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Heteronormativity and Performativity in Jeet Thayil's Narcopolis

Dr Prabhat Jha
Independent Researcher

Abstract

In this paper, we will discuss how heteronormativity and performance affects an individual who belongs to the Hijra community in South Asia. For understanding that we will analyse how Dimple in Jeet Thayil's Narcopolis performs as a "woman" and how she wants to fit in the social norms of being a heterosexual woman and a family set up. Hijra community in South Asia is respected as well as feared, but that also marginalize them outside the system of family. Heteronormativity restricts anyone outside the binary of heterosexual male and female from being into the social framework of family. The complexities increase because of Dimple being a "Eunuch." We will also try to find out how difficult it for a Hijra like Dimple to go beyond the heteronormative binaries of male and female. Whether Dimple is seeking the place in a family as a wife/mother or she is happy as a Hijra, as that gives her gender fluidity. The paper in the end is trying to understand the role and possibilities for a Hijra character in a heteronormative world.

Keywords: Jeet Thayil, Heteronormative, Narcopolis, Hijra, Performativity, Family.

Introduction

In a world where heteronormativity rules and anything which doesn't follow the social norms related to gender is seen as abnormal and is marginalized into different ghettos, it is quite difficult for someone who does not fit in the roles that are fixed inside a family, especially in South Asia. In Jeet Thayil's novel *Narcopolis*, we can see how the character of Dimple, a *Hijra*, who although tries to be beyond the two genders, still romances with the ideas of being in a heteronormative position in a family of a wife.

To understand what it means to be a Hijra in South Asia, we need to first understand what the term "gender" means and how it is connected with the social norms.

As Simone De Beauvoir states, there is a distinction between the term "Gender", which is a social construct and "Sex" which is related to biology. Unlike, "Sex", which has scientific determination in its centre, Gender depends more on power as to how it perceives different "Genders" culturally and historically. United Nations describes the term "Gender" as:

...culturally based expectations of the roles and behaviours of males and females. The term distinguishes the socially constructed from the biologically determined aspects of being male and female. Unlike the biology of sex, gender roles and behaviours can change historically, sometimes relatively quickly, even if the aspects of these roles originated in the biological differences between the sexes. Because the religious or cultural tradition that defines and justify the distinct roles and expected behaviours of males and females are strongly cherished and socially enforced. Source: United Nations, 1995; 2000; 2001. (Sen 3)

It can be seen that the focus of the definition is on the norms that are followed across the societies of the world which created expectations from what the roles and behaviours of different genders will be. For instance, to become a "female", one has to constantly "perform" according to the norms that have been historically and culturally created. As Judith Butler writes while discussing the ideas of Beauvoir:

When Beauvoir claims that "woman" is a historical idea and not a natural fact, she clearly underscores the distinction between sex, as biological facticity, and gender, as the cultural interpretation or signification of that facticity. To be female is, according to that distinction, a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to a historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to a historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project. (Butler, *Performative Acts* 522)

These acts performed by the "body" keep changing historically and people have to change accordingly. As Judith Butler suggests, "the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time." (Butler, *Performative Acts* 523) That is why 'the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives.' (Butler *Performative Acts* 526)

The body restricts itself to following the hegemonic structures, otherwise, there can be a conflict between the individual and the society, which in turn can remove the social privileges and access given to the person. The “body” is forced to be a part of the ‘performance which is performative, gender is an “act,” broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its psychological interiority. (Butler, *Performative Acts* 528)

Dimple and her Gendered identity

In Jeet Thayil’s novel *Narcopolis*, the character of Dimple is working and living in Rashid’s opium den. She is the heart and soul of the novel, where most others are indulged in their selfish quests. Dimple was born as a man, but forced castration turned her into a *Hijra*, and then she was forced to become a sex worker. She recounts the horrific way in which she was castrated because her mother had to sell her due to poverty.

A woman was called, a famous Daima, Shantibai. There was singing and dancing and whisky. The Daima told me to chant the goddess' 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 ... (Thayil 66-67)

What happened with Dimple, was a traumatic incident which scarred her for life. She becomes a part of the *Hijra* community.

Hijras in South Asia

In South Asia, *Hijra* is a term used for people who are “impotent, eunuch, someone born with genital ambiguity, asexual etc.” (Hossain) who are forced to get out of the family system and join a gharana or house.

Although, it is believed that *Hijras* are intersex, who are “born with the combination of characteristics(e.g., genitals, gonadal, and chromosomal) that are typically presumed to be exclusively male or female.” (Davis 2), it is far from being true.

According to a research by All India Hijra Kalyan Sabha in 2016, “Only 1 per cent of eunuchs are born so, while the rest either pretend to be hijras (eunuch) or have been forced to join the community by abduction and castration.” (Anwar)

Tariq Anwar in his news report in India Times, quotes Khairati Lal Bhola, belonging to the Sabha saying that “Young and addicted boys are abducted and then introduced to homosexuality by the agents of eunuch’s gurus. Castrations are clandestinely forced on them and ironically, very few people gather the courage to retaliate,” Bhola said. (Anwar)

After being a part of the *Hijra* community, Dimple was forced to become a sex worker like many others as mentioned in a newspaper report above.

