

# TRAUMA OF DIMPLE, A TRANSGENDER, AS DEPICTED IN THE NOVEL NARCOPOLIS BY JEET THAYIL

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**ABSTRACT-** *The writers in Indian fiction have by and large deployed the transgenders to be one of the main characters of the stories. This is an important technique to give voice to the third-gendered population as they are considered as ostracized from the main stream society for their differential and scandalous status and role in the society. Writers like Khushwant Singh, Anosh Irani, Jeet Thayil, etc. have tried to show the world from transgendered people's lens to present a critique to the society which lets this minority group of people, who happen to be marginalized, live in shabby conditions on the peripheries of the society. This paper is an attempt to discuss the arena of old Bombay wherein opium dens were highly active and its impact on third-gendered people's life like that of Dimple who have been given the responsibility to put forward her view-points and judge the societal atrocities which are unfair and hypocrite in many ways.*

**Keywords:** Transgenders, Ostracized, Minority, Marginalized, Peripheries, Opium.

## I INTRODUCTION

Transgenders are the people who do not belong to the set up heteronormative rules in the society. This population puts a challenge to the old and down-trodden binary traditions of genders i.e. of male and female. The people who are considered as gender ambiguous become a part of this umbrella term of 'transgenders'.

India's rich heritage, varied and unique cultural background has always portrayed the involvement of third gendered people in the society. The Vedic texts like the *Natyashastra*, the *Kamasutra* etc. all possess the entity of an ambiguous gender which is different from both male and female gender and hence is considered as 'tritiya-prkriti'. Similarly, the Hindu relics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* also depict the gender variance of their heroes and other deities who, at many times, takes form of the other gender and thus depicting gender fluidity and depict the presence of homosexuality and ambiguousness of the gender. In the Hindu text of the *Ramayana*, the power granted to the third-gendered community, on Lord Ram's return from exile, stand as the basis of their livelihood to this day. Lord Ram granted them the power to bless people and that no new beginning shall remain untouched from their pious presence. This is what happens when all the new married couples and new born babies are being visited by the Hijra workers to bless them and earn their livelihoods by asking for 'shaguns' for their sustenance.

The Mughal period in India also saw the remarking stature of third-gendered people in the royal courts. They were appointed as chiefs, as the loyal guards of the queens and her palace, and even helped the emperors in

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decision-making. They were confidantes of the queens as well as the kings and rejoiced their livelihood with pride. The sudden decline and shift in their status happened with the invasion of British in India. British gentry took third-gendered people as untouchables and criminalised their presence in the society for the very sake of their 'differences'. This led to the discard of the third-gendered community which ultimately led them to leave the societies and settle down in ghettos in the peripheries of the societies where they couldn't be seen or heard. The differential treatment became so renounced that their stature didn't rise until so late.

The post-independent India led its journey in the path laid by British imperialists which proved as a challenge in the upliftment of this particular stratum of society. In the new India, the Colonized laws and ideology remained and thus giving less scope for transgender community to flourish. The main way of earning a livelihood for the people of this community is either begging, sex-work i.e. prostitution or collecting 'shaguns' from families.

## **II ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Jeet Thayil is a writer, poet and artist of Indian origin who received his education mostly abroad. His four books on poetry have been published before his debut novel, *Narcopolis* 2012, which became the prize-holder in the DSC Prize for South-Asian Literature and was nominated for Booker's Prize and other prestigious awards. (Lea, 2013) His collection of poetry under the name, *These Errors were Correct*, earned him a Sahitya Akademi Award for English in 2012.

## **III ISSUES FACED BY TRANSGENDER NARRATOR IN THE BOOK**

*Narcopolis*, the novel is set in 1970s and 80s in Bombay. The setting of the book, is of opium dens, is dark and grotesque in a way that it brings to light the issues faced by people who are living under the influence of opium. All sorts of people from rich, to poor, to marginalized, to gangsters, to prostitutes, etc are being taken under light to show that the misery of each and every drug-user is eminent irrespective of his status, caste or creed. The book gives an accurate insight and detailed picturesque view of the entire setting and it is so because it is believed that the writer was himself under the influence of opium for a long time and thus the novel depicts life-like names and characters from his own experiences thus giving to the novel an autobiographical element. Thayil himself stated that he wrote the novel:

"to create a kind of memorial, to inscribe certain names in stone. As one of the characters [in *Narcopolis*] says, it is only by repeating the names of the dead that we honour them. I wanted to honour the people I knew in the opium dens, the marginalised, the addicted and deranged, people who are routinely called the lowest of the low; and I wanted to make some record of a world that no longer exists, except within the pages of a book." (Ratnam, 2012)

The novel has been assigned a transgender narrator named Dimple, who is a Hijra and is a prostitute in the opium den run by Rashid who is a crude businessman but leads wary and gets caught up in his own web of opium and prostitution. Dimple was a hermaphrodite at birth i.e. she was born with sex organs of both genders and thus was given away, in shame and agony, by her parents to a priest who then sold her for a meagre amount

of money to a brothel owner. She has always felt different and considered herself to be a woman one day, a man the other. She explains her constant struggle with her gender-identity even when she got castrated to be a woman. She says: “woman and man are words other people use, not me. I’m not sure what I’m. Some days I’m neither, or I’m nothing. On other days I feel I’m both.” (Thayil, 2012:11) This struggle of not fitting into one’s own body and not be seen and accepted by their families is common and constant to all the transgender people who no matter how hard want to get relieved of it, are always caught up on by the ghost of reality. This reality has been described by Madhu, another transgender character who is over forty years of age, in the book *The Parcel* by Anosh Irani, says:

“It seemed to Madhu as if she had been running ever since she was a child. Trapped in the wrong body, she has felt the panic take over time and again; it still did, insistent as ever... for forty years she had lived inside this body. No matter how much she accepted who she was, she was still afraid. She was still angry. She still wanted answers.” (Irani, 2016: 151)

Dimple was also trapped in her body. She didn’t completely understand what her body or soul wanted. Hence, the struggle between the two compounds. The struggle is so fierce that it has been compared to wars between countries. “Each fights a personal battle—as one says, “Indo-Pak is *inside* us” (Roy, 2017:27).

When Dimple was eight years old, she was made to have an illicit and painful castration which was so painful that it haunted Dimple all throughout her life. As she grows up, she is forced into prostitution as she was sold to a brothel owner by the priest. The horrifying life of her as a prostitute doesn’t haunt her as much as the pain of castration does. No painkiller, no matter how strong it is, takes away her pain. Eventually, she meets Dr. Lee, who was a Chinese individual and he prescribes small dosages of opium to Dimple which ultimately makes her an addict of opium and the after-effects it brings.

Being a part time prostitute and then a part time worker at Opium den of Rashid, never does Dimple felt discouraged from studying further. Her main concern was personal growth and power that education inculcates in a person. Whenever she had time, she used to read books, magazines, articles, newspapers etc. and thus in the narrative, a lot of excerpts from different means have been used which were helpful or stood right for Dimple. “She is on an unending quest for learning and excellence. She has taught herself to communicate in English, and is teaching herself to peruse.” (Sharma, 2016:127)

Being a eunuch was no easy thing which she exclaims from time to time throughout the story. Eunuchs usually have deranged and troubled childhood. They are confused beings whose essence does not match with their being. They are at mercy of others for earning a livelihood for themselves and are exploited at various occasions. The families do not accept them, children and peers schools and other institutions rag them and pick on them whenever they get a chance, they are raped and harassed till they drop out, nobody wants to be friends with ‘weird’, ‘different’, and ‘grotesque’ looking people, etc. Not just that, carrying out a normal relationship is also problematic to the mainstream society. All such problems have been discussed by Dimple.

Dimple is a sweet, silent and intelligent character who understands the nitty gritty of the world. She says: “Women are more evolved biologically and emotionally... But they confuse sex and the spirit; they don’t separate. Men ... always separate: they separate their human and dog natures.” (Thayil 2012:12) Her simple yet wise understanding of life and world is what makes her apart. Dimple was a good friend and an escapist place to

Dr. Lee, who always confided in her for telling his story. “Mr. Lee’s sharp portrait of the horrors of a communist regime in the late 1940s does highlight his unusual friendship with Dimple, in whom he confides the story of his lost life and loves.” (Pius, 2014:58) He even asks her to bury him in China but that couldn’t be done as Dimple, she dies of an opium overdose. She also becomes a great friend to Rashid, for whom she works in the opium den on the Shuklaji street. There are various chapters dedicated to the intimate relationship of Rashid and Dimple and then the change brought out in the Shuklaji street which led to the huge change in the lives of all the characters. Dimple is put in the rehabilitation centre to cure her addiction. With her, Rumi-the pimp, is also put in rehabilitation centre.

Throughout her life, Dimple has gone through different intensities of pain like the pain of given up by her own mother due to poverty, the pain of castration, the pain of sexual abuse and rapes, the pain of prostitution, etc. While she was in the rehabilitation centre, she was asked by the nurse so as the drug addiction isn’t good, why does she do it? To which she replies:

“Because it isn’t the heroin that we’re addicted to it’s the drama of the life, the chaos of it, that’s the real addiction and we never get over it ; and because, when you come down to it, the high, that is, the intoxicated life, is the best of limited options we are offered.” (Thayil, 2012:231)

The trauma of Dimple was co-related to all Indian women in many a sense, if viewed from a feminist approach. Being taken advantage of by people like Newton Xavier proves the powerlessness of a woman in the Indian society. Her dependence on men throughout her life whether it was Dr. Lee, or Rashid. She wanted to study further but was always led down by someone or the other. The challenging environment and society where the third-gendered people aren’t accepted were all the challenges faced by Dimple constantly till her end.

#### **IV CONCLUSION**

*Narcopolis* depicts the dark world of Bombay opium dens and the world which looks so appealing from the outside but in reality is cruel, callous and cold. The third-gendered people may have received official status in Indian trajectory but fails it to induce in daily lifestyle as the transgendered people still are being harassed and raped and what not. The reality of their situation and their status has barely changed over the period of forty years which probes question on the people who still consider third-gendered people as derogatory and untouchables. Many transgenders like Dimple are forced to enter a life of prostitution because their families are too poor, or are embarrassed to raise a child of third gender. They should be able to receive a unified acceptance by one and all and be motivated for further studying and working in whichever field they wish to.

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