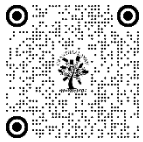


TRANSGENDER SURVIVAL AND ADVERSITY IN JEET THAYIL'S NARCOPOLIS

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ABSTRACT

The transgender identity within the Narcopolis environment presents a complex dynamic marked by profound challenges. Transgender individuals navigating these settings face heightened vulnerabilities due to the prevalence of substance abuse, crime, and societal marginalization. Despite adversities, their resilience manifests in various forms, including community support networks, personal strength in the face of discrimination, activism for rights and resources, and innovative contributions to culture. Thayil presents the haunting reality of the life of marginalized and oppressed individuals. Thayil's debut novel, becoming a voice for the voiceless, this paper explores his rendition of how people survive in the margins, concealed mainly from critical scrutiny.

Keywords: Transgender, Discrimination, Suppression, Marginalization, violence



1. INTRODUCTION

In Narcopolis, Jeet Thayil brings forward the face of the city of Bombay, chiefly from the 1970s to 1990s. Narcopolis, which means the city of intoxication, where Thayil shifts all his characters and depicts how the identities of the drug addicts are affected. Thayil unravels spaces of slums, roads, sea, opium dens, and brothels and draws the story of humankind with all its rise and fall. The novel's uniqueness lies in its historical, cultural, political, psychological, and geographical aspects to understand changing social spaces and society. Bombay, which has been depicted as a doomed and ruined city, is the witness of countless paradigm-shifting narratives. A strong sense of disappointment, disillusionment, personal loss, pain, grief, regret, identity crisis, and wish for death is all pervasive in the whole novel. The novel powerfully explores the theme of identity and the impact of drug involvement, which shadows the identity of the individual in the vast scheme of drug dealing. Thayil weaves the narrative around the characters in a diverse and complex range.

Transgender is a broad term for people whose gender identity, expression, or behavior is different from those typically associated with their assigned sex at birth. Transgender persons are the ones who exhibit gender-variant behavior and roles in society. In the Indian context, they are rejected by their families and community, undergo extremely stressful experiences due to gender dysphoria, undergo childhood sexual abuse, bullying, and teasing, early discontinuation of schooling, lack of livelihood opportunities, forced marriage, being compelled to do sex work and begging for livelihood, financial and sexual exploitation by the partners, exploitation by police and public; they stay at

slums with poor living conditions, and they are ill-treated at healthcare centers. Transgender persons are the most visible and exploited sexual minorities in India. Further, transgender persons are at high risk for developing psychological distress and mental health issues such as depression, substance abuse, suicidal tendencies, and conduct disorders.

Narcopolis (2012) deals with the trauma of opium drug addicts. The corrupted social-political environment and poverty worked as a childhood trauma in the life of drug addicts. All the addicts at Rashid's Khana were into criminal activities. Rashid, Dimple, Rumi, painter Newton, and Salim all lived in poverty and were drug addicts, sexual perverts, and criminals. When Dom Ullis reached Khana, Dimple asked an unusual question: Why is it so that a person with a family, education, and money becomes an addict? The answer was unknown to him, and that's why he, a foreign-educated man, came to Khana for the drug. In *Narcopolis*, Dimple has dreams. Sometimes, it seems that dreams are flashbacks of her memories. She has dreams about having a wealthy family and a proper education. In dreams, she finds herself a happy and brilliant student. This dream signifies his childhood desires and repressions. She has dreams about a sexual act, which is like a night ghost, haunts her tremendously, and symbolizes her sexual repressions so deeply buried in her unconscious that in dreams themselves, she seeks sexual gratification and finds sublimation. She dreams about dead Mr. Lee and the splashing sound of water, sometimes with or without Mr. Lee. When Lee dies, he surrenders his belongings (an army dress and opium pipes) to Dimple, whom he treats as his daughter. He makes a promise that his ashes will be transported to China after death because, for him, it is a humiliation to die in a foreign city. She cannot fulfill his wishes. The ghost of Lee appears in dreams under the water to recall his last desire and to say that he is waiting in the water to speak to her again. Dimple wants to escape from the real world of drugs in Khana and bloodshed around outside. Dimple has been hanging between the dream world and the waking life, and both seem to be the same: full of guilt, powerlessness, and helplessness. If we analyze this dream further, it signifies that the deceased soul wants some help to alter life through his beloved one to complete his wish. It is a waking-up call. Dimple remains terrified and helpless. She is poor and powerless, and because of the curfew outside due to religious riots, she can't find a way to complete Mr. Lee's last wish. In dreams, Mr. Lee says that the spirits of dead people stay in the water until their final wishes are fulfilled. Mr. Lee reminds her of her duty as a daughter. She feels sorry not to send his ashes to China. She asks what she can do to get his forgiveness, and Lee says – "Smoke more Chemical" (189), and she does because she knows that she will die very soon. She leaves hope for living because there is no reason to make her happy. Sex and drugs have ruined her identity, and she feels that it is quite easier to meet Mr. Lee in the water in an altered life rather than make vain efforts to survive in this world. By reaching there, she will be free from all sins, all guilt, and from any gender identity.

