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**Forgotten Bodies, Lost Identities: The Visual Ontology of Migration in *The Goat Life* Film**

Unutulan Bedenler, Kaybolan Kimlikler: *Keçilerle Yaşam* Filminde Göçmenliğin Görsel Ontolojisi

Serap Sarıbaş<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *Aadujevitham: The Goat Life* stands as a striking cinematic portrayal that reconsiders contemporary migration narratives through the expressive capacities of visual storytelling. Adapted from the eponymous novel by Benyamin, the film recounts the harrowing experience of Najeeb, a Malayali migrant who, after arriving in Saudi Arabia with hopes of economic stability, finds himself enslaved as a goat herder under inhumane conditions. This study explores how the film constructs themes such as forced migration, spatial isolation, corporeal exploitation, and ontological erasure, while examining how the migrant subject's disintegration is rendered through visual aesthetics. The vast emptiness of the desert operates as a metaphor for physical and existential exile, while silence, animalistic coexistence, and the erosion of speech render identity dissolution both visible and affectively tangible. Migration is represented not merely as a sociopolitical rupture but as a profound ontological severance. Within this cinematic space, the migrant body becomes an object of estrangement, and survival transforms into a metaphysical ordeal. The narrative reframes migration as a collapse of memory, a crisis of belonging, and a silencing of language. Transposed from literature to screen, this story questions how migrant experiences are shaped and mediated by visual culture. Through the lens's unflinching gaze, *The Goat Life* renders the unspeakable dimensions of migration visible, crafting a poetics of silence that resonates beyond the screen. Ultimately, the film unveils not only the dissolution of an individual self but also the structural silencing embedded in transnational labor exploitation across the global visual imaginary.

**Öz:** *Aadujevitham: Keçilerle Yaşam (The Goat Life)*, modern göç anlatılarını görsel anlatım olanaklarıyla irdeleyen çarpıcı bir sinema örneğidir. Benny Daniel'in (Benyamin) aynı adlı romanından sinemaya uyarlanan bu yapım, ekonomik beklentilerle Suudi Arabistan'a göç eden Najeeb'in insanlık dışı koşullarda bir keçi çobanı olarak çalıştırılması sürecinde yaşadığı kimlik kaybını ve yalnızlaşmayı konu edinir. Bu çalışma, filmin zorunlu göç, mekânsal tecrit, bedensel sömürü ve öznel silinme gibi temaları nasıl görsel olarak yapılandırdığını incelemekte; göçmen öznenin çöküşünü sinematografik imkânlarla nasıl temsil ettiğini sorgulamaktadır. Çölün sınırsız boşluğu, izolasyonun fiziksel karşılığı olarak sunulurken; sessizlik, hayvanlarla özdeşleştirilen yaşam biçimi ve iletişimsizlik, bireyin kimliğini yitirini estetik bir anlatı aracılığıyla görünür kılar. Göçmenliğin görünmeyen cehennemi, bu filmde sadece sosyal değil, ontolojik bir kopuş olarak temsil bulur. Göçmen bedeninin nesneleştirildiği bu sinemasal düzlemde, insanın hayatta kalma mücadelesi, sadece fiziksel değil aynı zamanda varoluşsal bir sınav olarak belirir. Filmdeki anlatı, göç deneyimini salt bir coğrafi hareketliliğin ötesine taşıyarak; hafızanın parçalanışı, aidiyetin imkânsızlığı ve dilin suskunluğu etrafında yeniden kurar. Bu bağlamda film, görsel hafızada yer eden her karede, göçün romantik bir ideal değil; sessiz, görünmeyen ve çoğu zaman kayda geçirilmemiş bir hayatta kalma savaşı olduğunu hatırlatır. Edebi metinden sinemaya aktarılan bu anlatı, aynı zamanda göç deneyimlerinin medya yoluyla nasıl biçimlendiğini ve temsil edildiğini sorgulama imkânı sunar. Kamera, insanın en çıplak hâlini acımasız bir dürüstlikle gözler önüne sererken, *Keçilerle Yaşam*, göçmenliğin 'konuşulamayan' boyutlarını sinema diliyle konuşur hâle getirerek sessizliğin poetikasını kurar. Bu anlatı, yalnızca bir bireyin kayboluşunu değil; ulusötesi emek sömürüsünün, görsel kültürde nasıl bastırıldığını da ifşa eder. Bu bağlamda *Keçilerle Yaşam*, bireysel trajedinin ötesinde, küresel düzlemde sessizleştirilen göçmen bedenlerin görsel bellekteki karşılığını araştıran güçlü bir anlatı olarak değerlendirilebilir.

<sup>1</sup> Doç. Dr. Karamanoglu Mehmetbey University, Faculty of Letters, [serapsaribas@kmu.edu.tr](mailto:serapsaribas@kmu.edu.tr), ORCID: 0000-0002-4079-8024.



## Introduction

In recent years, cinematic representations of migration have evolved beyond the conventional narratives of physical displacement, increasingly engaging with the ontological, psychological, and epistemic consequences of forced mobility. *The Goat Life* (2024), directed by Blessy and based on Benjamin's semi-autobiographical novel *Aadujeevitham*, exemplifies this paradigm shift by offering a visual ontology of modern enslavement, displacement, and identity dissolution. The film recounts the harrowing story of Najeeb, a Malayali man whose dream of financial stability in Saudi Arabia descends into a prolonged nightmare of bondage, silence, and dehumanization. Stripped of language and legality, his journey unfolds not so much as a tale of migration but as one of existential captivity, a cinematic rendering of what it means to live as a "bare life" subject beyond the protection of law or recognition of society.

