loss of his money, and the impossibility of escaping and reuniting with Umma, Sainu, and Hakeem heighten his awareness of his current life at the masara, triggering a torrent of memories. He understands that dwelling on his past will only cause him more pain and make his days at the masara unbearable. To adapt to the new life, he consciously tries to ward off memories of his wife, mother, and home, but new thoughts haunt him. He narrates it in the novel:

My discomfort kept me awake even though I was very tired. My thoughts were not of my home country, Sainu, Ummah, my unborn son or daughter, my sorrows and anxieties, or my fate, as one would imagine. All such thoughts had become alien to me, as they were to the dead who had reached the other world. So soon, you might wonder. My answer is yes. There is no use in being bound by such thoughts. They only delay the process of realizing that we've lost out to circumstances and there is no going back. I realized this within a day. Anxiety and worry were futile. The world had become alien to me. (Benyamin95)

To survive in the present, he deliberately forgets his past, realizing that holding onto those memories as remnants of a fresh, vivid, and hopeful past will haunt him and kindle his urge to return. To orient himself to the life at masara and endure the corporal punishments meted out by the arbab, Najeeb limits his recollections and reminisces of his home by preoccupying himself with gruelling physical labour and caring for the animals. Still, accidental or intentional encounters with objects or events bring back the suppressed memories of his life in Karuvatta.

Those memories are not just remembrances of things past but different versions of homesickness, nostalgia, trauma, alienation, pain, loneliness, hope, and expectation. Despite his status as a migrant, Najeeb remains a human being entangled in an alien landscape amidst multiple atrocities. He undergoes physical and mental transformations to sustain his physiological and psychological needs. The reification of memories through food, animals, objects, events, and people was, therefore, crucial for his survival and escape from the masara.

Reification of Memories and Preservation of the Past

Many objects recur in both the novel and the film as symbols, prompting Najeeb to pause and recall his suppressed memories. His duffle bag, the names written on the dilapidated vehicle where he stays, his dress, the names he calls the goats, the button on his shirt, his sandals, and a pickle bottle embody his memories of home. The pickle bottle first appears in the novel when the arbab throws

Najeeb's bag carelessly into his truck at the airport. Najeeb worries that the pickle bottle might break from the impact (Benyamin49). The case was no different for Hakeem because pickle bottles are one of the 'customary' items in the luggage of any migrant who goes abroad from Kerala.

The film begins by depicting the house, family, and river in Karuvatta to introduce Najeeb's past and his attachment to nature and food. A sand miner with a house beside the river, Najeeb would get plenty of fresh fish and had a fine appetite for beef, mutton, and other food. When his mother and Sainu prepare special food like chips and pickles for him to take to the Gulf, his mother tells Sainu that Najeeb would not need those because he would have mutton biriyani at his new job. They were unaware of the significance of the pickle they were packing, which would be preserved by Najeeb for many years and later serve as the embodiment of Sainu's love and mother's affection—a presence of an absent home in the barren lands of the Arabian desert.

A broken button that fell off Najeeb's shirt figures as a recurring motif in the film to emphasize the bond between Najeeb and Sainu and serve as a reified medium of memory that plays a significant role in Najeeb's survival. The bag and clothes are other tangible symbols that connect him to the memories of home. He uses the bag and clothes as a makeshift bed during those challenging days when he lies on the sand without a bed or cot, deprived of sleep and rest. Each time he catches sight of his bag, clothing, button, or pickle, memories of the days with his family and homeland flood his mind. Not only inanimate objects but also sensory triggers at the masara, such as smells, sounds, and the presence of living animals and people other than the arbab, evoke memories of deep emotional gravity. Najeeb relives his past through memories when he sees the men who bring water and grass to the masara, meets Hakeem and Ibrahim Khadiri, reads the message written on a piece of paper sent by Hakeem, and talks to the goats by calling them the names of people he knew. He resigns to his fate where he finds no escape from the hands of the arbab and the abysmal vortex of the desert; "I neither bothered about yesterdays nor worried about tomorrows. I just focused on managing the todays" (Benyamin96).

The strange environment, unfamiliar language, cruel arbab, the death of the coworker, lack of food, water, and shelter, the presence of animals, and the implausibility of return make Najeeb fearful and vulnerable, traumatizing him, unlike the usual nostalgia migrants feel for their home country and past. In an attempt to survive and distract himself from committing suicide, he "takes refuge in the memories of the past from the potentially traumatizing encounter with the present" (Hage417). As Najeeb becomes accustomed to the routine at the masara, he gradually reduces the time he spends rewinding his past. The subsequent narrative of the novel and the film reflects this mental and physical shift, emphasizing his 'goat life' over his memories. However, unable to completely disregard the memories of his home, he handpicks moments of his past life that centre on certain objects and places

to mull over. The pickle bottle, button, bag, and names written on the vehicle enumerate such objectified memories.

