

# Plight of Democracy in Middle East: A Study of the Twin Novels Al Arabian Novel Factory and Jasmine Days

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*Abstract The objective of this paper is to attempt an analysis of the impact of power by the authorities of the Middle Eastern country which has been explained in the twin novels called Al Arabian Novel Factory and Jasmin Days written by Benyamin. Both these novels deal with the contemporary life in an unnamed Arab country in the backdrop of Arab Spring in the Middle East. Benyamin presents, in these novels, the impact of the revolutions in the Arab world, the internal conflicts of Sunni and Shia Muslims and how these issues fall apart the happy world of the people. This paper explores how the people of an unnamed Arab country lacks their representation in the politics and how democracy becomes a farce when the entire power has been vested in one person.*

*Key words: Power, Arab Spring, Revolution, Democracy, Sunni-Shia conflict, Middle East, Expatriate*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Jasmine Days and Al Arabian Novel Factory are the twin novels of the Malayalam writer Benyamin originally written in Malayalam. Both the books were Published in Malayalam in the year 2014. Jasmine Days is the translated name of the original work entitled as Mullapoo Niramulla Pakalukal. It was translated in to English and published in 2018 as Jasmine Days by Shahanaz Habib. These books portray a similar issue described by two unique individuals from a similar spot however, in alternate points of view. This twin marvel is interconnected, and at the same time, both of these are novels that give a chance to read freely. Al Arabian Novel Factory gives an outlook for contemporary life in Arab world. In this novel author gives an idea that the time for conventional method of writing a novel within an enclosed space is over. Therefore, now a day each novel is like a factory product. Hence, the protagonist of the novel named Pratap, an expatriate Indian, is part of a factory which produces novels out of the collective contribution of a group of people. As a result, he becomes one of the members of a research team for a famous writer and reaches to an anonymous Arab Country. The country's name is not revealed in the novel to avoid controversies. In the team of research for the novel there were three other people along with Pratap. They were the people from three different countries. One was a man from Britain named Edwin. The second one was a man from Pakistan named Riyas and the third one was an Indian named Vinod.

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They witnessed several instances of the brutal attempts of the government to suppress the revolutionaries. As part of their research they conducted meetings with individuals who participated in the protest, the public servants who were forced to do the orders of the government, and the foreigners who don't want to get indulge in the issues of the country. The novel progress through these characters. The novel Jasmine Days is presented as a novel within a novel by providing inner cover page for the book with dedications and publisher's details which confuses us about the authorship of the book. In the inner cover page, the book is titled as A Spring Without Fragrance by Sameera Parvin, and in the end section of the novel titled 'Translator's note' Benyamin explains the circumstance which made him to translate this work. This is a new method of narration which allows a meta narrative reading of the text. In the novel, Al Arabian Novel Factory, Jasmine Days is mentioned as a banned novel in the country. Jasmine Days conveys the story of a young Pakistani immigrant named Sameera Parvin. She comes to an un named Middle Eastern city as Radio Jockey. In the city, she was living with her father and relatives who all are settled in the country from decades before. The men of the family were the officials of the Police department of the country. In the beginning of this novel author explains the diasporic issues of Sameera who was immigrated to a new place for job and living. But gradually she got fit in to the new place. She excels in her job and becomes the dearest one of all in the family. But the emergence of the revolution against change of totalitarian rule of the ruler of the country made her life deteriorated. Sameera and her family got entangled in the political issues of the country. One of themovements of protest caused the death of her father by her companion and lover Ali. This made her relatives to have a hatred against her. As a result, Jasmine Days becomes a tragic story of a young lady in a city where the assurance of protests turns to destruction. Arab Spring, which is the background for both the novels were a series of protest democracy that occurred in several Muslim countries, including Tunisia, Morocco, Syria, Libya, Egypt and Bahrain. The initiation for the series of revolts was in the spring of 2011. The Arab Spring is a series of protests, that ultimately resulted in the change of rule in the certain countries of Middle East. Arab Spring was started in Tunisia due to the suicide of a Street vendor named Mohammed Bouazizi. He put fire on himself as a protest against the harassment from Police officials who had seized his vegetable stand and shut down his business. This sacrificial incident led to the birth of Arab Spring or Jasmine revolution in Tunisia. This revolution made serious



