

Reading 'Dimple' as a Typecast Trans Woman Character in Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*

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ABSTRACT

This research paper studies the formulaic typecasting of the trans woman, Dimple in a role that has been appropriated by the writers in general thus proving deteriorating for the development of the trans woman character in the novel *Narcopolis* and explores how much of her character traits are not explored in order to truly understand the character. A trans woman is a "female" who was assigned "male" at birth and then decides to go after her true self, after discovering her identity as one. The novel is written in the year 2012 but the story dates back to 1970s and the writer has tried to make the character relatable to that era. However, as the novel is written for generation Z, it could have experimented with the character of the trans women, keeping in view the latest developments of the Rights of the LGBTQIA+ community and their efforts to erase the stereotypes held against them. The character of 'Dimple' could have been made progressive in order to present an original picture to the world about them. She is an integral part of the story without whom most of the action would not have taken place in the novel, the character of trans women is still stereotyped in a conventional frame which is being investigated here. Methodologically, close textual analysis of the novel is carried out to understand the meaning of the text and to further support our hypothesis by citing from the book as well.

KEYWORDS

Narcopolis; conventional view; trans women; textual analysis; LGBTQIA+.

Introduction

Narcopolis is a story about Bombay (Mumbai), the inexorable change in the city, the rise and fall of the drug dens (khanas), the stuffing of pipes (pyalis) of Opium to literally everyone crossing its way, the onset of new drugs like Heroine, Brown Sugar (garad) etc, and about the characters who are rooting for some affinity to and companionship for each other through opium. We are introduced to a character Rashid running a drug/opium den in Shukla Jee Street and making the most out of this business in

terms of money with the help of Dimple. The novel touches upon different themes like gender, sex, drugs, religion, prostitution, riots which make us both question a lot of things in the end and also make us understand that subjects such as gender, religion, sexuality, etc are perceived differently by people not only in the novel but also in real life. This novel also explores the chameleon character traits of people who for their own benefit can put anyone's life in danger without giving it a second thought. There is no solid story but is more of a series of events

occurring to the characters throughout at various places. Some scenes are gut-wrenching and extremely disturbing, these include scenes of drug use and drug abuse and sexual tendencies of people leading to painful experiences both emotionally and physically. This novel tries to provide both a glimpse of 30 years of a city from which all the stories come together to make the plot of the novel also a glimpse of a trans person's life which has an important role in the novel. There are other characters as well in the novel apart from Rashid who is an integral part of the story and who helps in developing the storyline of the novel. The novel is partly autobiographical in nature as the writer himself has been an addict for more than 20 years of his life, sharing some of his real-life experiences in the novel including meeting a trans person by the name of Dimple in those years of his life.

In the novel we first meet Dimple, the trans woman at the drug den of Rashid, working during the day, making pyalis of opium. She has perfected the way of making them and even teaches the new customers the correct way of smoking the drug in order to have the maximum intoxicating effect of the drug. To perfect the art of making the opium pipes for the customers she too becomes an addict, first of opium and then to the garad, thus making the addiction one of the reasons for her untimely death. The customers are in awe of Dimple not only because she makes the perfect pyalis but because the way she teaches them is something they do not see anywhere except in this khana. She becomes Rashid's sex partner for most of the days and also works at a brothel in the night where she also stays as she has no place to call a home. She has a passion to read and learn and it thrills her whenever she finds a book or a magazine to read. However, she reads mostly when she is alone because she doesn't want anyone to see her reading and make her the butt of jokes. Thus, she

keeps it a secret. Being ensnared in this world of drugs and prostitution she is helpless and cannot do anything for herself than be submissive to her situation. The narrator of the novel is not continuously present and leaves the novel with omniscient narration in most of the parts. The narration is not done using short conversing sentences but long ones. As the author states in an interview,

I realized the only way to write about opium was to write long, open-ended sentences where the writer who is writing it has no idea where the sentence is going to go... (Reuters).

Through the occasional resurfacing of the narrator amidst the omniscient narration, we go through the stories of the characters and their relations with the drug den and each other, the gradual changes which cannot be retrieved in their relation to the city which too is changing in an irrevocable way, all of which eventually leads us to the end where we get to know the myriad ways the city has changed after the boom of capitalism. We see that clubs have come up in place of drug dens and brothels, the emergence of shopping malls, supermarkets, etc. and how the new generation is taking over everything that belonged to the past and has painted it anew as per its own preferences and needs. The best example of the changing dynamics of the city is Rashid's son, who replaces his father's khana with a club and becomes a cocaine seller, replacing opium, the pride of his father.

Although everything changes by the end of the novel for everyone, the character of Dimple deteriorates the most with nothing good or better provided for her. She dies, simply leaving as somebody who wouldn't do anything for her own betterment and didn't have anyone either to make her escape her miserable life in the khana or help her in rebuilding her life with dignity and ease. The later part of her

rehab gives some hope to the readers but soon she dies and leaves everything behind: her body, her books, her memories, her friends from the khana and this dirty and cruel world which didn't let her live on her own conditions but forced the bad stuff on her and killing her in the end without even an iota of dignity or care that all the people in the world deserve, including her.

Hypothesis

The purpose of this research paper is to study the conventional typecasting of the trans woman Dimple in the novel *Narcopolis* by analyzing the text carefully in order to test the hypothesis.

Methodology

The textual analysis method has been applied for this research paper which requires a close reading of the text. One has to read the original source so that the results come out as per the expectations. Understanding meaning-making, differently understood in different historical periods and by different theoreticians, is key to understanding textual analysis. The researcher's aim here is to understand how the things that are to be researched in a novel contribute to the text's meaning.