What distinguishes *The Goat Life* from conventional migration dramas is its minimal dialogue, visceral visual palette, and near-monastic focus on the solitary body in suffering. The desert, in this regard, emerges not merely as a geographic backdrop but as a symbolic space of ontological emptiness. It evokes Edward Said's description of the desert in Orientalist imagination as a "timeless, featureless void,"<sup>1</sup> but here, that void becomes the terrain of modern slavery and the erasure of subjectivity.<sup>2</sup> Najeeb's silence is not metaphorical but literal: the film presents long sequences devoid of speech, in which the migrant body becomes the only communicative medium. Such silences resonate with Laura Marks's notion of "haptic visuality," whereby cinema engages the viewer's sensory perception beyond mere optical input.<sup>3</sup> The reduction of Najeeb to a laboring body aligns hauntingly with Giorgio Agamben's notion of homo sacer, a figure who can be killed but not sacrificed, existing outside the juridical-political order.<sup>4</sup> Deprived of language, citizenship, and community, Najeeb survives as a creature of biological function: eating, herding, enduring. The employer's violence, the absence of institutional mediation, and the systemic denial of rights place him in what Achille Mbembe terms the "necropolitical" zone, where sovereignty manifests as the power to expose the subject to death.<sup>5</sup> This framework renders *The Goat Life* not merely a story of labor exploitation, but a meditation on the very limits of being.

Moreover, the film's exploration of memory functions as both a psychological refuge and a resistance strategy. Najeeb's inner life, recalled through fragmented visions of home, water, and familial affection, becomes the locus of his remaining agency. These scenes evoke what Marianne Hirsch calls "postmemory": the inherited or recreated memory of a trauma not directly experienced in linear time but revisited as an ongoing affective burden.<sup>6</sup> Although Najeeb's recollections are personal rather than intergenerational, they operate in analogous ways: as phantasmatic anchors holding the self together against a tide of forgetting and obliteration. Importantly, the film's refusal to aestheticize suffering distances it from Western cinematic tropes of redemptive migration. There is no triumph in *The Goat Life*; there is only endurance. The film's ethical potency resides in its anti-spectacular aesthetics: the camera does not romanticize Najeeb's pain but insists on the viewer's uncomfortable proximity to it. This refusal aligns with Susan Sontag's critique of the commodification of suffering in visual media, which warns against reducing atrocity to aesthetic consumption.<sup>7</sup> *The Goat Life*, by contrast, transforms the screen into a site of ethical witnessing, a silent indictment of global labor systems that normalize invisibility, dispossession, and servitude. In sum, *The Goat Life* functions not merely as a narrative of migration, but as a philosophical inquiry into what remains of the human when all else is stripped away.

## Constructing the Cinematic Topography of Forced Migration in *The Goat Life*

Contemporary visual narratives of forced migration often fail to account for the lived experience of immobility and entrapment that defines the lives of many undocumented or unfree laborers. In contrast, *The Goat Life* (2024) does not depict migration as a journey or a transitional space, but as a condition of indefinite suspension, a life without movement, recognition, or time. Through its spatial aesthetics and narrative construction, the film produces a uniquely claustrophobic vision of migration, one in which the subject is dislocated from geography, legality, and personhood simultaneously. The film's early sequences contrast sharply with what follows. Najeeb's departure from Kerala is captured with a lyrical tenderness: handheld camerawork, lush mise-en-scène, and close-ups of his affectionate farewells convey a tactile connection to land, language, and community. The use of local soundscapes, rustling trees, distant temple bells, village chatter, forms what Chion terms "empathetic sound," reinforcing the emotional texture of belonging.<sup>8</sup> This is abruptly severed upon his arrival in the Gulf, where sound becomes dissonant or disappears entirely,

<sup>2</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 166.

<sup>3</sup> Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 144.

<sup>4</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 83, 85.

<sup>5</sup> Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics", *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11, 40.

<sup>6</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 22.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 70, 75.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 8, 12.



replaced by industrial hums, engine noise, and windswept silence. The sonic shift is more than environmental, it is ontological.

From the moment Najeeb's passport is confiscated and he is shoved into the back of a truck, the narrative disavows any sense of agency. The transition from airport to desert is filmed as a discontinuous fragment: sudden cuts, blurred motion, and low angles convey disorientation. This aesthetic of rupture recalls Gilles Deleuze's notion of the "time-image," where continuity dissolves and the viewer is forced to confront pure temporality without action.<sup>9</sup> Here, action is not merely suspended; it is made impossible. The desert is not merely a backdrop; it is a character, a regime of control. The camera frequently frames Najeeb from an overhead angle, emphasizing his smallness within the topography. Wide-angle shots erase the horizon, rendering orientation impossible. The absence of coordinates mirrors his legal and social invisibility. The very space he occupies is undefined: no maps, no borders, no signs of nationhood. Michel Agier calls such spaces "zones of indistinction," where people are excluded from both the law and the city.<sup>10</sup> *The Goat Life* situates Najeeb precisely in such a space, a desert where he becomes administratively dead yet biologically alive.

