

Do Trans Lives Matter? Ambivalent Transfeminism in Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*

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Abstract

Courvant and Koyama were one of the first trans-activists who had propagated the concept of transfeminism. The focus of transfeminism is coalition politics between feminism and transgender activism, but it also questions the idea as what constitutes a 'woman' (can a medically operated trans woman be included in the fabric of feminist concerns?) which makes the foundation of feminist politics porous. Inevitably, there are two major factions of transfeminism; trans-inclusive and trans-exclusive feminism (which creates contradictory strains due to transmisogyny and transphobic gaze of many women). In India, the exploration of transfeminism in literary studies is still at a nascent stage and this article aims to explore the ambivalent slippages in transfeminism as exhibited in Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* (2012) through hijra Dimple, the protagonist. The primary focus will be to excavate the issues pertaining to transmisogyny of women, erasure of hijras through death politics, ghosting of trans entities, specific hijra desire (hijrotic), non-normative family structures, hijra as a productive body and to explore how trans-identities inform feminism and change the contours of feminist politics.

Keywords: Transfeminism, hijrotic, alternative family structure, transmisogyny, transphobia, hijra kinships

Introduction

The term transfeminism was coined by Courvant and Koyama and found tangible manifestation in *Transgender Manifesto* (2001). It emphasizes the need for viewing feminism through the lens of trans-women's concerns

and consequently widens the contours of feminism. However, the major thrust of transfeminism is not only the coalition politics emanating out of collaboration of cis gender (who is not only born as a woman, but also in her lifetime has always identified as a woman) and transgender women but also questioning the very idea as who can be termed a 'woman' and showing alliance with Butler's (1990) idea of 'performative gender'. Thus, the first section of this article aims to document the contradictory strains arising out of two factions, trans-exclusive and trans-inclusive feminism, and the debates surrounding them. The second part focuses on the ambivalent fissures pertaining to transfeminism as exhibited in Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* (2012) and the theoretical apparatus for the same has been borrowed from Haraway's concept of Cyborg (as how cyber-genetics has combined machine and humans; and has questioned the very basis of categorization of human species and consequently gender organization); Emi Koyama's ideas on transfeminism; Diana Courvant's critique of transmisogyny (as how many women despite being oppressed by patriarchy like trans individuals have transphobic gaze towards trans-women); Shubhi Jiwani's notion on 'hijrotic' (specific hijra desire); Gayatri Reddy's theorization on specific hijra kinship and alternative family structure; Snorton and Haritaworn's contentions on trans-necropolitics (deliberate erasure of sexual and gender deviants through death politics).

Debates Surrounding Trans-Exclusive and Trans-Inclusive Feminism

The complication arises out of the fact that transfeminism calls for the inclusion of both a cis woman and a transwoman who may have been born as a man but identifies as a woman. Also, a transwoman at times may have taken the help of modern medical sciences (Sex Reassignment Surgery) to craft herself into a subjective idea of what constitutes a 'woman'. This, at one level, makes the idea of 'woman' more fluid and takes it out of fixities and gives impetus to the cause of inclusive feminism.

Stryker (2008) explains "transgender feminism, calls into question the usefulness of 'woman' as the foundation of all feminist politics" (p. 3). Understandably, there are two major factions of feminism in this regard; one is trans-inclusive and the other is trans-exclusive which has a transphobic gaze. Janice Raymond's resistance to consider transwomen as women and as participants in feminism illustrates the transmisogyny

of feminists as documented in her book, *The Transsexual Empire* (1994). Transwomen have not only been accused on account of attendant male privileges in case of Male turned Female (MtF) but also due to the convoluted idea of 'femininity' because unlike women, 'femininity' in transsexuals is hugely condemned, as has been illustrated by Diana Courvant (1999).

This kind of misogyny has also been mentioned by Julia Serano as 'transmisogyny' in *Whipping Girl, A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (2007). Moreover, there are feminist activists like Janice Raymond, Mary Daly, and Sheila Jeffreys who have vociferously talked about the exhaustion of resources (that should be exclusively for women who fit into their idea of what constitutes a 'woman') through trans-inclusive feminism. There are also serious reservations among many feminist activists regarding the issue of attendant male privileges accorded to MtF and this has been vociferously rejected by critics like Emi Koyama. She postulates that any cis-gender person is more privileged than a trans-person because the kind of social opprobrium and anxiety one suffers on account of gender dysphoria is unparalleled. Indeed, a clear-cut gender identity will trump over a trans identity at any given time. Apropos of this, Emi Koyama (2001) cogitates:

What is happening here is that we often confuse the oppression we have experienced for being gender-deviant with the absence of the male privilege. Instead of claiming that we have never been benefited from male supremacy, we need to assert that our experiences represent a dynamic interaction between a male privilege and the disadvantage of being a trans. (p. 3)