Understanding LGBTQIA, Trans woman, and the Portrayal of Dimple In the Novel *Narcopolis*

LGBTQIA+ community is the umbrella term with which people who are Lesbians, Gays, Bi-sexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and more associate themselves. This community not only supports its people to tackle with different issues but also spreads positivity among people who are afraid of realizing their true gender and sexual orientation. The community also works hard in safeguarding the Rights of the people associated with it. A trans woman is one of the members of the LGBTQIA+

community. A trans woman is a female who was assigned male at birth, but once they realize their identity, they lead their life to become what their identity offers them to be. A trans woman transgresses the norms of gender and sexuality as well. She changes the gender role, provided by society to her and is able to secure her own place in it. Not only does she transcend the gender role but is able to liberate herself sexually by changing it with a sex-correcting surgery.

In the novel we get acquainted with a trans woman character Dimple later Zeenat. Dimple is the one character that stays with us even after we are done reading the novel. We know that she has been forcefully castrated and changed from a male to a female in a very brutal manner and to lessen the excruciating pain of the act she becomes an addict to opium. She is also forced into prostitution because of poverty and even becomes their sexual partner of Rashid, whenever he asks for it. We experience her pain while going through these lines:

A woman was called, a famous Dai Ma, Shanti Bai. There was singing and dancing and whiskey. The Dai Ma told me chant the goddess's name and she gave me a red saree. She made me drink whiskey. I hated the taste but I drank it. They gave me Opium. The 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... (67).

Dimple is talented: she is the one who knows how to make the pyalis of opium for the customers and even teaches them the correct way to smoke it. She has a passion to read and learn as well and tries to read everything that she gets her hands on: a paper cutting, a magazine, etc.

However, her character does not develop much. Dimple is portrayed as a conventional trans woman, ill-fated, forced into the world of drugs and prostitution. We don't see the development of the character emotionally, physically or economically. Her character is still shackled in the unchangeable character traits of the Hijras and she is seen to get hurt by the things said to her by others, making it again an example of a classic trans woman instead of portraying her as a strong character who embraces her identity as a Hijra.

Dimple in one of the scenes is reminded of a line that had an impact on her, it was a quote from *Mahabharata* that the newspaper had placed on its editorial page as a thought for the day: *Only eunuchs worship Fate*.

The girak had made a joke of it, asking her if it's true; but the words had stayed with her. (Thayil *Nacropolis* 76).

This further leads us to understand her character as weak as she is not sure about the identity that she is more comfortable in, she has confusion in her mind about living the life of a trans woman which gives us a picture of her character not being able to understand her true calling and not being able to give any direction to her life in order to have a better life and an improved life quality. "Dimple says of herself: 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." (11).

On reading the novel to the end we come to the realization that we are not provided with a better end for the trans woman. Her role-switching, becoming the mistress of Rashid further pushes her backwards adding more suffering to her already perturbed life. Only her name changes from Dimple to Zeenat but her fate remains unchanged. We start to believe that a trans woman can't do

anything other than prostitution. We do glimpse a ray of hope when she is sent to rehab, but in the end, when she dies, we feel pained and angry as well. Pained because she was somehow free now and angry because she dies without even truly understanding the meaning of a dignified life, where she could have followed her heart and not become a slave to her situation or anyone else.

At the end of the novel, we see how things have changed and developed for the characters as well as the city and the khana, but it is the character of Dimple that remains unchanged and she dies without understanding the meaning of a free life.

The Conventional Typecasting of the Trans woman Character Dimple

The character of Dimple as a trans woman offers nothing new at a time when the LGBTQIA+ community has moved far ahead of the stereotyping and wants the world to accept them in all fields of life instead of pushing the walls on them or bearing down on them by oppressing them and forcing them into prostitution and other odd jobs in order to make a living. If the novel is read from a trans woman's perspective one can imagine how difficult and traumatizing it might be for them to again go through the age-old conventional stereotyping of them by always typecasting or portraying their characters as prostitutes or people who "don't fit" hence snatching one more chance from people to think of them in a better way.

Thayil tries to tell the story of people, who are totally different from each other in all ways but are connected through one "pipe" i.e; the opium pipe and its provider Dimple, without whom there wouldn't have been so many stories. But though Dimple is at the centre of the novel, her character is brutally stereotyped and is not given any chance to grow.

There was a possibility of creating magic from Dimple's character but the writer has kept it raw, taking it from the street as it is and not letting her grow, further typecasting her in a role written for hundreds of them ever since their stories began to come in writing. Her developments in the form of becoming the mistress of Rashid and being sent to rehab only prove to push her further backwards and she is unable to hold the chains of her life by succumbing to the situations instead of rising to shape her life. She lives with Rashid because she has nowhere to go but we don't see any desire in her as well to set herself free. The writer has not provided her with opportunities to grow and break the stereotype of being a typical trans woman while we as readers yearn

for her freedom and want her to rebel against everything and live life on her own choice and desires.

Hence, as the novel finishes, we feel that the writer has not done any justice to her character. Putting her in a stereotypical role, the writer hasn't even left her with a sense of one identity in order to understand what she truly wanted and how she wanted to live.

Here we should understand that appropriating the stereotype for a generation like this is never a good idea, when people particularly the LGBTQIA+ community have and are already working hard trying to erase all the stereotypes about a particular set of humans, called trans women.

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