Significantly, the labor he is forced to perform, herding goats, carrying heavy tins of water across miles of burning sand, is depicted through durational aesthetics. Scenes linger far beyond narrative necessity, capturing the sheer repetition of bodily exertion. In one sequence, the camera follows Najeeb's footsteps across the sand in real time as he makes his way to a dried-out well, only to find no water. The scene takes nearly four uninterrupted minutes. There is no music, no cut, no speech, only breath and dust. This prolonged exposure does not build suspense; it builds fatigue. The viewer is drawn into what Bachelard would call "slow time," where temporality stretches into oppressive repetition.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the architectural structure of the compound reinforces the theme of spatial enclosure. Unlike traditional prisons, the desert contains no bars, but the structure is no less carceral. The goats' pen and Najeeb's sleeping area are barely distinguishable. The employer's home is inaccessible, and the only enclosed space, the storehouse, remains locked. This reflects what Foucault described as "disciplinary architecture," where control is maintained not through chains but through spatial partitioning and surveillance.<sup>12</sup> Yet, in this case, surveillance is minimal because resistance is already unthinkable; the geography itself is the prison.

The visual parallels between Najeeb and the goats are recurrent and intentional. In multiple scenes, the film cross-cuts between Najeeb eating and the goats feeding. Both are shown chewing in silence, from the same angle, lit with the same golden wash of the desert sun. In one particularly harrowing moment, Najeeb urinates beside a trough where goats drink, and the act is not marked by shame or reaction, only routine. Such moments embody the literal animalization of the migrant subject, not as metaphor, but as cinematic equivalence. The film thus pushes the viewer to recognize the radical disposability of certain lives under global capitalism, echoing Judith Butler's assertion that not all lives are equally grievable.<sup>13</sup> Near the midpoint of the film, there is a moment of near-escape when Najeeb stares across a distant ridge and sees a truck passing far away. The camera cuts to his expression: a flicker of hope, quickly extinguished. Instead of running, he turns back to the goats. The moment is telling, not only of his fear, but of a psychological internalization of captivity. He no longer perceives the possibility of agency. As Fanon wrote, "The colonized subject is always presumed guilty. His dream of flight is treated as insubordination."<sup>14</sup> In this frame, even desire becomes treasonous. This interiorization is compounded by the absence of language. Najeeb speaks rarely, and never in extended conversation. Even his inner monologue is reduced to brief murmurs or breathy invocations of home. The muteness becomes a representational choice: the migrant is not simply unheard, he is unspeakable. Language, as a vehicle for subjectivity, dissolves. The result is a cinematic world where identity is not only suppressed but unmade.

### Isolation as Cinematic Logic: Silence, Surveillance, and the Deconstruction of Migrant Space

In *The Goat Life*, isolation is not depicted merely as a contingent effect of migration, but as the ontological architecture upon which the migrant experience is constructed. The film utilizes silence, asymmetrical visual framing, and spatial repetition not only to evoke emotional desolation, but to instantiate isolation as a systemic condition, one that transcends narrative and becomes a form of cinematic grammar. This section analyzes how *The Goat Life* deploys visual and auditory minimalism to produce a discursive space of non-being, in which the migrant subject is not simply alienated but structurally erased. The film's most dominant formal strategy is its use of radical silence, not as absence, but as a tool of discipline. Unlike in classical narrative cinema, where silence marks suspense or emotional weight, here it is used

<sup>9</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 41, 45.

<sup>10</sup> Michel Agier, *Managing the Undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 92, 93.

<sup>11</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Dialectic of Duration*, trans. Mary McAllester Jones (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000), 33, 36.

<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977), 141, 147.

<sup>13</sup> Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 25.

<sup>14</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 16.



to indicate ontological degradation. In multiple sequences, such as when Najeeb attempts to speak after weeks of muteness and fails to articulate a single word, silence becomes physiologically embodied. The cough, rather than any verbal articulation, becomes his first sound. This moment exemplifies Michel Foucault's proposition that silence may function as "an effect of power exercised over bodies, not merely a cultural sign."<sup>15</sup> In this regard, *The Goat Life* performs what one may call biopolitical muting, a cinematic transformation of the body into a regulated, speechless vessel of labor.

The film simultaneously constructs a regime of asymmetrical visibility, wherein the migrant is subjected to observation without reciprocity. Surveillance in *The Goat Life* is ambient, sporadic, and spectral. The employer's gaze is rarely visible but constantly implied. He appears at the edges of frames, partially silhouetted or refracted through heat or dust. Najeeb, by contrast, is always fully exposed, centered, sharply focused, and open to scrutiny. This asymmetry echoes John Tagg's analysis of visual regimes in disciplinary modernity, where the subject is rendered "legible to power, yet denied legibility to self."<sup>16</sup> Najeeb is therefore not a subject of vision, but an object within a visual system that prioritizes control over recognition.

Despite the open vastness of the desert setting, the spatial logic of the film operates according to what Marc Augé terms non-place, a site devoid of relational, historical, or personal significance.<sup>17</sup> In *The Goat Life*, all spaces, whether interior (storeroom, sleeping quarters) or exterior (sand dunes, animal pens), are rendered functionally identical in terms of access, agency, and orientation. Notably, doors and enclosures appear throughout the film, yet Najeeb is never granted full entry. The employer's house, the storeroom, and even the water tanks remain physically present but symbolically unattainable, enforcing what Henri Lefebvre would call spatial alienation through the denial of place.<sup>18</sup> The desert thus becomes a paradoxical prison: open but uninhabitable, borderless but impenetrable. Spatial collapse is accompanied by the eradication of temporality. There are no markers of civic time, no clocks, calendars, religious festivals, or state rituals. Najeeb's futile attempt to record passing days by scratching marks onto a stone wall is erased by a sandstorm, a visual metaphor for the obliteration of lived duration. Giorgio Agamben's notion of the state of exception, in which legal time is suspended and the subject is rendered bare life, is cinematically realized here.<sup>19</sup> Najeeb lives, but outside of history, progress, or consequence. Migration, in this schema, is not a journey across borders but a transition into temporal invisibility.