Migration, Nostalgia, and Pickled Memories

Migrants who preserve their home country's culture and experience nostalgia in their destination countries "recreate a small part of their home 'out of place' through culinary practices" (Parveen52). Nostalgia—"a memory of a past experience imagined from the standpoint of the present to be homely" (Hage420)—helps migrants overcome the difficulties associated with cultural dislocation, offer a feeling of attachment to their homeland, and preserve their sense of self and collective identity through sharing collective memories. As an outcome of the physical and mental translocation, the nostalgia they encounter also turns out to be "a bodily experience, often prompted by sensory data (a particular smell or taste) and producing physical effects (depression, illness)" (Farrar278).

Individuals create and sustain memories through their interactions with the five sensory modalities. Although each sense serves a distinct function in these processes, the olfactory system plays a significant role in keeping memories vivid for an extended period. As olfactory information is processed in the place where the brain regulates one's emotions, "memory, emotion, and smell frequently seem to be interrelated" (Hawkes and Doty 33). Smells can "elicit strong positive or negative emotions toward the source of the smell in order to induce the appropriate behavior" (Keller172). The brain, stimulated by the olfactory system, vividly reproduces past experiences and transports individuals back to those moments more effectively than memories associated with sight. This is crucial in retrieving Najeeb's flashbacks and transporting him to Sainu because even a single drop of water without a particular shape, colour, smell, or taste brings back memories of his home.

Food, as an essential medium of contact between human beings (Appadurai495), has a multifaceted connection with memory. Each variety of food item carries different geographical, climatic, economic, linguistic, religious, and political significance as a cultural product, and it serves as both an "intellectual and emotional anchor" (Mannur12) and "a vehicle for recollections of childhood and family" (Holtzman367). Food with collective memories and personal attachments provides "an intimation of an imagined homely experience in the past, an experience of 'back home'" (Hage421). While eating *khubus*—a breadlike food made from wheat common in Middle Eastern countries—with irresistible hunger, Najeeb remembers, with great sadness, pain, and feeling of loss, the time he spent with his wife and mother cooking and having food together. The presence of a foreign food, *khubus*, replaces the absence of homely food, making him miss his past life and find the present to be intolerable. Food is thus a medium to preserve, recollect, and restore these memories and longings for home through its taste, scent, and visual appeal, fulfilling material, symbolic, and functional purposes.

In Najeeb's case, the pickle he brought from home becomes the *Lieux de Memoire* and a signifier of personal memories. Nora's concept of *Lieux de Memoire* (sites of memory), which preserves, commemorates, and transfers the past to future generations, includes both tangible and intangible sites and practices, such as cemeteries, museums, festivals, archives, rituals, and cultural practices. According to Nora, *Lieux de Memoire* are "simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial," directly experienced through our senses, and subject to complex conceptualisation as sites in three distinct senses: "material, symbolic, and functional" (18). The pickle also serves as a memory site, materially and symbolically, especially in diasporic communities, where food replaces the physical and psychological hunger of returning home.

Pickles are food preserved in vinegar or brine for future use, and "they are a food of great emperors and the poorest of peasants" (Davison13). Despite pickles' primary purpose of preserving nutritious food for out-of-season use, their unique taste and quality make them popular throughout all seasons. Indians have been using pickles for several thousand years, and they are an inevitable part of most Indian cuisines. Pickles figure prominently in the Malayali gastronomic sensibility by simultaneously preserving love and sustenance during short and long-term absences from home. Moreover, pickle memories have always been a part of Grandma's stories, often invoking nostalgia through their narration of the pickling process and the fond memories attached to it. Similarly, the multisensorial appeal of pickle is explored in literature, film, music, and art as well, which in turn stimulate the taste and memory buds of the audience. Pickles are integral to Malayali lives because they influence their culinary, cultural, personal, collective, ethnic, and diasporic lives. True to this long-practised tradition, the pickle bottles made it into the baggage of dreams of Najeeb and Hakeem, too.