Transfeminist Ruptures in *Narcopolis*

Indeed, the trans-exclusive feminism primarily emanates out of four major reasons: Transwomen are accused of being imposters (crafted femininity); many feminists have stringent ideas about what constitutes a 'woman' and thus a trans-person's experiences as a 'woman' including patriarchal subjugation are discounted; many trans entities are accused of having male privileges (in case of MtF); and there is a serious concern regarding the draining of resources by transwomen (specially welfare schemes) meant exclusively for women. Patently, though coalition politics appears to be an obvious outcome of patriarchal subjugation (as both

trans people and women suffer patriarchal oppression), contradictory fissures are inherent in the very framework of transfeminism due to transphobia of some women and consequent transmisogyny.

This article aims to explore the slippages in transfeminism as exhibited in Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*. Before delving into deeper discussion on the novel, let me first briefly sketch the outline of the novel. Set mostly in 70s and 80s Bombay, *Narcopolis* aims to unearth the secret history of drug addicts, peddlers, prostitutes, and the depraved and deranged through the prism of phantasmic and psychedelic world view. It narrates the story of an opium den in Mumbai's red-light district, and the addicts, prostitutes, and various other kinds of people who frequent it in search of illusive release from pain and suffering.

One such character in this novel is a hijra Dimple, who has been given away by her poverty-ridden mother to a priest when she was barely six or seven. The priest later on sold her to hijras who have emasculated her. The significance of Dimple in the novel is visible from the fact that the novel opens with hijra Dimple who is shown discussing the gender dynamics with one of her customers in a brothel. She later on shifts from the brothel to opium den or *khana* of Rashid where she tenders opium pipes and lives as his kept. Her room is situated between a drug den and a floor occupied by Rashid's two wives which presents an interesting dimension not only about her liminal corporeality but also her liminal spatiality in every sense of the word. She has been shown dead towards the end of the novel (due to cancer) but makes her presence felt in the lives of Rashid, the narrator, and others through her ghostly presence and once again can be seen occupying a liminal space between the living and the dead.

The very first page of the novel brings forth the mitigation of gender binary. Dimple annihilates the dichotomous model of gender by blurring the boundaries. When the narrator asks her whether she feels like a man or a woman, Dimple contends that, "Woman and man are words other people use, not me. I am not sure what I am. Some days I'm neither, or I'm both" (pp.11-12). Hence the very first page of the novel begins with the diffusion of fixities and definitives pertaining to gender segregation. When the gender becomes fluid, then the essentialist categories are diffused automatically. Significantly, the very first chapter is imbued with a feminist stance and sets the tone for the trans-feminist streak of

the novel. Her trans-identity that could have been a source of subjugation otherwise proves to be a reason to authenticate her version of analysis of both the genders.

The novel is imbued with persistent negotiation vis-a-vis gender fluidity. When Dimple goes to meet Mr. Lee, a Chinese alternative therapist, she thinks of the inter-connectedness between sartorial identity and gender expression. While getting ready, “she thought: Clothes are costumes and disguises. The image has nothing to do with the truth. And what is the truth? Whatever you want it to be. Men are women and women are men. Everybody is everything” (p. 57). Dimple nearly echoes Judith Butler in stating that clothes are actually disguises and there is a huge incongruity between image and the truth. Butler highlights the radical connection between fluid sartorial identity, drag and gender identification emphatically when she states in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*: “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency.” (p. 137)

This, in a way, is an affirmative stance for cross-dressers and transvestites. Also, the phrase that ‘everybody is everything’ by Dimple reminds me of Donna Haraway’s concept of Cyborg (2006). Cyborg is a hybrid between machine and organism. In this manner, it is a unique amalgam of nature and culture in one body and blurs the lines between them and eliminates the essentialist understanding of human existence. Science fiction is loaded with such cyborgs; from implantation of artificial organs to placing of a baboon’s heart in a baby, the field of medicine has blurred the boundaries of human, animal, and machine. Similarly, a smart phone appears to be a metaphor for extended human memory. Hence, we can safely assume that we all are cyborgs in one way or another as postulated by Haraway that “technology is not neutral. We’re inside of what we make, and it’s inside of us” (p. 113). In modern life, it is almost impossible to decipher where the machine ends and human begins. Combining cyber-genetics with feminism, Haraway states in Cyborg manifesto:

...because a cyborg is a hybrid of the machine and the organism, it merges nature and culture into one body, blurring the lines between them and eliminating the validity of essentialist understandings of human nature. This includes claims that there are specific social roles reserved for each of the sexes which are based on biological differences between them, in

addition to other differences such as age or race. (p. 116)

In this way, the rejection of binaries is hugely conspicuous. This kind of pluralism inherent in the idea of cyborgs has been effectively used by many trans-feminists. Hence Dimple's assertion of diffusion of gender binaries bears a close semblance with both Butler's idea of performativity of gender and Haraway's notion of cyborg as she affirms that in the modern world, forget about amalgamation of genders, there is a unique merging of living and non-living. In this way, the concepts of both Butler and Haraway give impetus to the gender-blending and consequently to transfeminist ideology.