Even scenes of displacement within the desert are rendered in non-progressive visual form. When Najeeb is moved to a new herding location, the *mise-en-scène* remains identical: the color palette, spatial layout, and labor rhythm do not change. The viewer is offered movement without transformation, what Lefebvre would classify as "spatial repetition under abstract labor conditions."<sup>20</sup> Such aesthetic circularity aligns with the psychological dimension of captivity: over time, Najeeb ceases to expect escape or novelty. As Frantz Fanon asserts, the colonized subject internalizes repetition as natural law, ceasing to perceive his condition as contingent.<sup>21</sup> Unlike many migration films that resolve with acts of agency or catharsis, *The Goat Life* refuses to aestheticize liberation. When Najeeb finally escapes, the film offers no triumphant score, no symbolic rebirth. His movement is anti-epic: he simply walks away, unspectacularly. This narrative gesture is crucial. By resisting redemptive resolution, the film critiques the spectacularization of suffering, what Susan Sontag called the "pornography of pain."<sup>22</sup> The desert is not a trial to be overcome but a structure that leaves permanent ontological injury.

### **The Transformation and Objectification of the Migrant Body in *The Goat Life***

The migrant body in *The Goat Life* is not simply a passive vessel enduring suffering; it is the central cinematic apparatus through which global regimes of labor exploitation, dispossession, and species-based hierarchy are visually and ideologically rendered. Over the course of the film, the protagonist Najeeb is gradually deprived of linguistic, political, and symbolic agency until his body is no longer human in the cultural or social sense, it is functionalized, commodified, and animalized. This chapter argues that the film constructs the migrant body not only as a target of systemic violence, but as an active site of ontological degradation that implicates broader structures of global labor, racialization, and species hierarchy.

<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 27.

<sup>16</sup> John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 62.

<sup>17</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995), 34.

<sup>18</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 286.

<sup>19</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 84.

<sup>20</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol. 2, trans. John Moore (London: Verso, 2002), 56.

<sup>21</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 16.

<sup>22</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 93.



The reduction of Najeeb to a laboring object begins at the moment of his arrival in the desert. He is offered no contract, no identity verification, no orientation, only a stick and a herd of goats. The camera stays close to his hands, tracking the movement of his limbs more than his facial expressions. As he begins to work under the blazing sun, his body is marked not by dignity, but by exhaustion, exposure, and function. This moment echoes Agamben's concept of homo sacer, in which a person exists only as a body to be used or discarded, situated outside the protection of law or recognition.<sup>23</sup> Najeeb is not seen as a person with a name or nation; he is valued only insofar as he produces. In a particularly symbolic sequence, Najeeb, too weak to stand, begins crawling on all fours to reach a water barrel. The scene is filmed with a low-angle dolly shot that mirrors the gaze used for animals, subtly aligning his status with that of the goats around him. There is no music, only the sound of wind and breath, reinforcing the somatic and degraded nature of his existence. In this moment, the viewer is denied sentimental distance: the body becomes not the object of sympathy, but the subject of biopolitical logistics.

As the film progresses, Najeeb's condition is not simply that of human suffering, it becomes one of species ambiguity. He shares his sleeping quarters with animals, eats the same food, and drinks from the same troughs. In one striking image, he chews dry grass as he crouches next to a goat doing the same. The composition offers visual symmetry, suggesting that the human-animal boundary has been obliterated by structural violence.

This aesthetic choice is not incidental. It engages directly with what Cary Wolfe identifies as the animalization of the laboring poor, whereby modernity's biopolitical regimes strip certain human populations of their full human status by aligning them with animality.<sup>24</sup> Through this representational lens, *The Goat Life* exposes how global labor systems not only dispossess workers of rights but redefine them as functionally sub-human. The soundscape reinforces this dissolution. Human dialogue disappears almost entirely during the middle stretch of the film; in its place, the bleating of goats and the clatter of hooves dominate the soundtrack. In one key sequence, Najeeb attempts to recite a prayer, but his voice is drowned out by the guttural cry of a camel. This auditory displacement functions as a metaphor for the muting of the migrant, whose cultural and spiritual identity is buried beneath the noise of the non-human environment in which he is embedded.

The migrant body in the film is not only stripped of its humanity but also subjected to capitalist logic of extraction and expendability. Najeeb is fed just enough to work, sheltered just enough to survive. In one powerful scene, he collapses from heatstroke while carrying a tin of water. The employer observes but does not intervene; instead, he waits silently until Najeeb regains consciousness. This absence of reaction encapsulates David Harvey's theorization of disposable labor, where human life is reduced to units of temporary utility.<sup>25</sup>

What is particularly significant in *The Goat Life* is that this economy of disposability is never dramatized with overt villainy. The employer is not presented as sadistic; rather, the violence is structural, banal, embedded in routine. This banality evokes Hannah Arendt's reflections on the "banality of evil," that cruelty does not always arrive in monstrous form, but often in the cold, bureaucratic management of bodies.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the film resists melodrama. There are no close-ups of tears, no elegiac music, no cutaways to symbolic imagery. Najeeb's body is depicted in long, static shots, where pain is not aestheticized but normalized. This refusal to stylize suffering functions as a political gesture, enacting what Susan Sontag calls an "ethics of witnessing" that resists the consumption of pain as spectacle.<sup>27</sup> The viewer is asked not to empathize through catharsis, but to observe and be implicated.