impact in the administration of the country which made the authoritarian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to step down from his position, and then he left to Saudi Arabia. This incident became a motivation for the activists of other countries as they also wish for the change of totalitarian regime in their nation. Protests in Bahrain, Egypt and Tahrir Square uprisings in Cairo are the notable revolutions of Arab Spring. But in some cases the revolutions resulted into Civil wars as evidenced in the countries of Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Both the novels Jasmine Days and Al Arabian Novel Factory apparently seems to be the depiction of the arrogance of power by the government upon their subjects, and the revolts of the people to attain freedom over the tyranny of their ruler.

## II. OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

The important objectives of this research paper

1. To find out the instances of the exploitation of the people in both the novels
2. To understand the reason for the fall of Democracy in Middle East
3. To bring out the reason for the rise and fall of the revolutions

## III. HYPOTHESIS

The hypothesis of this research paper is that people of the country is in fail to overcome the tyranny, and the dictatorship of their ruler due to the internal conflicts of Sunni and Shia community, and it will be the reason for the fall of Democracy in the city of Middle East mentioned in the novels Jasmine Days and Al Arabian Novel Factory.

## IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Methodology that has been used in this research paper is a case study of both the novels Al Arabian Novel Factory and Jasmine Days by deeply analyzing the conflicts of the subjects of an Arab country within themselves and with the ruler of the country called The Majesty. An exploration about the uprisings and the cause for the Arab Revolutions in Middle East available in the print and online sources are referred for this research.

## V. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Both the novels Al Arabian Novel Factory and Jasmine Days are comparatively under explored novels in the field of research. Certain websites had published the review articles of both the novels. The issues of power and democracy in Middle East is a well explored topic in research. JSTOR had published a journal article titled "The Limits of Democracy in the Middle East: The Case of Jordan".

## VI. ANALYSIS AND MAJOR FINDINGS

The events in Benyamin's novels brings out the massive protests by Shia residents against the Sunni monarchy. In the beginning, the revolution was to bring democracy in the country and to make a change in the rule. Therefore, all the people of the country participated in the protest, jointly. The novel explains that: There were no religious symbols in those protests. There were no photos of imams or sheiks and no slogans in their support. The only flags were the national

flag and the white flag of the peace. Some Maulav is would come to the Square to give speeches. But so did Politicians, human right workers, communists and social activists. They all had the freedom to give speeches and many organizations had put up their tents there. No single leader could claim to represent all protesters. But the anti-government protest quickly turned into a sectarian protest. Or perhaps it was portrayed like that and pushed in that direction. What was protest by the people against the injustice of His Majesty turned into a protest by Shia against Sunnis. Soon there was a feeling that Sunnis would have to fight for their lives, that if the majority came to power, the Sunni minority would be persecuted. As that fear grew, The Sunnis decided to betray the protests and help defeat it (Benyamin, Jasmine days 166-67). As a result, Shia community, even though the majority of the total population of the country, became the secondary citizens of the country. They denied the right to acquire good job, they were not permitted to visit foreign countries as they don't have passports. They were not even considered as the citizens of the country. This was due to the false belief that Shia were the inhabitants of Iran. so, they were considered as expatriates in the country mentioned in the novels. But they have actually roots in the country from centuries. There were also people, who tried to suppress the Shia community to please the Government and the Majesty. Social media played a significant role facilitating communication and interaction among participants of political protests. Protesters made use of social media sites to coordinate the demonstrations that support and opposes the government, and circulate information about their activities to propagate local and global awareness of ongoing events. There is a chapter in the novel, Jasmine Days called 'Facebook' which substantiate the role of Social media in the situation of protest. Social media Web sites Facebook, Twitter and Google Buzz took part a significant role in the revolution. During the extremity of protest people used Social media for communication. They shared important news, conveyed the status and expressed the comments (See figure 1).