As the novel progresses, Dimple moves from hijra brothel to Rashid's opium den where she tenders opium for him and lives in the same building though in a different room. It forms a kind of alternative family structure as instead of deconstructing the familial ties of Rashid's family, she stabilizes them in an oblique fashion by enhancing his business and never trying to be an obstacle to his family life. When viewed from the hijra kinship structure, it is a very specific arrangement that Dimple lives in. She has spent her formative years in a hijra household where she has gone through *nirvanam* ceremony or castration. Hijra initiation requires them to live in hijra household promoting the *guru-chela parampara*. In this novel, she is shown to be cohabiting with her paramour and his two wives in a more or less peaceful proposition despite some hostility from the family. Transgressing the confines of domestic spaces while still living with his two wives, she, like any other working woman, breaks the glass ceiling of the hugely masculine world of opium den by being an active participant in Rashid's business. Indeed, she is an amalgam of excesses; the hypersexualized hijra, the business woman, the drug dealer and still living in a Muslim household as a keep without disturbing the basic fabric of domesticity. She becomes a metonymic signifier for all kinds of social deviancies that are not appropriate for a domestic Indian woman while still occupying a domestic space. The otherness and excess of hijra Dimple are in stark contrast to the repression of female desires. In an inverted fashion, Dimple not only presents a critique of patriarchy but also through her feminine corporeal self gives a sense of what all a liberated woman can experience if s/he occupies a non-binary placement.

Dimple not only deconstructs the bipolar organization of genders but also takes the sexuality and sexual identity out of stringent boundaries

of straight and queer. When Rashid becomes intimate with her and asks her as what kind of sexual pleasure she is able to experience, she gives a fitting reply. To quote from the text: "He said, ...What I want to know, do you feel pleasure or not?" 'Not like you do and not the way a woman does'. 'You don't feel anything'. 'Oh, bilkul, I do. I feel pleasure but not, what's the word, relief'" (p. 127). She further cogitates that men who come to her may not identify themselves as homosexuals, as they have wives and children but they at times get more pleasure from a hijra than a woman. The specific hijra desire that cannot be jammed into straight and strictly queer categories has been termed as hijrotic. The term was first used by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi in her autobiography, *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life* (2016). Later, it was employed by Shubhi Jiwani who has written significantly on hijra photography. Shubhi Jiwani in her essay, 'Resisting the Othering Gaze: Photography and the Hijra Body' (2011) elaborates on this term when she states:

On plumbing its depths, it revealed an intrinsically transgressive nature. By coupling the words hijra and erotic, hijrotic brings together hijra subjectivity, rarely thought of as desirable or desiring and eroticism. It is more than an adjective: It is an utterance, an act of self-affirmation. (p. 6)

The trans body has always been a sight of repulsion and disgust, hijras like Laxmi and Dimple have turned them into a site of sexual empowerment by reversing the paradigm. This is an ultimate break from the repressive module of feminine sexuality which has been contained through the modes of marriage and motherhood since ages and restricted to the monogamous heterosexual format.

As the novel progresses, Dimple is shown handling the business in a proficient manner and being an important part of Rashid's life. She sees Rashid's family and children either on the staircase or in the neighbourhood. There is an apparent discomfort but not overt hostility as there is a tacit understanding that no one is appropriating the other person's space. Thus, alternative family structure is visible albeit in a quite unique fashion where all three women have their specific roles to play without causing any substantial loss to one another or crossing each other's path. The queer alternative familial arrangement is a major rearticulation of heteropatriarchal family dispensations. Commenting on the theoretical significance of unique queer alternative family structure and specially hijra kinships, Gayatri Reddy in her seminal work, *With*

Respect to Sex (2006) makes some pertinent observations:

What is the significance of such a rearticulation? Does the fact that hijra kinship alignments potentially mirror normative familial arrangements necessarily make these relationships merely derivative and therefore devoid of specific symbolic value? Or as Judith Butler might argue, does this very fact, and the variety and complexity of these approximations, 'trouble' the ideal of the normative family? ... By examining the variety of hijra/kothi kin framework in their specific contexts of elaboration, we can begin to generate some answers to such questions and potentially re-theorize the analysis of kinship. (p. 164)