Perhaps the most devastating transformation in the film occurs not in the visible deterioration of Najeeb's body, but in the internalization of his own object status. Over time, his movements become mechanical, devoid of volition or reflexivity. In a symbolic sequence near the third act, he continues lifting a water tin even after it has been emptied, unaware that there is nothing left inside. The action is performed for the sake of performance itself, signifying the collapse of kinesthetic intentionality.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work on embodied consciousness suggests that subjectivity is rooted in one's orientation to space and purpose through the body.<sup>28</sup> In *The Goat Life*, this orientation is shattered. Najeeb no longer moves toward a goal; he merely circulates in labor's closed loop. His gestures are no longer expressions of will, but involuntary responses to routine, echoing Giorgio Agamben's description of the camp as the space "where the rule of law is

<sup>23</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 83.

<sup>24</sup> Cary Wolfe, *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 32, 35.

<sup>25</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 76, 77.

<sup>26</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 135.

<sup>27</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 91, 98.

<sup>28</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), 105, 106.



suspended, and the body is exposed to the pure force of repetition.”<sup>29</sup> The film visually communicates this condition through the recursive use of tracking shots and spatial choreography. Najeeb walks the same path dozens of times, and the camera reproduces the same angle and distance each time, underlining the collapse of narrative progression into ritualized endurance.

### **The Dissolution of Identity: The Loss of Language and the Silence of Memory in *The Goat Life***

The process of migration, particularly when structured through exploitative labor regimes, does not only produce spatial displacement, it generates a radical crisis of selfhood. In *The Goat Life*, Najeeb’s journey into the desert marks not simply a physical ordeal, but an existential unmaking. As the film unfolds, we observe the gradual erosion of the very foundations that constitute personal identity: language, memory, recognition, and relationality. This section analyzes how the film deploys silence and mnemonic fragmentation as cinematic strategies for representing the ontological disintegration of the migrant subject under conditions of captivity and dehumanization. Language in *The Goat Life* is inseparable from subjectivity. In the early scenes, Najeeb still speaks; he prays, remembers, and articulates fragmented thoughts that preserve a fragile continuity with his former sense of self. His voice carries emotional resonance, functioning as a lifeline to his past. However, once he enters the desert, his speech gradually disappears. There is no one to talk to, no social interaction, no linguistic exchange. Instead, Najeeb’s voice is gradually supplanted by involuntary and non-verbal utterances such as heavy breathing, coughing, sighs, groans, and sounds that lack grammatical structure or communicative intent. One particularly devastating moment occurs when Najeeb attempts to recite a verse from the Qur’an but stutters and fails to continue. He closes his eyes, his lips moving silently while the desert wind howls louder than his breath. Here, the film visualizes what Giorgio Agamben calls “the threshold between sound and sense,” the place where voice becomes pure sound, no longer embedded in logos.<sup>30</sup> This is not a mere loss of speech; it is the ontological breakdown of enunciation.

Furthermore, the muteness is not interpreted as trauma in need of healing; it is structural and enduring. As the viewer, we are offered no subtitle, no voice-over, no textual supplement. Silence is presented as complete. In this way, *The Goat Life* defies the Western narrative of testimony and catharsis, where trauma is ultimately rendered knowable through confession. Instead, the film suggests that some forms of suffering cannot be spoken, and that the migrant’s silence is a symptom of systemic untranslatability. As speech dissolves, memory too loses its coherency. In the film’s early phase, Najeeb’s flashbacks are fluid, sensorially vivid, and emotionally coherent. We see images of his wife brushing her hair, his child playing near a pond, the smell of rice being cooked, the rhythmic call to prayer echoing in the village square. These sequences are filmed in rich color with soft transitions, suggesting a continuity between past and present. However, as captivity deepens, these memories begin to fragment and fade. Later recollections appear in quick flashes, monochromatic, silent, and brief. They offer no full scene, no auditory depth, no spatial context. One memory consists only of a close-up of his wife’s hand in a gesture of farewell. Another is a rapid image of a wall painted green. The viewer cannot decipher these moments fully; they appear as mental afterimages, inaccessible to narrative interpretation.

This shift from linear memory to fragmented sensory residue reflects what Cathy Caruth calls “the trauma of survival,” in which memory is not recalled but re-lived in fragmented, belated form.<sup>31</sup> Najeeb does not remember his life before captivity, he is haunted by it. In this way, the past is not recuperative; it becomes another layer of his entrapment. The breakdown of memory culminates in a moment of total estrangement: Najeeb sees his reflection in a bucket of still water and is startled. The film lingers on this moment, allowing the audience to witness the full emotional disorientation. He touches his face, as if testing whether he still exists. This scene echoes Lacan’s mirror stage in reverse: rather than entering subjectivity through recognition, Najeeb experiences symbolic death through disidentification.

The film’s primary setting, the desert, is a space without history, reference, or inscription. It is, in Marc Augé’s terms, a non-place: a landscape that offers no cultural anchors, no communal markers, no symbolic depth.<sup>32</sup> There are no clocks, calendars, books, photographs, or artifacts to attach memory. The sand erases every footprint. The light never changes. Days bleed into nights in an indistinguishable repetition. This spatial monotony is not incidental; it is psychologically and narratively annihilating. As Michel de Certeau suggests, memory is not only temporal but spatial: it requires “paths, thresholds, and objects” to persist.<sup>33</sup> The desert’s refusal to offer such material coordinates results in the collapse of mnemonic continuity. Without spatial cues, time itself dissolves, and with it, the coherent construction of selfhood. Even

<sup>29</sup> Agamben, *State of Exception*, 48.