Thayil uses dreams to reveal the trauma in the mental space of the characters and the events to be held in the future. Mr. Lee's dream, waiting for Dimple in the water, symbolizes Dimple's death. It also lets the reader enter a space beyond their physical and mental space, which assures life after death and makes readers believe that spirits and ghosts exist because they anticipate the future. So, it has been witnessed by the narrator, Dimple, and Rashid. Dimple also recited Mr. Lee's two quotes during her last days and received the same fate as Mr. Lee. She, too, was diagnosed with the same ailment and died because of opium.

This is the most complex and the last dream of her life. To see a girl having sex with clergy puts a question on morality, which society teaches us. It may symbolize Dimple's deepest desire to feel orgasm in waking life. The clergy is the symbol of God. To have sex with the clergy doesn't mean to do it in real life. Having sex can also symbolize a physical union. Thus, it may reflect her desire to have a union with God after death. It may be possible that the clergy simply replaced a man in her dream because she went to the church for prayer.

Dimple, a eunuch prostitute, has been castrated in childhood, living her life on drugs and sex. Her sexual dreams of seeking sexual identity symbolize the city's economic crisis, which seems like a dream city, a center city but a city of crisis. The poor or marginalized and 'the women who are sold and bought for five rupees' are invisible entities without names, papers, or families in the government record. The narrator presents an abstract idea to show sexual depravity, grotesqueness, frustration, and hopelessness in the life of drug addicts. As Dimple says:

I know something about love and how lovers want to consume and be consumed and disappear into each other. I know how they yearn to make two equal one and I know it can never be (11).

The story of this novel centers around a woman, Dimple, who is transgender and a drug addict. The narrative shifts to the past throwing light on Dimple's life as she is involved in the world of drugs and brothels. While working as a drug dealer in an opium den, Dimple meets many people. Some of them are artists and intellectuals who frequent opium dens to escape the harsh realities of life. Through Dimple's experiences, the novelist studies the marginalized existence of the

hijras and shows how they strive for acceptance in mainstream society. Dimple is faced with a bleak question as the first chapter opens. The narrator asks her if she is a man or a woman, and Thayil fills her answer with a high level of intellectual response. She says,

Women and men are words other people use, not me. I'm not sure what I am. Someday, I'm neither, or I'm nothing. On other days, I feel I'm both. But men and women are so different; how can one person be both? Isn't that what you're thinking? Well, I'm both, and I've learned some things, to my cost, the kind of thing you're better off not knowing if you mean to live in the world (11).

Narcopolis is the story of a ruined metropolis, Bombay, which can be mapped through the lanes full of garbage, debris, and open gutters to the slums of poverty, to the cages, cubicles, brothels, and inebriated opium dens which are the original, dark and ugly side of a doomed city which is ruled by glamour, power, and money. Thayil presents Bombay as a wasteland that cannot be seen or mapped in Bombay's cartography. This is the city where the identity of the people is known by their religion, not by profession. They believe in freedom of religion yet kill the people in the name of religion. It is a city of chaos and contrast. It is the city where thousands of people immigrate. They are crowded with people of different religions and cultures, but they are actually with no one. With them, they are deeply alone. They are nowhere, living for nothing and dying for nothing.

Thayil presents his psychopath character, painter Newton Xavier, who represents India, a city of chaos and violence. He is a drug addict and a sexual maniac lunatic, famous for Christ paintings that are chaotic, brutal, and more powerful than British painters. The paintings have a devastating effect on readers. The paintings present bloody, gory Christ and two pitiless nudes spread-eagled, which disturbs Dimple intensely. The details of the painting have an analogy with the background of the novel as later readers come to know about the bloodshed in the city in the name of religion. The nude paintings are an analogy to Dimple's life. Dimple's focus on the spread-eagled body and her silence after seeing it and her opinion about the painter that "he wants to make everything ugly, he wants to kill the world" (14) symbolizes her past when she has been castrated.

Dimple's efforts to add something more to her identity make her learn how to read and write because she is illiterate and does not want to be so in the future. She learns English by talking to her customers, and she starts identifying many words and phrases in the newspaper and film magazines. The following lines describe her passion to teach herself how to read and write:

She read in secret because she didn't like to be seen reading. She read the way an illiterate person reads. She liked to look at the covers and trace the title with a finger as if she was able to make sense of a line or a word, it gave her a thrill (12).