Significantly, it creates potent slippages in our stringent and culturally mediated understanding of family. However, this alternative familial structure in *Narcopolis* reflects a blatant suppression by the patriarch where all these women (Rashid's two wives and Dimple) including a transwoman are employed in the service of a man, Rashid. Since transwomen have always been a subject of ridicule for not being able to bear children, Rashid's son calling Dimple 'mother' in a dire situation creates that structure of alternative family though very briefly and out of extreme compulsion. The fluidity and liminality of hijra Dimple is not only visible in her religious choices, but also in her sartorial preferences as she slips from western outfits to a sari to a *burkha* with equal ease. On one such occasion, when she is wearing a western dress and Rashid's son, Jamal, is chased by some religious fanatics, he sees Dimple on the road in an attire that reflects her Christianity and in an attempt to save his life he calls her *maa*, Dimple immediately understands and acts accordingly to save the child's life. After that though there is a change in Rashid's son's behaviour, yet in the latter part of the novel, he resents that incident. To quote from the text:

Then during the riots, a mob pulled me off my cycle, I wasn't wearing a skullcap. I spoke in Marathi, but still they didn't let me go. I was very young. I broke down. I saw the hijra woman, my father's kaamwali. She was wearing a dress like a Christian. I pointed at her and called her *maa*. I said, Dimple. He said: How do you think these things made me feel? Powerful. (p. 176)

There is an uneasy negotiation pertaining to alternative family structure as there is only acceptance out of compulsion, and an antagonism is visible though in a latent form.

Similarly, the dichotomy is once again visible in the form of ghosting of Dimple (Dimple has been shown dead at the end of the novel), which is quite typical of queer characters (Terry Castle gives a detailed analysis of it in *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture*, 2013) and at times indicative of the author's anxiety and homophobia. The issue of interrelatedness of biopower and necropolitics (a term used by Achille Mbembe in "Necropolitics", *Public culture*, 2003) is significant to bring into the discussion in the context of the erasure of hijra Dimple through death, whose deviant body must meet death in the service of sanitization of the state. Mbembe coined this term to evince the political potential of death of the marginalized communities. Apropos of this, Snorton and Haritaworn contend in *Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife* (2013) that "necropolitics enables us to understand how biopower, the craving out of subjects and populations... can profess itself at the service of life and yet generate death, in both quotidian and spectacular forms" (p. 66). Despite the significant contribution to the business, Dimple's efforts are unacknowledged and thus her unruly body must embrace death in the era of neo-liberalism where the death of the 'other' is necessary for the healthy maintenance of the so-called privileged productive citizens. Apropos of this, Snorton and Haritaworn contend:

Henry Giroux calls it 'biopolitics of disposability', a new kind of politics in which entire population is now considered disposable, an unnecessary burden on state coffers, and cosigned to fend for themselves'. Thus neoliberal ideologies provide biopower with new ammunition in the creation of life-enhancing and death-making worlds, and offer an insidious addendum to rationales for population control. The consequences of this logic effaces the way power and life are maintained and reproduced through the deaths of certain others. (p. 69)

No wonder, be it the death of trans individuals like Safi in the movie, *Bol* (2012) or the murders of hijras, Anarkali and Sam in Dattani's *Seven Steps around the Fire* (2000) and Leslie Forbes' *Bombay Ice* (1999), the erasure of a trans-body through death is a common feature of many hijra narratives. However even after death, Dimple is shown haunting Rashid and a few others.

Hence, liminality and ambivalence pertaining to trans-feminism are present throughout this novel, such as the hyper-sexuality of Dimple

as opposed to the repression of feminine sexuality but still her own un-spoken dissatisfaction with Rashid is unanswered; the apparent alternative family structure (Rashid's two wives, children, and hijra Dimple live in the same building) which punctures normative concept of traditional family and accords new ways of loving and living but to some extent it is loaded with discomfort for all the three women; sartorial freedom and fluidity of Dimple that is punctured by the male gaze; Dimple's business prowess that is not fully acknowledged and in the end shows her as a ghost though not fully lacking empowerment as liminality of her living-dead status creates ruptures. The overlaps of trans and feminist concerns run throughout the novel without delving into didacticism. However, envisaging Dimple as a truly empowered trans-feminist will only be a half-truth considering the ambivalent slippages that the novel exhibits as mentioned above. But indeed, *Narcopolis* is remarkable for informing feminism through a trans-gaze and is a welcome move towards coalition politics as it extends feminist framework because the gender incongruity and pluralism of Dimple presents a necessary critique of not only patriarchy but also revolutionizes the very idea as who can be termed a woman. The gender and sexual fluidity of Dimple reminds me of Tejal Shah's (the famous photographer who is well-known for her hijra photography) assertion regarding gender liminality: "I always wonder, what if there were indeed a thousand tiny genders? And we could define our own unique one, which is always open to change, or what if we don't need to define one at all because it does not matter" (2015, p. 1). Indeed, in the light of the above discussion it is safe to assume that despite contradictory fissures, *Narcopolis* makes the boundaries of feminism porous and is a significant literary signature when viewed through the lens of transfeminism.

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