<sup>30</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen E. Pinkus and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 80, 81.

<sup>31</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 62, 66.

<sup>32</sup> Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, 63, 65.

<sup>33</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 108, 110.



religious ritual, which might otherwise serve as a mnemonic anchor, is inaccessible. In one scene, Najeeb prepares to pray, marking a line in the sand to indicate qibla. But a gust of wind wipes it away before he finishes the first verse. The ritual collapses, not because of disbelief, but because even memory's architecture cannot endure the eroding violence of the desert.

The final stage of identity dissolution in *The Goat Life* is not just linguistic or memorial, it is ontological. Najeeb no longer functions as a narrative subject. He does not grow, resolve, or recover. He merely endures. The film ends not with voice, but with continued muteness, denying the viewer any catharsis or resolution. Even the escape from captivity is marked by silence, no dialogue, no triumphant music, no explanatory montage. He walks across the screen, unannounced. This formal silence echoes Jean-Luc Nancy's argument that "being silent is not the absence of speech, but the exposure of speech's impossibility."<sup>34</sup> In *The Goat Life*, silence is not emptiness, it is the philosophical condition of a subject rendered illegible by the systems that consumed him. The migrant's silence, then, becomes a radical indictment: not of individual cruelty, but of structural forgetting.

### **From Text to Screen: Narrative Transfiguration and the Ethics of Media-Specific Storytelling in *The Goat Life***

The adaptation of Benyamin's *Aadujeevitham* into Blessy's cinematic vision in *The Goat Life* presents more than a simple translation of content from one medium to another. It stages a profound confrontation between two fundamentally different epistemologies of narration: the literary logic of verbal reflection and syntactic memory versus the cinematic logic of embodied perception, affective resonance, and sensorial immersion. This section argues that the shift from novel to film is not merely formal, but ontological, political, and ethical, redefining not only what can be shown and told but also what must remain unspeakable and unshown. In *Aadujeevitham*, the reader is enveloped by Najeeb's internal voice, a detailed and articulate monologue that guides the narrative across time, space, and affect. The novel opens in medias res, with Najeeb speaking retrospectively: "When I look back now, I do not see a desert; I see the shape of my own pain."<sup>35</sup> Through this framing, pain is named, contextualized, and linguistically stabilized. Language, as Roland Barthes would suggest, functions as a shield against the pure terror of the Real.<sup>36</sup>

In contrast, *The Goat Life* actively suppresses narrative voice. There is no framing voice-over, no retrospective mediation. Instead, what the audience encounters is pain as sensation, not reflection. The body speaks where words fail: cracked skin, shallow breathing, slow, staggered movement. This shift corresponds to Vivian Sobchack's theory of "the filmic body," where the spectator's engagement is not interpretive but corporeally empathetic.<sup>37</sup> In one unforgettable sequence, Najeeb kneels in the desert, his back arched in silent agony as goats move around him. The camera remains static. We are not told what he feels; instead, we are positioned to experience affect through his embodied presence, rather than through verbal or narrative cues. Benyamin's novel oscillates between flashbacks, internal recollection, and present-tense narration. This layered temporality constructs a linear restoration of memory, where the self is temporally fractured but ultimately unified through narration. The act of remembering becomes the act of surviving.<sup>38</sup> Blessy's adaptation resists this structure. In the film, time is not restored; it is dissolved. There are no clear temporal markers, no explanatory transitions. Days and nights collapse into a single extended present. Repetition replaces progression. This aesthetic structure aligns with Gilles Deleuze's "time-image" cinema, where narrative yields to optical and sonic blocks of time.<sup>39</sup> A paradigmatic example occurs when Najeeb carries water across a vast dune. The sequence lasts over three minutes with no cuts, no dialogue, and no musical cue. We do not know what day it is, how many times this has happened, or how close he is to his goal. The effect is not narrative tension, but experiential absorption into meaningless duration. This approach fundamentally alters the viewer's relationship to the story. In the novel, we know why each event occurs and where it leads. In the film, the viewer is immersed in a recursive temporal structure, a durational field in which narrative progression is suspended and closure is denied, reinforcing a sustained state of existential indeterminacy.

In the novel, memory functions as a restorative act. Even amid dehumanization, Najeeb constructs coherent memories of his wife, child, and home. These scenes are narrated with care and clarity, grounding the reader in a moral horizon of return.<sup>40</sup> In the film, however, memory appears only in disjointed fragments: a hand brushing a forehead, a monsoon

<sup>34</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 37.

<sup>35</sup> Aadujeevitham Benyamin, *Goat Days*, trans. Joseph Koyippally (Chennai: DC Books, 2008), 3.

<sup>36</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 66.

<sup>37</sup> Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 67, 68.

<sup>38</sup> Benyamin, *Aadujeevitham*, 115, 118.

<sup>39</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 39, 44.

<sup>40</sup> Benyamin, *Aadujeevitham*, 137, 140.



cloud, a laughing child, an empty bed. These images flash without explanation, sound, or sequence. They are not "recollections" but traumatic apparitions. He transitions from narrative memory to visual trace recalls Marianne Hirsch's distinction between memory and postmemory, the latter describing a form of inherited remembrance shaped less by factual recall than by affective proximity to a past one did not directly experience, involuntary, and non-narrative.<sup>41</sup> The disorientation is reinforced by the film's refusal to frame memory as redemptive. In one scene, Najeeb collapses in the desert and envisions his wife reaching for him. The scene ends not in comfort but in abrupt cutback to the sound of goats bleating. What initially appears as a mnemonic image function not as a site of recollection, but as a mechanism of entrapment that prevents narrative resolution and reinforces the unresolved status of traumatic memory. This structural cruelty redefines memory not as hope but as aesthetic haunting.