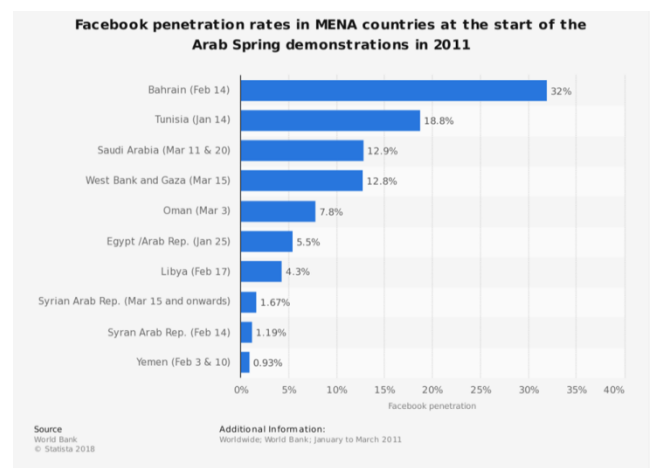
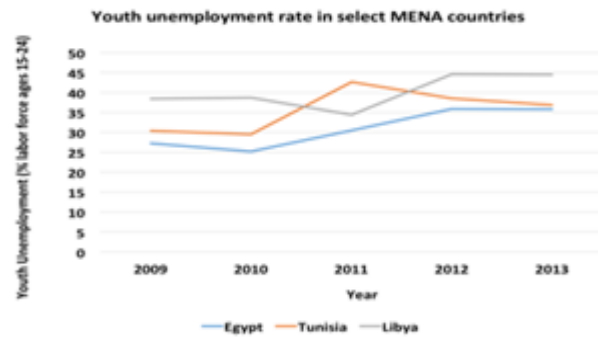


Figure 1. Facebook penetration rates in MENA countries at the start of the Arab Spring demonstrations in 2011. Graph from Statista. Web.13 May 2019. n. pag. The above graph shows the role of Facebook for the coordination and the beginning of revolutionary



acts in the Arab Spring demonstrations between January and March 2011, by country. In the novel *Al Arabian Novel Factory*, we can see the protagonist Pratap and his fellow researchers several attempts of protest by the revolutionaries of the city against their Majesty, the ruler of the country. The revolutionary acts became a habit of the native men of the city. When Pratap and his friends Bijumon and Raju travelled through the road they happened to witness an explosion in the road that: On the way to the restaurant, we got caught in traffic. Several police vehicles stood ahead, their lights are flashing. Fire engines with blaring alarms were driving down the side walk to cut through the traffic. I thought there must have been an accident. Though Bijumon and Raju told me not to, I got out of the car, unable to tamp down my news hound curiosity, further up, after a few vehicles, I saw fire on the street. Maybe a car had caught fire? But when I got closer, I saw that a pile of tyres was blocking the road and had been set on fire. The police were trying to put out the fire. At the same time, lit torches were being hurled at the police from behind a nearby wall. I felt my own eyes suddenly tear up and ran back to the car. Consider this as local Arab custom... This is how they celebrate their weekends. Some fire on the streets, some tear gas bombs. Maybe a few bullets to go around. On the most weekends, a couple of them will get slaughtered. The next day, the corps will get a grand burial. That's how they live ("The City: An Excerpt from *Al-Arabian Novel Factory - Ilanot Review*"). From the above quotes we get the primary idea about the condition of the country in which the law and order is broken and the revolutionaries are fearless of the police and authorities. Because they are ready to do whatever to disturb their government. But at the same time, the expatriates of the countries were happy with the ruling of the king because the country from the peripheral view is very beautiful with all the amenities and facilities like first world countries. There are so many people from other countries who work here and acquire money. The government also encourages the expatriates to work for the country. As a result, the government imported men from other countries to work in the police department. Taya and Baba as Eldest uncle and father of Sameera Parvin in *Jasmine days* is an example for the people who continued to work as policemen from decades in the city. Here we can see that the duty to maintain the Law and order of a country is given to expatriates. This was actually done not to save the country from outside intruders but to protect the Majesty from his People. This is because the expatriate workers were paid less than compared to the native workers. Because of this, the natives became unemployed (See figure 2).



