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Coding and Decoding: Body as a Cultural Text in Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*

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Abstract

The closing years of the 20th century witnessed a renewed interest in body studies. It is reflected in cultural studies, gender studies and geographical studies. While the traditional model concentrates on a body that is pre- social, the new perspectives treat body as socially constructed. Literature too has responded to this turn towards the space of the body. Jeet Thayil's Narcopolis, published in 2012, is one of those works that capture this orientation on body. Against the existing notion of body as natural, unified and static, Thayil presents body as socially constructed and culturally conditioned. Thayil's telling of the cultural life of Bombay in turn becomes a survey of the diverse bodies that inhabit its cultural space. Body spaces are marked by the coding of culture. It may be reflected through dress codes, food and fashion styles or bodily adornments. As shown in the novel, bodies are marked by gender roles and specific sexual expectations. Body is also treated as a place which reflects the dominant traces of cultural classification and the resulting preferences. Narcopolis Thus, becomes a tale of alternate body types, bodily practices and perspectives that inhabit the streets of Bombay.

Keywords*— *body, cultural text, cultural coding, nationalism, gender coding, border crossings, performance, transgender.

Introduction

Thayil highlights body as a cultural text in *Narcopolis*. Body is a text that is written with the cultural coding of the institutions like law, religion, family, etc. Bodies carry with them the discourse of nationality, gender and sexuality. The concept of national borders is inscribed in the individual bodies. Body has long been a subject of study in various disciplines including medicine, physiology, psychology, philosophy and phenomenology. The new theoretical trends in cultural studies and gender studies in the closing years of 20th century considerably affected body studies. Since then, there happened a shift in body studies whereby the traditional model of a natural body was supplemented by a socially constructed body. While the traditional model concentrates on a body that is pre- social, the new perspectives treat body as socially constructed.

The Social Constructedness of the Body

The traditional viewpoints treat body as a biological constant. This deterministic approach tends to be exclusionary because it considers bodies and bodily behaviors that differ from this model as abnormal, deviant and pathological. The social constructedness of body is revolutionary in that it treats bodies as actually produced by social forces and cultural practices. Feminists, Marxists and postcolonial theorists uphold the social constructedness of body (Turner 40).

Bodies are marked by gender roles and specific sexual expectations. Regarding sexuality, most societies are controlled by the dictums of heteronormativity. The dominant cultures are defined by heterosexual men, and for the same reason the marginalized ones are under the constant threat of erasure (Ryan 28-29). Along with homosexuality, ambiguity sexuality also is counted as

'abnormal.' If classified 'deviant' in terms of sexuality, individual bodies are forced to refashion their bodily attributes and orientations.

At the same time, these differences of bodies may not be a matter of personal choice; they may often be desired personally, demanded legally, expected socially, or sometimes may even be enforced. The inclusion or exclusion of bodies is a matter of culture too. The reception/ rejection of intersexed individuals in various cultures exemplify this.

> The reception of intersexed individuals, born with ambiguous genitalia, has varied widely and ranged from fascination and honor to scorn and stigmatization. Hijras in Hindu society, who are born either with ambiguous genitalia or are biologically male but live as transsexuals, are frequently members of the lower castes, but they have important roles in rituals and ceremonies related to fertility. American Navajo nadleehi, born intersexed, have been celebrated, but in Western traditions, intersexed people have been highly stigmatized. (Taylor xxi)

In such cases, bodily variations are not often smooth. Force and coercion are sometimes directly involved in bodily practices as in the instance of female genital mutilation: "Since modern societies have little tolerance for ambiguity of physical sex and gender, children who are born of 'ambiguous' sex (i.e. where genitalia are not clearly female or male; e.g. a micro-penis) are often subjected to genital reconstruction and then 're-socialization'…" (Petersen 83). Scrutiny of such practices may reveal that individual agency and consent are not always honoured in such instances. The attempts at gender normalization in encoding bodies as culturally meaningful involve a lot of violence.

Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*, was published in 2012. Thayil, recipient of the 2013 South Asian Literature Prize and shortlisted for the 2012 Man Booker Prize, attempts to chart out the urban sub culture of 70's and 80's Bombay in this novel. The Bombay life is narrated from the view point of a character named Dom Ullis, who is more an observer than a participant in the novel. The novel is unique in telling the life of Bombay drug culture by placing Dimple, the eunuch, as the main character of *Narcopolis.* Thayil's telling of the cultural life of Bombay in turn becomes a survey of the diverse bodies that inhabited this cultural space.