*Aadujeevitham* is deeply invested in bearing witness. The novel's central ethical project is testimonial: Najeeb survives in order to speak, and he speaks in order to indict. The novel ends with the possibility of healing, of voice reclaimed. Its moral trajectory aligns with a tradition of postcolonial life-writing, where the subaltern becomes legible through narration.<sup>42</sup> Blessy's film, by contrast, withholds testimony. There is no climactic confession, no courtroom, no audience within the diegesis. Even Najeeb's rescue is muted. He does not declare his return; he merely appears. In this way, the film enacts what Trinh T. Minh-ha calls "speaking nearby" rather than "speaking about," it gestures toward pain but refuses to resolve or represent it fully.<sup>43</sup> This withholding is not apolitical; it is a critique of the spectacular economy of suffering in global media, where pain is often aestheticized for viewer catharsis. By refusing narrative closure, *The Goat Life* affirms opacity as an ethical stance, suggesting that certain forms of pain resist articulation and that rendering them visible may risk aesthetic appropriation or epistemic violence.

What emerges from this comparison is a profound intermedial dissonance. Literature offers time for reflection, the power of articulation, and the construction of memory as narrative. Cinema, particularly as practiced by Blessy, offers none of this. It deals in absence, presence, repetition, and silence. Each medium stages a different relationship to pain, time, and voice. This dissonance should not be seen as failure, but as critical opening. In making Najeeb's voice disappear, the film does not betray the novel, it confronts us with the limits of adaptation, the impossibility of carrying verbal witness into visual form without loss. That loss, however, is itself meaningful. It is where the ethics of representation begins.

## Conclusion

*The Goat Life* is not merely a tale of survival, it is a cinematic meditation on the untranslatability of suffering, the fragility of memory, and the ontological disintegration of the migrant subject. Rather than conforming to the established tropes of the migration genre, the film unravels narrative expectations, suspends linguistic coherence, and confronts the viewer with a visual and affective grammar that resists articulation. It offers no triumph, no redemption, no explanatory arc, only silence, repetition, and the gradual erosion of the self. This refusal to narrate in conventional terms is not a failure of form but a deliberate ethical strategy. In eschewing the voice-over, in denying closure, and in withholding catharsis, *The Goat Life* asks: what does it mean to represent a life that has been structurally devalued? How does one translate the lived experience of voicelessness into a medium defined by expression? The film's answer is radical: it does not attempt to restore voice but to embody its absence. It reconfigures the cinematic frame into a space where pain is not spoken but performed, where memory is not recalled but fractured, and where identity is not resolved but disassembled.

At the center of this disassembly is the migrant body. Najeeb's corporeal presence, marked by exhaustion, enforced silence, and a gradual reduction to bare biological function, emerges as the central locus of meaning within a representational system that withholds political recognition and renders him unintelligible as a speaking subject. His body is not a metaphor; it is a medium through which the violence of invisibility is materialized. The camera does not seek to dignify him through heroic angles or romanticized imagery. Instead, it lingers on the unremarkable: feet dragging across sand, eyes blinking into wind, hands trembling underweight. This durational aesthetic draws the viewer into a temporal loop where each gesture becomes a reiteration of abandonment, a repetition of dispossession. Time in the film does not advance in a linear trajectory; instead, it enters a suspended state that disrupts temporal continuity and resists narrative progression. There is no linear progress, no clear delineation of days or nights, no narrative tension toward resolution. The film constructs a space where time collapses into sensation, into the heaviness of heat, thirst, and solitude. This flattening of temporality is crucial: it captures the migrant not as a figure in motion, but as a subject trapped in the

<sup>41</sup> Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, 22, 25.

<sup>42</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 180, 183.

<sup>43</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 90, 91.



inertia of structural entrapment. The desert, in this context, functions not merely as a physical backdrop but as a metaphysical space of erasure, an expanse rendered symbolically void, detached from historical continuity and resistant to human inscription, reflecting Orientalist constructions of the desert as a timeless and featureless void. It functions as a void where memory cannot take root and identity cannot hold.

In the absence of speech and story, the film turns to silence as its principal narrative force. But this is not an empty silence, it is textured, layered, and profoundly expressive. It is the silence of abandonment, of erasure, of lives lived without witness. And yet, this very silence becomes the film's mode of ethical engagement. By refusing to fill the silence with exposition or sentimentality, *The Goat Life* prevents the audience from consuming pain as entertainment. Instead, it holds the viewer within the discomfort of the unspoken, demanding not empathy but recognition of a world in which certain bodies are rendered mute not by accident but by design.

The film's aesthetics of non-resolution also perform a critique of testimonial culture. In many migration narratives, suffering is redeemed through storytelling, the survivor speaks, and through this act of speech, reclaims agency. But *The Goat Life* dismantles this framework. It suggests that some wounds cannot be verbalized, some traumas resist narrative closure. Najeeb's journey does not culminate in a declaration, a trial, or a reconciliation. His return to Kerala is presented without dialogue, without audience, without affirmation. He walks into the frame not as a restored self, but as a being permanently altered by exposure to a world that refused to see him. In this way, *The Goat Life* challenges both cinematic conventions and ethical presumptions. It resists the demand to make pain meaningful, to turn suffering into symbol, to aestheticize loss. Instead, it allows loss to remain what it is: unresolved, unspoken, and absolute. The film does not translate the migrant experience into narrative clarity, it renders it opaque, and in doing so, protects it from appropriation. It reminds us that the deepest forms of violence are not always loud, not always visible, and not always narratable. Sometimes, they are endured in silence, in repetition, in the body's slow deterioration beneath an indifferent sky.