Dimple was born as a man, but she was castrated forcibly and was turned into a Hijra, and then she was forced to become a sex worker. She recounts the dreadful way in which she was castrated because her mother had to sell her due to poverty. Dimple recalls the event when she was castrated:

"A woman was called a famous Daima, Shantibai. There was singing and dancing and whisky. Daima told me to chant the goddess's name, and she gave me a red sari. She made me drink whisky. I hated the taste, but I drank it. They gave me opium. Then, four of them held me down. They used a piece of split bamboo on my penis and testicles and held me down. The bamboo was so tight I felt nothing until afterwards, when they poured hot oil on my wound. That was when I felt the pain ... would stop" (66-67).

This horrible incident scarred her for life. She became part of the hijra community and was compelled to act as a woman and a sex worker.

Though Dimple does not have any issues with being called a hijra, she prefers it rather than being called 'Eunuch', an English derivative,

"...a strange conversation that filled her with dismay because of the way he says the English word 'eunuch' as if to disparage her and women like her: he never used the word 'hijra'" (47).

Dimple works for Rashid, and her place in Rashid's life is restricted to being a "kaamwali," i.e., someone who provides sexual pleasure. She could never replace the common woman or wife. Thayil describes the difference between women as Dimple and women as wives,

Whereas his wives kept his home running, laundered his white shirts, and made his food the way he wanted. She, on the other hand, had no official standing. She could not bear children or cook: all she could provide was sex and conversation (190).

There are times when Dimple has this incredible desire to become part of the family. She wanted to know how it feels when one becomes a "wife,"

"She wondered if this was what it meant to be married, to be a wife. You were bored and irritated and comforted, all at the same time" (132).

Dimple has no choice but to act like a woman and tries her best to behave like a woman. She tries to look beautiful and even cares to protect her beauty. The novelist manifests this through the following lines;

"... she was protecting her complexion, a phrase she had learned from *Stardust Magazine*" (71).

Dimple does not get the acceptance in society that she would want to have. Even though Dimple did want to be a part of Rashid's family somewhere in her thoughts, she considers herself part of a *gharana*(family). Thayil raises questions on the possibilities of measurement of tolerance and endurance of transgender in his novel. Drugs like opium and other parallels contribute as a remedy to recover the everyday troubles of nights. Besides intoxication, 'forgetting' is a social process of frustration and suppression because all transgender people are sustaining their pain and suffocation inside their premises.

"She was learning to live with pain. It was always there, on her shoulders and her back. The opium reduced it to something manageable, but she woke with pain" (22).

It is essential to understand that the hijra identity transgresses the binaries of gender and offers an alternative space for individualism. It has the potential to stand outside of this binary and instead be in a state of gendered dimensionality that can occupy a different kind of gendering. Dimple, too, seems to feel comfortable by being beyond the definite binaries of genders. She said,

"And what is the truth? Whatever you want it to be. Men are women and women are men. Everybody's everything" (57).

In Dimple's case, we can see how fluid gender and sexualities are, as she could confirm or reject the heteronormative ideas of the social patriarchal order. Thayil shows how these hijras do not get proper medication in case they are sick and diseased. The doctor trespasses the doctrine ethic of his profession by treating Dimple untouchably. It is a highly hazardous situation for her,

The doctor wore glasses with gold frames, and he didn't actually examine her. He didn't touch her at all, not even to shake hands, as if he knew her, knew where she lived and what she did for a living and the exact amount of opium she took on a daily basis, and even if he made no moral judgment about her life, he had made a medical or personal judgment, which he had every right to (199).

Efforts to support transgender lives in *Narcopolis* involve creating safe spaces, providing access to healthcare, advocating for policies that protect transgender individuals, and addressing systemic issues that contribute to their marginalization. Understanding and compassion play a crucial role in supporting transgender individuals in such environments, acknowledging their unique challenges, and working towards inclusive and safer communities for everyone.

2. CONCLUSION

Jeet Thayil's evocative storytelling in *Narcopolis* serves as a poignant reflection on the multifaceted and enduring challenges experienced by transgender individuals, fostering awareness, empathy, and a call to action for positive societal change. Thayil unveils the systematic hurdles such as economic hardships, limited opportunities, healthcare inequities, vulnerability, violence, safety concerns, societal stigmatization, and cultural challenges faced by transgender individuals. Thayil skilfully depicts Dimple's experiences, illuminating the challenges and intricacies she faces as she attempts to navigate a society that frequently lacks comprehension and acceptance of those who are unique. While the conclusion does not provide a definitive resolution, it invites further reflection on more universal concerns, such as acceptance, identity, and the human condition in a diverse and occasionally harsh society.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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