**Figure 2. The rate of unemployment in MENA countries during the period of Arab Spring, 2009-2013. Graph from Michael Gordon, Wilson Center, 15 Feb. 2018. Web. 14 May 2019. n. pag.**

The above graph is the representation of the rate of unemployment during revolutions. Poverty and unemployment are the important reasons for the native Arabs to revolt against their government. The natives even made use of the expatriate workers in the medical field and hospitals. To bargain with the government, the revolutionaries made these people as prisoners. This was to make an international pressure upon Majesty to resign from his position. They converted a portion of the hospital including a ward, laboratories, mortuary and the operation theatre to store weapons. They used the blood stored in the blood bank and poured it in the places of protests to create a terror. The doctors who joined in the protest, instead of saving the wounded people they deteriorated their minor injuries into major wounds and used deadly medicines to make it unable to be healed. Thus they purposefully created martyrs from people who could have been saved. They did it not to their enemies but to their own people so as to convey to the world as all these cruelties were done by the Majesty and his military force (Benjamin, *Al Arabian* 185). The above mentioned instance of the novel signifies the circumstance of anarchy in the city. In both the novels *Al Arabian Novel Factory* and *Jasmine Days* Benjamin has done a vivid description about democracy in the Middle East by depicting its evolution and decline. In the Middle East, religion has an important role in democracy. By considering the example of the Iran revolution we get the idea that: During the period of revolution the communists of the world considered it as the victory of democracy. Later it came to be revealed as the drama of religion. The first president of the country couldn't rule the country for at least two years. By the pressure of the Imams of the country the Parliament impeached him and was ordered for his arrest and he escaped from the country in the attire of a woman (Benjamin, *Al Arabian* 65-66). This incident shows the very shameful and embarrassing end for a revolution. The important political party from Iraq and Syria called the Arab socialist party Ba'ath was originated from exact precautions and ideology outside the religion. Its constitution was formed out of democratic laws of France and Turkey. One of the founders of it called Muhammad Aflaq's book entitled *On the Way of Resurrection* provided the idea for the name of the Party Ba'ath which means renaissance. The significant policy of this party was that to put



forward Arab Power and to give priority for socialism and nationalism. When this party came to power both in Iraq and Syria, there was a thought about the merging of both the countries. Ba'ath's ideologies were accepted all over the Arab World and there were followers for it. It also had branches in Jordan, Libya, Yemen and also in the other Arab countries. For a very short time period Egypt and Iraq joined together and a dream country called United Arab Republic was formed. It ended on Sept. 28, 1961, when Syria, following a military coup, declared itself independent of Egypt. Despite the dissolution of the union, Egypt retained the name United Arab Republic until 2 Sept. 1971, when it took the name Arab Republic of Egypt. It was the greed for power by the leaders caused the reason for the fall of faith in the Ba'ath party. It was a socialist party during Saddam Hussein and Bashayar and gradually it became movement of dictatorship. The reasons for the existence of dictatorship in Middle East was mainly because of four reasons. That are as follows:

1. The Middle East countries doesn't have the stability to withstand the first impact of Democracy.
2. These societies are not improved up to the level to wisely use the rights of Democracy.
3. Their mind set haven't been grown well to present new Political rules.
4. They haven't rise up to the expectation of the people in the field of economic prosperity.

Even though the city in the novels seemed to be a developed country with luxurious buildings and facilities, the city also has another face of poverty stricken streets, roads and huts. But each of these huts were decorated with the colorful pictures of His Majesty. This was not because of the admiration of people upon Majesty but to admit that they support their government. The developmental programs of the country are taken as a personal business by Majesty. For that he took loans from banks of the country with lesser interest rates and gave the work for the companies in which he owns share and he takes the profit that was deserved for the poor. So what all developmental activities that had been done on the city was for the personal needs of him. The condition of education in the Middle East countries are far behind other countries of the world. This can be substantiated from the words of Abdul Nabi, one of the character in the novel Al Arabian Novel Factory who had been expelled from his job and started a restaurant. He tells that: People in this Middle east country are below the quality of employment of a Bengali in India. This is because of the worst quality of education especially in technical studies. The reason for the poor quality treatment in Hospitals are due to the poor quality of education that is available in medical colleges and Universities. The officials of top companies and banks are educated from other foreign countries. None of the universities from Middle east is included in the top five hundred universities of the world. The rulers only know to make big cakes of the world and to skyscraper tower buildings (Benyamin, Al Arabian 212-13).

