

## GENDER FLUIDITY: A CRITICAL STUDY OF JEET THAYIL'S NARCOPOLI

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<https://doi.org/10.54922/IJEHSS.2025.0946>

### ABSTRACT

The major aim of present study has to explore gender fluidity in Jeet Thayil's Narcopolis. The gender fluidity is postmodern term that shows the psychological, physical, and physiological changes in an individual with the passage of time. It challenges the traditional binary gender system that shows the mental and physical transformations in the individual in identity, desire, and self-perception. Set in the late 1970s Bombay, the novel Narcopolis represents the city of Mumbai as an urban landscape dominated by crime, drug trade, and the sex industry. The novel unfolds dark sides of the city of Mumbai and its chaotic environment in which the individual's identity, gender, morality and religion are constantly changing with the passage of time. Moreover, the novel exposes societal and economic diversities on the basis of issues unemployment and illiteracy, child abuse and violence both in domestic and public workplaces. The novel has a multilayer narrative that captures the complexities of life in an evolving and morally ambiguous urban space.

**Keywords:** Gender Fluidity in Narcopolis, Non-binary Gender in the Contemporary Society, Identity, Urban Decay and Gender Transgression.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept gender fluidity is dealt with the rigid challenges that binary notions in gender. It has become popular in the contemporary literary and cultural studies. It is an understanding of gender role between male and female that is unfixed. It is a spectrum that offers an individual to carrying various identities that transcend conventional gender boundaries. It is clearly seen in the contemporary Indian English literature which is a reflection of gender fluidity and its broader cultural, social, political and economic aspects of the life in an urban space.

Published in 2012, the novel *Narcopolis* is a mirror of the metropolitan cities like Mumbai in which the individual's like Dimple migrate from the remote area to fulfill their aspirations and dreams, but once they enter in the city they find that the life of city is fragmented, displacement, and marginalization. Now they feel trapped in the city and grapple with their own life problems regarding their identities and survival and so on. Even though, they would like to live the city, but they are forced to compel the city, masculinity and femininity. The characters, caught between the binaries of tradition and modernity, highlight how the city's disorienting landscape allows for the possibility of alternative expressions of gender.

### Research Questions:

What is the gender fluidity?

What challenges arise from embracing or achieving gender fluidity?

**Aim and Objects:**

To critically examine the representation of gender fluidity in Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*.

To examine the psychological and physical transformations of characters as they relate to gender identity.

To investigate how urban decay, crime, and drug culture influence the concept of gender in *Narcopolis*.

**2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Having used his hand in music and poetry, Jeet Thayil is a great novelist. As a result, he has become a part of critical attention many scholars, and critics. These critics and scholars have interested to explore his art of writings through various perspectives. These points of view are:

Renu and Dr. B.K. Jha makes a study under the titled of "Metropolis and Narrative Strategies in Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*," in which they investigate that the city life is fragmented in various ways. Moreover, they find that the life in the metropolis is disjointed and complex.

M. Thendral and Dr. G. Paravthy finds in their study "Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* as a Reflection of the Postmodern Condition in India" that the life of city is full of chaotic and in secured that brings psychological disorder in the life of its dwellers.

Kaur, Inderpreet in his study, "From Bombay to Mumbai: Understanding 'Postmetropolis' via Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*" finds the upcoming changes in spatial transformation of Old Bombay to New Bombay. She also tries to highlight the city, which is a globalized world and industrial activities, has emerging an illicit drugs subculture in the transformed urban setting.

Through the above cited studies, I have identified that there are a number of field which is unexplored in *Narcopolis* of Jeet Thayil. So, I have chosen the topic "Gender Fluidity: A Critical Study of Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*."

**3. ANALYSIS**

**3.1 Gender Fluidity in *Narcopolis*:**

Written by Jeet Thayil, the novel *Narcopolis* has a wide range of characters who denies the conventional gender roles, most notably Dimple. Unfortunately, Dimple, who is the protagonist, is sold to a brothel when he was 9 years old and lives life of *hijra* like other. After joining brothel, she involves in prostitution and drug addiction. This process of making *hijra* known as castrated and also changes in his body physics the idea of gender fluidity. In the novel, Dimple is represented by 'She' because Dimple dresses like a female and behaves like a female and also identifies as a female. Throughout the character of Dimple, Thayil challenges the traditional gender binary male and female, and demands a space for these categories. It is evident in the novel, "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" (12).

**3.2 Non-binary Gender in the Contemporary Society:**

Born as a male, the protagonist Dimple is a transgender woman who becomes a symbol of transformation and fluidity in the novel. Her journey of self-discovery is an overarching theme that runs parallel to the central plot. Dimple is often dissolute, seeking to escape the harsh realities of her life as she struggles to find her place in a chaotic environment. This confusion reflects the breakdown of rigid identity categories, and her story serves as a metaphor for the fluidity of

identity. She also seeks recognition and space for her own existence. Through Dimple, Thayil portrays gender as constantly evolving, shaped by both internal desires and external societal forces.