Later, after some years, after studying and freeing herself from the brothel where she was living in, she became a part of Rashid’s den, where she used to prepare the pipes for opium smokers. Even then she didn’t have any issues with being called a *Hijra*, and she preferred it rather than its English derivative ‘Eunuch’, “...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’.” (Thayil 47)

The reason being, a sense of belonging to a community that one gets after being recognized as a *hijra* in South Asia. The *Hijra* community, although belonging to the minority are respected or feared for it is believed that they have “powers to bless and to curse.” That is why they are asked to “dance and sing” when a “baby is born” and the public shows respect for their powers. (Hanna 107)

However, *Hijras* can only dance and sing when a ‘family’ celebrates. They have no place in the family structure. They have to live in a Gharana, away from their families and are mocked all the time. Dimple reads in a newspaper that: “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*. Girak had made a joke of it, asking her if it is true; but the words had stayed with her.” (Thayil 76)

Heteronormativity and Dimple

Cameron and Kulick define *Heteronormativity* as “as an overarching system for organizing and regulating sexuality, whereby certain ways of acting, thinking and feeling about sex are privileged over others,” recognizing that “not all expressions of heterosexuality are equal. (Vavrus 123)

The societies all over the world treat the heterosexual relationship as normative and anything other than that is abnormal. Even in the construct of a ‘family’, which according to Merriam Webster dictionary, is the “Basic Unit in society traditionally consisting of two parents rearing their children”, we do not have any place for any other sexuality. However, things have certainly changed as same-sex marriages have become legal, which has broadened the concept of family, though not universally.

But, people like Dimple do not have a place in the concept of family, even though she often tried to become a part of it. It is often seen that people who have been castrated get confused about their sexuality.

The responses of men who are castrated, who as Wassersug suggests are at the boundaries of masculinity, have to reconfigure their sense of masculine selves as new forms of gender identity, or as men who are unable to live up to the normative expectations of masculinity. The impact is that these men come to occupy a liminal space, where they see themselves as not men and not women. (Chris Heywood et al)

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” (Thayil 11).

Her place in Rashid's life was restricted to being a “kaamwali” i.e. someone who provides sexual pleasure, she could never replace the ‘woman/wife’ in his life. “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.” (Thayil 190)

Even in the term of space that she was provided, she could never be a part of the ‘family space’, but live outside of that in the *khana*, “It was 1992, which meant that she's been living in the apartment on the half landing between Rashid's khana and his home for almost ten years.” (Thayil 190)

At times, Dimple does want to be a part of the family. She wanted to know what it is to become 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.” (Thayil 132)

To fit in the role of a “woman” she performed like one. ‘femininity’ was much more imbibed into her than masculinity at least on the surface. At certain times she became a woman. Taking care of her beauty.’ she was *protecting her complexion*, a phrase she had learned from *Stardust Magazine*.”(Thayil 71)

She did so well doing the ‘act’ or performance of being a woman that when Rashid's son was surrounded during a riot, he pointed out towards her, “I saw the hijra woman, my father's kaamwali. She was wearing a dress like a Christian. I pointed at her and called her ma. I said, Dimple.” (Thayil 276)

Dimple tried to Perform as a female gender, as she perceives herself as, but it doesn't mean that the society will ignore the “sex” in which she is born into. The “body” becomes a hinderance for her to become a woman and a wife, who in the end, want to become a part of a family.

To understand Dimple's marginalization within the structure of family and her difficulties of finding a place in the social order, we can also compare her to a female character who was also having the similar sexual role in the life of a man having another ‘homemaker’ wife. We can look at Virmati from Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*. The Professor, her husband couldn't leave her earlier wife, because she took care of the house, “She is a housewife, you know. Somebody has to do these things.” (Kapur 216) That is why Virmati could never find the place that she wanted in his life.

However, Dimple's case is even more tragic, because being a woman, Virmati could get educated and take a job in a school as a Principal. Dimple does not have that privilege as she won't get the acceptability in the 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 to be a part of a gharana(family) where there are “is a complex system of social stratification based on age and membership to a gharana or house, by lineage or ‘apprenticeship’ forming a kingship network.” (Goel 147)

However, even in the *Hijra* family, there are norms of gender performativity one has to follow to consider oneself to be a *Hijra*. Ina Goel writes, “The guru punishes most of the perceived misbehaviour by demanding an act that unsubscribes an aspect related to “hijra norms of gender performativity’ from the accused, who can then be “publicly” slammed for not being “hijra enough” ” (Goel 147)

Her *Hijra*/Eunuch identity doesn't need to be defined as any of the two genders.

However, Chris Haywood et al suggested that:

a eunuch subjectivity could be informed outside heteronormative models of identities and is not dependent upon sexual object choice. Unlike, theoretical discussions of gender variance that emerge from within the heteronormative model, eunuch gender identity is not defined by sexual orientation or sexual object choice. Importantly, the eunuch identity transgresses the binaries of gender and offers an alternative space for identity has the potential to stand outside of this, and rather be in a state of gendered dimensionality that can occupy a different kind of gendering.

She does feel comfortable 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 is everything.” (Thayil 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. Judith Butler writes:

When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as casually signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body easily a female one. (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 10)

Conclusion

In the end it can be said that even though for a certain amount of time Dimple hopes to be a part of the heteronormative 'family' as it is perceived by South Asian community, it is unlikely that she could have. However, we can also say that she felt quite comfortable in her *Hijra* identity and while performing her feminine side convincingly, she didn't really bothered to be confined to one of the two gender binaries. It enabled her to be fluid in her gender and sexuality outside the heteronormativity of the patriarchal social order.

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