Thayil's highlights body as a cultural text in *Narcopolis*. Body is a text that is written with the cultural coding of the institutions like law, religion, family, etc. Bodies carry with them the discourse of nationality, gender and sexuality. The concept of national borders is ascribed on individual bodies. Thus, Lee's mother is full of admiration in remembering 'the heroic patriots of the Society of the Righteous and Harmonious Fists' in China: "The Fists won fame for taking up arms against the foreign conspirators who tried to partition China…." (83). Her respect for the patriots is mainly rooted in their endeavors for protecting the national borders. Thus, bodies are the situated places for sustaining authoritarian state's political interests in issues like national borders.

Bodies as Sites of Cultural Coding

Body spaces are marked by the coding of culture, reflected through dress codes, fashion styles or bodily adornments. Each of them serves as a symbol of certain identity patterns or cultural grouping. The cultural meanings unraveled through the dressing patterns are hinted by the character, Dimple: "Clothes are costumes or 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." (57). Thus, dressing patterns are revealed as rooted in discursive attempts for constructing particular identity types.

Religious coding on certain bodies contribute to making people appear as priests or nuns. Each of these identities demands unique adornment practices. Thus, the priest has his own adornments according to the propriety rules of his profession, as in the case of an air hostess or a whore: "the priest, threaded, shirtless, his orange dhoti a flash in the sun." (137). while the adornments of the nuns, the masks they wear and their white dresses, are seen by the narrator in a different way: "for protection against the world that the nuns wore their masks; it was to protect the world from their own small mistakes." (268). Thus, the space of the body-bodies of the nuns and the cultural inscriptions in them- are simultaneously used by the institution of religion to signify their cultural classification and also as a way of hiding its wrong doings.

Dom's description of the people in the streets reveals the numerous ways by which bodies in the city is marked: "The walkers were out, in their ugly new shoes and branded tracksuits. Men in green overalls swept the street…. A trio of Jain nuns crossed a bridge

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on foot, single-file, in white robes and head-coverings." (268). City spaces are turned as the contentious site for the occurrence of bodies with diverse cultural coding. The heterogeneity of the city spaces is arising from this existence of multiple types of cultural identities and their diverse practices.

The body as a site of cultural coding through the significant acts of dressing and adornment clearly figures in the part that deals with the description of the uniform that Dimple finds in the ex-military officer Lee's trunk: "It had high collars and narrow epaulettes and insignia on the breast; it suited him, and the peaked cap transformed him. . .. She saw the markings on the uniform and she understood that he'd been an important man" (66). The 'epaulettes and insignia' in the dress literally serve as the site of cultural writing. While the cultural status of the dress as 'uniform' marks it as a symbol of conformity to a group's ideology. The materiality of the peaked cap stands arouses notions of hierarchical and dictatorial power. The markings on the uniform signify the amount of power rested on an individual body in its conformity to the group. Thus, body becomes a site of the embodied practices of power, class, and culture.

The novel shows the ways by which a girl bears traces of religion and patriarchy on her body. Farheen, Jamal's girlfriend, is supposed to wear burka, as her body is religiously classified as Muslim. And it is Jamal who often decides her dress. Thus, even when she wears jeans it is according to his wish (283). But she appropriates religiously decided dress pattern by wearing "burkhas that she designed herself, patterned burkhas cut like a lab coat, tight around the hips and belly" (278). Along with it, Farheen displays considerable amount of resistance in spite of her marginal role in man woman relationship. Thus, Jamal's display of sexual interest by means of repeated intercourses is turned meaningless in Farheen's response. "Number seven," he said, "what do you think of that"? "I wish you also thought of pleasuring me a little," Farheen replied." (279)

Body is also treated as a place which reflects the dominant traces of cultural classification and the resulting preferences. Thus, while in the sick bed Lee expresses his dislike of India and the city of Bombay by criticizing its material practices in connection with his body space: "the city's terrible food, the dirtiness and bad manners and the sharp body odour that all Indians shared, because spicy food smells were exiting through the pores" (76). Thus, bodies are exposed as caught up in the strange network of connections and inter connections. Body space of the rebels becomes the templates for writing the chronicles of national history. They are used as representational space for the coding of times gone by. The body space of Lee's mother becomes the ultimate ground for the manifestation of the complex working of historical connections, spatial struggles, cultural conflicts and nationalist chronicles. Body becomes the embodied site of the inter playing of history, power, culture and nationalism.

The cultural conditioning of the body is shown as effecting changes in the materiality of the body. Thus, as passing a temple in the street Rashid utters prayers: "Uncontrollable prayer phrases rose to his lips as he walked past the temple." (137). The religious coding on body and the perpetuation of imaginary boundaries are shown as generating the fear of intrusions. It is this same fear that prompts Rasheed to utter prayers in the presence of a temple. Thus, the prayers here serve as the traces of religious conflict in Rasheed's body.