### 3.3 Dimple's Self- Discovery:

Confused about her gender identity, Dimple grapples with her own existence, body and sexuality. Dimple does not know that who I am and what is her gender?. She embarks on a personal journey of self-discovery, a quest to understand herself more deeply. Her complex psychological experience as a *hijra* in society highlights the marginalization of her in the society. As a result, she feels, leading to an identity shaped by both fetishization and societal exclusion. This inner conflict mirrors the broader struggles of individuals who do not conform to binary gender roles. Thayil captures this turmoil, emphasizing gender fluidity as a construct constantly shaped and reshaped through personal and social negotiation. The real image of Mumbai city reveals in the following statement, "The brothels and drug dens were gone. In their place were hundreds of tiny cubicles or storefronts, each indistinguishable from the next. The street itself was as cramped ramshackle as ever, but there was a McDonald's on the corner and a mini mall and supermarkets..." (271).

### 3.4 Addiction and Gender Identity:

In *Narcopolis*, Thayil reveals that Dimple's drug addiction is intertwined with her fluid gender identity, as she seeks escape from restrictive societal norms. She turns to opium to distance herself from the harsh realities of the world, ultimately blurring the lines between illusion and reality as she retreats into a realm where these distinctions fade. Due to the impact of drug, Dimple like the other slums dweller, migrant labour, street vendors, sex workers and street vendors who migrate in the city to get the success hiding their failure in the life. As a scholar Deshmukh S. comments, "Marginalized communities, such as sex workers, street children, and migrant workers, face heightened risks of drug addiction due to socio-economic vulnerabilities and social exclusion. The impact of addiction on these communities extends to health disparities, stigma, and barriers to accessing addiction treatment" (qtd. In Pankaj Vaishnav 3).

### 3.5 Urban Decay and Gender Transgression:

In the novel, like other metropolitan cities, Mumbai is not merely a setting but also functions as a character. The city has a fluid identity that evolves and adapts with time and circumstances, transforming from traditional to modern. Despite the fragmented world it inhabits, Mumbai provides shelter and basic amenities to its residents and characters. The novel suggests that in a city where survival is precarious, rigid identities cannot endure, making fluidity essential for navigating life. As the narrative progress, the city of, "Bombay, which obliterates its past by itself, by design" (7) and represents a world with numerous shattered identity and functions.

### 3.6 Mumbai's Opium Dens as Liminal Spaces:

Throughout *Narcopolis*, Jeet Thayil portrays Mumbai as a liminal dreamscape that draws individuals like Dimple and others who migrate in search of fulfillment. While some manage to achieve their aspirations, many fall short due to pervasive corruption, leading them to turn to opium as an escape. Under opium's influence, the lines between reality and fantasy blur, along with distinctions between man and woman, rich and poor, and even life and death. The opium dens become sanctuaries for those who defy societal norms, where gender fluidity is accepted, and

characters like Dimple find a sense of belonging otherwise denied to them in the outside world. She says, “Maybe I is, may be the O (opium) is the I and I is unreliable, my memory like blotting paper, my full of holes, porous, shreddable non- memory, remembering details from thirty years ago” (6).

### **3.7 Addiction as a Metaphor:**

Addiction in *Narcopolis* is intertwined with the characters’ ability to transgress societal norms, including those related to gender. The altered states induced by drugs allow characters to explore identities that are otherwise suppressed. Thayil uses addiction as a metaphor for the fluidity of identity, suggesting that the characters’ addictions to opium and other substances are attempts to escape the rigid confines of gender, class, and societal expectations.

### **3.8 Intersectionality of Gender, Class, and Power:**

With the help of gender fluidity, Thayil unfolds in the intersectionality of gender, class, and power. Dimple is not only a margin on the behalf of their identity but also her socioeconomic status. So, she does not choose the section of third gender by her own choice but also to fulfill their socioeconomic aspirations. As a result, she is deeply influenced by the characters’ social and economic circumstances. It is clearly seen in the novel, “Bombay, which obliterates its past by itself, by design. The only city that improves on the original by forgetting it” (7).

### **3.9 Survival of Margins through Gender fluidity:**

As the narrative progresses, Thayil illustrates the survival strategies of marginalized individuals in the city. Migrant groups, in particular, adopt gender fluidity as a means to endure the challenges of urban life. By moving between different genders roles, these individuals navigate a society that often rejects their identities. In *Narcopolis*, Dimple embodies this approach by adopting various gender expressions, not only as a way to establish her identity but as a crucial strategy for survival outside societal norms.

### **Gender Fluidity as a Social Resistance:**

Throughout *Narcopolis*, Jeet Thayil seeks to expose and resist the oppressive structures of contemporary society. As the narrative unfolds, Thayil reveals his artistry by carefully shaping his characters to reflect his vision, particularly evident in the character of Dimple. Dimple, a hijra, symbolizes a revolutionary force, resisting the oppression experienced by the middle and lower classes. Her identity and existence as a *hijra* embody resistance against the patriarchal and heteronormative forces that try to confine her. Thayil presents gender fluidity as both a personal and political act of defiance, challenging the conventional power dynamics that govern gender and identity.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

To sum up, this study examines the theme of gender fluidity within the contemporary social structure and its impact on traditional gender binaries. The analysis reveals how marginalized individuals use gender fluidity as a survival strategy within a chaotic urban environment. Through

characters like Dimple and the turbulent world they navigate, Thayil challenges rigid traditional gender norms, inviting readers to consider the fluid nature of identity. Ultimately, the novel suggests that in a world shaped by addiction, decay, and disintegration, fluidity—in gender, identity, and life itself—becomes essential for survival.

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