This shows that the government doesn't pay attention to improve the quality of education and the progress of the country through. Thus, here in these novels we can see the misuse of Power by the Ruler, His Majesty. He had a very cruel, and devilish mindset. To satisfy the sexual needs of

him he chooses school going girls and boys. In his crazy sexual harassment leads to brutal injuries in the private parts of their body. Sometimes the children may die or will remain in the verge of death. The dead Children were buried in the desert, privately whereas the heavily injured children were sent back with some money for treatment and a bullet to safely keep both the bullet and this incident as a secret. He also finds sexual satisfaction when animals try to do sexual copulation with humans. This can be seen in the novel, Al Arabian Novel Factory when a nurse trampled Majesty's photo in front of the media, his commanders take her into his custody and brutally harasses her without any pity and at last she was made to be naked, and he himself jump upon her in way she trampled his photo and finally her weak body was made to do sex with a dog. All these abnormal dirty actions which freeze the conscience can only be done in an autocratic country where the democracy gets declined. Educated citizens. Sexual exploitations are the common punishment that are given to the female culprits who had done the crime of raising their voice against the autocracy of Majesty. This is what happened for the nurse who trampled Majesty's Photo and Ayath, a little girl of twelve years. Ayath's crime was that she wrote poems against Majesty and his rule and supported the revolution. She was both mentally and physically tortured so that she lost the power of her brain to restore thoughts and thus she became unable to write poems further.

## VII. FINDINGS

Jasmine Days and Al Arabian Novel Factory, both the novels deal with the subject matter of Power. The issues of authoritarianism and the protests for freedom, protests for the rights of woman, and the issues of expatriates are the major concerns of both the novels. Both the novels can be considered as clear cut political fables. In both these novels Benyamin offers an amazing picture of a dictator's attempt to remain in his fortune of power with the policy of divide and rule. Therefore, he injected caste, and class consciousness among the people which resulted in to Sunni-Shia conflict in the country. This resulted into deviation of the aim of revolution. Instead of overthrowing the dictator Majesty from the Power, the people began to battle among each other. The conflicts between the Sunni and Shia Community of the country made the situation which is easy to nurture autocracy and dictatorship by the ruler, the Majesty. Thus, the method of divide and rule benefited for the ruler as it reduced the number of opponents against the Majesty and his rule. Hence, the influence of the power of religion upon individuals has an important role in determining the politics of their country. Hence, the reason for the fall of democracy in the country is the lack of coordination between the citizens of the country. There autocracy rules over democracy.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

This research paper entitled "Plight of Democracy in Middle East: A Study of the Twin Novels Al Arabian Novel Factory and Jasmine Days" arrives to a conclusion that



both the novels are clear cut description of the anarchy and autocracy which is a serious issue of many of the Middle East countries. This paper gives us the awareness that the authorities of these countries closed the mouths of their people by giving food, shelter and even women by making them a happy life of slavery. But at the same time they denied them a professional and technical education facility for the commons to find their food by themselves and a higher standard of living. Because, they knew well that education will change their mind from slavery to revolutionary. But gradually people understood the exploitation of them by the authority, and thus they began to revolt for the change in Government. But the strategy of Majesty to divide the people based on the Sunni-Shia division, the revolution for democracy became a religious war. From this conclusion we can substantiate our hypothesis that the fall of Democracy in the Middle East is very much associated with the caste conflict of Sunni and Shia Muslim community in the country. Hence, this paper could find out the instances of the exploitation of the people by power in both the novels and to bring out the reason for the rise and fall of the revolutions. This paper also provides the scope for further advanced researches about the aftermath of Arab revolutions and uprisings of Jasmine Revolution in Middle East both for the natives and immigrants. There is also a scope for an exploration of the impact of Arab Spring in the Economy of Gulf nations and how it affected on other countries through their immigrant workers.

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