The violence on the bodyspace in relation with one's transgender identity is clearly depicted in *Narcopolis*, in presenting the transgender identity of Dimple. Cultural production of body and identity can be best explained with reference to Dimple, the hijda's life. As portrayed in the novel, body is the intimate geography. It is the single most site where workings of power operate in maximum. Like any other space, body is made, re-made and ever-changing. It is marked by territories and boundaries.

Dimple's history starts with her body transformation and the subsequent naming process in tai's hands. Thus, with her new name, Dimple, (imitating the popular name of the actress of the hit movie Bobby, she makes a self-assertion of her existence as a woman and starts her attempts to get in to the pages of her history (59). It is also her starting of the profession at Tai's brothel. But the naming also significant in that it is Tai's spatial imaginations to mould the body of Dimple in the model of an actress who 'captured the nation's excitable imagination' at least for a while. Spatial representation of the body of a film actress with its dominant class connections is revealed as bringing changes on the body of someone in the marginalized space. While, later Dimple is named as 'Zeenat' as she is spatially transferred from the hijra's brothel to Rashid's Khana. It signifies her transfer from the power relationship of one system to another. Body is subject to the simultaneous cultural coding of dominant spaces in the culture. Subaltern body of Dimple seen as caught up in the power struggles of Capitalism, nationalism, religion, and patriarchy.

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Thus, dimple's identity is seen as subjected to the spatial imaginations of Tai and Rasheed. Both of them name her in different ways so as to represent her spatially according to their imaginations. But Dimple manages these imposed representations on her body by appropriating them according to her will and needs. Dimple as she walks through the street after appropriating the hair cut of Zeenat Aman feels "as if she were emitting some kind of bio-radar, some hormone ray that magnetized male animals" (165). Dimple can be seen as re-writing the geographical imaginations that shaped her by re-making herself as an 'imagined geography.'

The materiality of Dimple's body is projected as bearing the traces of culture and history. "There were burns on her fingers and her toenails were painted black. She had a moon-shaped bruise on her collarbone" (16). Each of these distinct marks are spatial remaining of her personal history. Whereas they are also the traces left on her body space by the dominant power systems through the different spatial relations and social interactions and the resulting spatial conflicts.

Bodies are marked and categorized along various lines. Instances of border crossings are dealt with doubt and hostility. It is revealed in describing Bengali's unpleasantness in watching Dimple's behavior with Rasheed: "Bengali's thoughts were in his face: look at this woman, until yesterday she was a prostitute in a hijra's brothel and listen to her now, talking as if she's Rashid's equal. He was dismayed by her manner around his boss and by the way she said whatever came to her mind . . ." (176). It exposes his class intolerance and patriarchal bias in seeing Dimple as a prostitute in a hijra's brothel and also in his intolerance of seeing her as Rashid's equal.

The material body is a site of the cultural traces and spatial imaginations. Thus, "the ridged skin stretched like a ghost vagina" in Dimple's body bears the traces of 'cutting' and it is also a symbol of her spatial imagination of a female body resulting 'a ghost vagina' the 'presence of an absence' or in other words the 'absence of a presence'. In continuation, Rashid and Dimple converses like this: "He said, You're like a woman. She said: I am a woman" (127). Body Thus, becomes a contentious site of spatial imaginations, spatial experiments, spatial explorations and spatial histories.

Dimple: A Case Study of Transgender Identity

Dimple's analysis of the men's arrival in the hijda's brothel is so comprehensive as it hints at the spatial imaginations that drive bodies to the 'dirtiness' of the brothel. Apart from reality it is the spatiality of the bodies and places- the body of the eunuchs and the cultural coloring of it as a brothel that inspires the men to reach here. Dimple also realizes that the men who reach in the brothel "don't think of themselves as homosexuals" (128). Thus, sexual performances of the body also are revealed as driven both by the spatial imaginations of bodies and the spaces where these bodies are placed.