Najeeb worries that his memory will gradually fade away if he fully adapts to that environment and condition. He keeps her memories in the pickle bottle, "safely inside the bag to hang on to Sainu's warmth and smell" (Benyamin 184) without letting any microbes of forgetfulness enter, adding the vinegar of grief and the brine of pain. He guards his bag and pickle bottle like a museum of emotions, even as he sleeps in the sand and runs with aching feet during his escape.

I was alone. My bag was my pillow. It had the scent of pickle. Suddenly, I recalled the people at home, Ummah, Sainu, our son (daughter) who grew inside her. They must be troubled not having heard of my safe arrival. I felt miserable. My heart felt like it was about to burst. (Benyamin85)

On the day of the escape, Najeeb consumes the last piece left in the pickle bottle. At that moment, he understands that he does not have to live in the past again because a future awaits him. He then discards the burden of memories and enters the excitement of escape by embracing his 'new dress' from the bag.



Figure 1: Najeeb (Prithviraj Sukumaran) with the pickle bottle, Blessy (dir.), *Aatujeevitham*, 2024. India. © Visual Romance.

Najeeb's fervent attachment to the pickle bottle stems from the aromatic spices and herbs in pickle recipes, which offer a unique combination of flavours—sour, sweet, and salty, stimulating both the sense of smell and taste buds. This sensory experience, along with the visual and tactile, activates memory sites in the brain, enhancing his emotional connection to the pickle. Besides being a culinary delight, the scent triggers powerful emotions and memories of belonging. Similarly, Najeeb talks of the pungent smell of the masara from goats' urine, droppings, hay, and milk; 'if I had ever experienced a similar stink before, it was in a circus tent' (Benyamin128). Initially, he struggles to adjust to the strange, stinging odour, but he gets accustomed to it, mastering the ability to distinguish the scent of each animal and anticipate their biological conditions. He narrates:

Pregnant goats had a certain smell; goats about to give birth had another. Based on that smell, I was even able to calculate a goat's date of delivery. The newborns had a particular smell different from that of older lambs. [...] One day, I developed a craving to write a letter to Sainu. (Benyamin128)

The scent of the pregnant goat brings forgotten memories of his pregnant wife and generates "powerful feelings of reality and presence (i.e. as if one were here)" (Stevenson 159). Similarly, when the Pakistani driver brings fodder, he feels "a shiver of satisfaction passing through" as he can touch and smell a human being after a long time (Benyamin126). The olfactory system serves as an instrument to bridge the gap between the lonely masara life and the colourful Karuvatta life, proving that memories are both personal and collective.

The collective memory of home, family, mother, and home town reiterates his sense of belonging and solidarity within the social group in which he existed in the past. The dilemmas that

haunt him every day; his constant worry and concern over his pregnant wife, his financial commitments, and the uncertain future of his wife and unborn child, are the result of his collective memory as a member of the community. Collective memory, as per Maurice Halbwachs, is a shared memory of past events, morals, narrations, and images of a specific group that is multiple and distinct at the same time (171). The mental anguish he experiences upon realizing his inability to fulfil his social responsibilities, which he internalizes from collective memory, outweighs the physical pain he endures at the masara. His affection and treatment towards the newborn lamb, whom he calls Nabeel and considers his son, exemplifies his nature as a family man. Najeeb believes that god will grant Sainu and his son their rightful reward at home (Benyamin109). He preserves and reproduces the memories of shared experiences with his community, perpetuating a sense of his identity ‘through them, as by a continual relationship’ (Halbwachs47).

In one instance in the film, the arbab strikes him down when he attempts to find an escape by asking for help from the driver who brings water and other essentials to the masara. Lying unconscious, the sound of the water flowing in the sand transports Najeeb to a dream realm that slowly transitions into a past memory of his life with Sainu in the early days of their marriage, reflecting his longing for her and the pain he experiences.

En manamagumivennmannalaageninnchiriyamilaveyilalayilminni

(My mind, like white sand, lit by the sunshine of your smile) (Rahman)

Aadhyaraavindhaahaminnummarridathormmayil

(Thirst of the first night, still in memory, unforgettably)

The song illustrates how Najeeb recreates and redefines his life in the dunes by merging and trans-shifting the familiar (hometown) with the unfamiliar (desert), comparing his life to the sand dunes and memories of her smile to the gleaming sun. These shots serve as pertinent examples of how migrants like Najeeb have sought asylum in the ‘flashbulb memories’ to protect themselves from the miseries of exile life. Flashbulb memories are “the consequences of the very exact and detailed recollection of extraordinary events,” which are “accompanied by strong emotions,” causing a high impact on the individual psyche (Keszei816, 808). As a diaspora individual, his mind oscillates between flashbacks and the present, becoming a translated migrant from present to past. However, classifying these emotional states as typical experiences of displaced individuals is not appropriate, as Najeeb does not belong to an expatriate community in the conventional sense of the term. There are many instances where Najeeb discerns that brooding over his past always creates more grief and trauma for him and affects his work and existence at the masara.