Ultimately, this study has argued that *The Goat Life* redefines the cinematic ontology of migration. It does not portray the migrant as a traveler between borders, but as a figure suspended between speech and silence, history and stasis, memory and erasure. Through its rigorous visual minimalism and ethical opacity, the film exposes the viewer to the psychic and physical costs of living outside legibility. In doing so, it contributes not just to the cinema of migration, but to the broader discourse on what it means to represent the unrepresentable, to narrate the unspeakable, and to witness without possession. What *The Goat Life* ultimately reveals is that some stories are not told to be understood, they are told so that we may learn how not to look away.

## Extended Abstract

This article offers a comprehensive philosophical and cinematic inquiry into *The Goat Life* (2024), Blessy's adaptation of Benyamin's semi-autobiographical novel *Aadujeevitham*, situating the film as a paradigmatic example of how migration can be represented not through conventional narrative devices but through visual minimalism, bodily endurance, and ontological suspension. The study approaches the film not as a straightforward depiction of exile, captivity, or physical hardship, but as a meditation on the radical loss of voice, self, memory, and symbolic legibility that defines the migrant condition within late-modern regimes of labor, surveillance, and silence. In this context, *The Goat Life* does not merely tell a story, it dismantles the very structures through which stories are usually told.

This paper engages with a range of interdisciplinary frameworks including biopolitics, posthumanist theory, trauma studies, cinematic phenomenology, and media aesthetics to examine how the film deliberately avoids verbal exposition and emotional dramatization. Instead, it adopts a durational aesthetic grounded in silence and repetition, privileging sensory affect over narrative resolution. The protagonist Najeeb, abducted and forced into desert servitude, is progressively stripped of speech, memory, and subjectivity. The desert itself functions not as a backdrop but as a non-place, a mnemonic void and temporal vacuum that actively erodes his identity. Here, spatial collapse becomes temporal dissolution, and silence emerges not as the absence of voice but as the primary language of ontological degradation.

The first analytical section investigates how the film constructs isolation as a total system, architectural, epistemological, and sensory, through mise-en-scène, ambient sound design, and spatial choreography. Surveillance, animality, and routine become mechanisms of control that render the migrant body both visible and voiceless. The second section traces the objectification and instrumentalization of Najeeb's body, demonstrating how he is gradually transformed from a narrating subject into a mere apparatus of labor, aligned with the goats he tends and rendered indistinguishable from the non-human. These readings engage with post-Foucauldian theories of bodily governance and bare life.



Subsequent sections delve into the film's deconstruction of language and memory. Unlike the novel, where Najeeb's interior monologue provides continuity and redemption, the film fractures speech and recollection into traumatic flashes and corporeal rhythms, challenging the testimonial structure typically associated with migration narratives. Flashbacks do not function narratively but disruptively, surfacing as involuntary visual ruptures that haunt rather than integrate. The inability to speak, to remember, or to recognize oneself becomes not a symptom of trauma, but a new ontological condition, the condition of being no longer recognizable to oneself or to others, suspended between the human and the inhuman.

A key contribution of this study lies in its media-specific analysis. The paper interrogates the intermedial dissonance between Benyamin's novel and Blessy's film. While the novel relies on verbal articulation, internal consciousness, and temporally layered memory, the film chooses cinematic opacity, resisting adaptation as translation. Instead of preserving narrative fidelity, the film enacts a shift in epistemological mode: from verbal to visual, from logical to sensorial, from narrative to event. This cinematic language privileges repetition over resolution, presence over progression, silence over statement.

The conclusion argues that *The Goat Life* refuses to represent the migrant experience in a form that can be easily consumed, empathized with, or resolved. By denying the viewer catharsis, closure, or explanation, the film stages what this paper terms an "aesthetics of structural witness", a mode of viewing that confronts the viewer with the irreducible opacity of forced migration as lived suffering. Rather than portraying the migrant as a heroic survivor or a political subject, the film renders him as a mute signifier of global precarity, subject to disappearance not only from geography and citizenship but from history, narration, and memory itself. This cinematic refusal to humanize or narrativize the migrant figure operates as a form of epistemic resistance, undermining the narrative conventions through which suffering is typically aestheticized. In doing so, the film aligns itself with a counter-visibility that challenges the ethics of representation in contemporary migration discourse. Ultimately, *The Goat Life* insists not on recognition or redemption, but on sustaining the discomfort of witnessing that remains ethically unresolved.

This extended analysis ultimately posits that *The Goat Life* radically reframes the cinematic ontology of migration by rejecting representational transparency. It constructs a grammar of suffering that does not rely on voice, plot, or image in any conventional sense, but instead compels the viewer to witness what remains when those categories collapse. In doing so, the film becomes not only a work of art but an ethical proposition, inviting scholars, critics, and audiences to rethink what it means to see, to hear, and to remember those lives that the global order would rather forget. Rather than offering representation as redemption, the film mobilizes absence, stillness, and incompleteness as modes of epistemological rupture. In this refusal to resolve, *The Goat Life* performs a cinematic ethics that is as politically urgent as it is formally experimental.

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