Body is presented as a site of identity performances and gender roles. There is Dimple who appropriates her positioning as a subaltern by moving between both. Thus, she occasionally wears trousers as it "allowed her to act like a man when she wanted to" (57). Dimple changes the appearance immediately after reaching 007 in Hijde ki Gully: "She exchanged her salvaar for a sari and was touching up her lipstick and face powder…" (46). The same tone is evoked in Xavier's instruction to Tai, "But ask her to put on a burkha for me. You should make them all wear burkhas, you'll make more money" (46). Dimple learns the way by which she has to move in a special way after wearing Sari (157). She also learns from Bengali people that wearing specific types of Saris necessitate varied bodily make ups. At the same time her body adornments are changing according to the needs of the time. "She didn't give up saris. She varied her costume depending on who she wanted to be, Dimple or Zeenat, Hindu or Muslim" (158). While on her journey from brothel to Rahid's khana, Dimple takes "a many-tiered make-up kit, the kind carried by Air India stewardesses" (132). The fact about the body and identity as a performance is underlined here. Thus, as the role of an 'Airhostess' needs make up kit for her performance, a eunuch wants the same for playing her identity. The effect of these performances are also mentioned. Thus, Rashid is impressed by the appearance and manners of Dimple on their first meeting: "He liked her manner, her conservative clothes, the way she spoke Hindi mixed with English" (124). In the same manner, Dimple's wearing of a salwar instead of burka saves her from a physical attack in the street. The performances of body are powerful enough to affect spatial experiences. Dimple manages to subvert the gendered prescriptions of the patriarchal society that imposes definite dressing patterns for woman by individually appropriating such dressing patterns. She even thinks that her experiments of wearing Saris without skirts may bring some kind of economic profit where "some of her giraks would pay a lot to see her in the Begum Bahar" (158).

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The performative nature of body finds its powerful expression in speaking about the transgender spatial experiences. The assertion of the existence as a third gender is made explicit in this: "Lakshmi said, Men are dogs. We know and they know. Only women don't know." (128). The use of the word 'we' rather than 'men' and 'women' undermine gender distinctions usually taken for granted. In a similar instance, Dimple asserts her 'in-between' position: "What I want to know, do you feel pleasure or not?' 'Not like you do and not the way a woman does" (127). Dimple's understanding of her 'in-between' position as a eunuch, and her knowledge of the psychology of the customers in coming there, is that "they think eunuchs give better value than women. Eunuchs know what men want in a way other randis don't, they know men like it dirty" (128). The deprived social group is once again shown as asserting the subject position instead of simply trying to replace one of the items in the existing binaries. Thus, issues of consumption, economic relationships, market interests etc. are shown as rooted in the cultural places of brothel and body space of eunuchs. Characters like Dimple and Lakshmi is also presented as occupying an in between position in the matter of sexuality.

Gender, Sexuality, and Resistance

Dimple's transgression from the male body to the female body is presented as a decision taken by herself. She describes it as "she wanted it, the tai had nothing to do with how much she wanted it" (59). At the same time body is shown as bearing the traces of this sexual transition. Thus, even many years after the amputation Dimple's body has active traces of it: "Her breasts were fuller and the space between her legs had healed long ago into a scar, but the ache in her back and elbows was something new" (56).

Dimple's body is recalled many times as have been passed through the processes of transgression. The conversation between Salim and Rashid reflect this history of her body's transgression:

'She's a hijra, right? She was a man once?'

'Long ago. Her dick was probably bigger than yours.'

'So what I was wondering, bhai, is why she looks so feminine. (141)

The 'in-between' or 'make shift' position in sexuality enables Dimple to experience the spatial reality of both. However, she rejects any attempt to classify her into any of them strictly as she says, "Woman and man are words other people use, not me. I'm not sure what I am. Some days I'm neither, or I'm nothing. On other days I feel I'm both" (11). What she suggests is her body's potential to cross boundaries. Thus, Dimple subverts and appropriates her subaltern status of being a transgender. Whereas the questioning voice of Dimple about fixing gender roles find an expression in the saying, "But they confuse sex and the spirit; they don't separate" (12). Dimple's ability to make such a powerful criticism on the taken for granted cultural dictums has its roots in her position as a cultural outcast. Dimple's body reacts in a resistant manner to dominant ideologies and normative discourses. Body as represented in the novel is an embodied site of spatial struggles and resistance.

Conclusion

Thayil' s narrative records and maps resistant bodies in Bombay's subcultural life. Bodies on Border places seem to offer alternate perspectives and subversive voices. *Narcopolis* in this manner becomes a celebration of alternate body types, bodily practices and perspectives. The narrative highlights the interconnectedness of bodies, spaces, and cultural meanings, demonstrating how they shape and are shaped by social forces. The body is not merely a biological entity but a site of cultural inscription, resistance, and transformation, existing within dynamically constructed spaces. Similarly, space is more than a physical setting—it is a lived, gendered, and politicized dimension that influences identity and power relations. These perspectives challenge static understandings of embodiment and place, emphasizing fluidity, contestation, and lived experience. As societies evolve, these frameworks remain vital for analyzing how individuals navigate and negotiate their surroundings. By bridging theory and real-world dynamics, this exploration underscores the need for ongoing critical engagement with the complex relationships between bodies, spaces, and cultural practices.

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