Now only my sad new world existed for me. I am condemned to the conditions of this world. I have fallen headlong into the anxieties of it, and it is better to identify with the

here and now. That was the only way to somehow survive. Otherwise, my growing anxieties would have killed me or my sorrows drowned me. Maybe this was how everyone who got trapped here survived, no? (Benyamin95)



Figure 2: Najeeb (Prithviraj Sukumaran) with Sainu (Amala Paul), Blessy (dir.), *Aatujeevitham*, 2024. India. © Visual Romance.

A button that fell off his shirt connects him to Sainu's memories, emphasizing how much he misses her. It was a button Sainu accidentally pulled off while hearing the sound of firecrackers on the first day of their wedding, which Najeeb later uses to tease her with. While the song 'Ninne Kinavu Kanum' illustrates the role of the button visually, showing the bond between Najeeb and Sainu, the song 'Periyone Rahmane' vividly describes the significance of her memories in sustaining his life in the desert through its lyrics.

Aattakkiliyudenokkumparachilumpunchiriyumkochunukkazhiyum

Aaishqintenjekkuvilakkinvelichamanulinniruttarayil

Aa kannintethumbathethulliyannudekhalbinmarupparambil (Rahman)

(The sparrow's glance, talk, smile, dimple

And her love's lantern illuminate my lonely darkness

Her tears wet my desert-like-heart)

Her presence, the light of her memories, keeps him alive amidst the darkness of the desert. If the trauma of being alone in the strange desert had made him psychic and erased his memory, he would not have survived.



Figure 3: Najeeb (Prithviraj Sukumaran) with a button, Blessy (dir.), *Aatujeevitham*, 2024. India. © Visual Romance.

Even though he sustains and recollects his personal memories through the bag, pickle bottle, button, and Nabeel, it was not enough to satisfy his need for social life and community building. He builds a new community—a community of goats—by giving them names of familiar people as a solution to the loneliness and alienation he undergoes at the masara. The names he gives to the goats, such as Nabeel, Razia, Kausu, Marymaimuna, Ravuthar, Ramani and Raghavan, are representative of the real community in Karuvatta, where he is also a member. He attributes unique qualities to each of them—the distinguishing factors of real individuals in Karuvatta, like *aravu* (the butcher) Ravuthar, *pochakkari* (the grass collector) Ramani, and *njandu* (the crab) Raghavan—which differentiate one from the other. As a member of his private community at the masara, “each of them was dear to [him] in one way or another,” and he named them not only by observing their faces but also by “relating their names to some character traits, their gait, the sounds they made, by incidents that reminded [him] of them” (Benyamin161). This ‘artificial’ community, which includes the representatives of the local people, political figures, and popular actors, plays a crucial role in sustaining Najeeb’s life at the masara and mitigating the trauma inflicted by his nostalgia.

I kept talking to them as if I were talking to dear ones when I walked them, milked them, filled their containers and gave them fodder. I poured out my tears, pains, sufferings, emotions and dreams. [...] I shared with not only my sorrows and pains, but also my body. (Benyamin167)

In the absence of any and all technology to contact his family or even a photograph of his wife and mother, this exercise becomes a means through which he mentally connects with home and communal life.



Figure 4: Najeeb (Prithviraj Sukumaran) with goats, Blessy (dir.), *Aatujeevitham*, 2024. India. © Visual Romance.

While caring for the animals and adapting to the changing seasons of the desert, Najeeb often forgets to take care of his body. He is unperturbed by his deteriorating health from lack of food, water, rest, and love. He does not realize that as time goes on he is transforming physically as well. It shocks him when he sees his face in the mirror of a vehicle and meets Hakeem as a lean, scary man after a long time—reflecting his body in the mirror and the self in Hakeem. He says, “I had not looked in a mirror since I had entered the desert. If I had, I might not have been able to recognize myself as well” (Benyamin137). For migrants, memory plays a crucial role in shaping the future, but in “certain pathological situations that memory becomes a form of entrenchment in the past,” as in Najeeb’s case (Hage419).

Numerous cinematic techniques aid in recreating reality, facilitating the transfer of history, actual events, and memories from written historical records and books to the medium of film (Classen and Wachter89; Radstone81, 330). As a film deeply entrenched in the protagonist’s physical and psychological evolution, *Aatujeevitham* employs different techniques to vividly depict Najeeb’s experiences and memories. In some parts of the film, the director retains the non-linearity of the novel’s narrative but incorporates more events at Karuvatta to foster emotional attachment with the character and introduce his family background. The director focuses on Najeeb’s physical and emotional transformation, portraying how memories are pertinent to Najeeb’s survival and escape from the desert. Cinematic techniques, such as merging the past and present with fade-in and fade-out effects, symbolic visuals like Sainu’s face covered with sand, slow motion, dissolving visuals of

floating on a river and lying on the desert, long shots of the barren desert and zoom shots of pickle bottle and button, are employed to capture the audience's attention to Najeeb's memories. AR Rahman's music and Resul Pookutty's background score also intensify emotional depth, establish different moods for Najeeb's past and present, and enhance the audience's connection to the film.



Figure 5: Najeeb (Prithviraj Sukumaran) with Sainu (Amala Paul), Blessy (dir.), *Aatujeevitham*, 2024. India. © Visual Romance.

These cinematic techniques, coupled with Prithviraj Sukumaran's (Najeeb) acting, transform the movie into a medium that documents the less-visualized perspectives of the Gulf migrants' lives and a prosthetic memory of Najeeb's experiences. Prosthetic memory, in Alison Landsberg's words, is the memory that "emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theatre or museum" (Landsberg2). They have the potential to influence that person's subjectivity, even though they are "implanted memories" because they "do not come from a person's lived experience" (Landsberg175). Realistic films like *Aatujeevitham*, which is "indistinguishable from lived experience has the potential to create long-lasting 'memories' with the capacity to remould identity" of the spectators, especially those who have directly or indirectly undergone the difficulties of displacement and alienation (Radstone334). *Aatujeevitham*, therefore, is an example of the prosthetic memory of the life many Indian migrants experience in the Gulf.

Conclusion

The concretisation of abstract concepts, ideas, and memories is fundamental to the human mind and is responsible for human society's existence, cohesion, growth, and historicisation. Objectification of things that do not have a physical existence enables the human senses to perceive them and the human mind to understand them more effectively. Such objectification of emotions is crucial in the life of Najeeb, who had to live like a slave in a place where the language, landscape, food, and climate were drastically different. This paper posits that the pickle bottles, bags, buttons, and goats are reified

memories of the wife, mother, and homeland that aided Najeeb to break free from the isolation of his miserable life at the masara.

This study infers that the major factors that influenced Najeeb to migrate to the Gulf were his economic condition and the social pressure of the 1990s when Gulf migration was transforming Kerala economically, socially, and culturally. At the masara, Najeeb undergoes two types of displacement—first, as a migrant who left his homeland for the Gulf, and second, as a human being stranded among goats and camels despite being in a region inhabited by thousands of Malayalis and other Indians. The novel *Aatujeevitham* and its film adaptation very realistically depict Najeeb’s miserable life at the masara, where he dreams of a golden watch, tape recorder, and gold necklace, just like any other Malayali from that era. Although the story can be divided into three parts: Najeeb’s past, his survival in the desert, and his escape from the masara, both the novel and the film emphasize the visualisation of Najeeb’s memories and escape through nonlinear narration. Within days of reaching the masara, he realizes that he will never be able to escape, and his wife, mother, home, countrymen, and Gulf dreams, which were his lived reality, suddenly turn into fantasies and memories. Later, as Najeeb tries to adjust to the life at the masara, his past starts to drift away from him. In order to get through the barbarous life, meeting only the basic physiological needs, preservation of his memories was imperative. The only way to do so was to externalize his memories through objects such as the pickle Sainu gave him, filled with love and care. As Najeeb smells and tastes the pickle bottle, memories of his home and Sainu rush in. Not only pickles but also the bag, button, food, clothes, and even the names of goats related to his country, home, and household are reified memories that stimulate Najeeb’s mind.

Through reified memories, Najeeb is able to retain his past as an individual and a member of society. Using various cinematic techniques, the movie brings his experiences to the audience in a realistic way, portraying Gulf life as the audience has never experienced before. By presenting an unprecedented perspective on migration, the film becomes an example of a reified memory of Najeeb and any expatriate who suffers in a foreign land.

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