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PORTRAYAL OF CHARACTERS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY ACROSS NOVELS OF
DIFFERENTIATED GENRES

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ABSTRACT

Characters and their portrayal in novels are as, if not more, important as the plot themselves in enabling the novelists communicate with the reader. This is particularly relevant (and possibly difficult) for novels set in a time far removed from when the novel is brought before the reader. To the extent that the ease of a reader in getting in the shoes of a novel's characters is a direct function of the strength of its characterization, it is worth exploring the depths of novels through the intensity of the portrayals of their characters. This paper attempts to do so through two novels: Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* and Zeenuth Futehally's *Zohra*. The former traversing three decades from the seventies in Bombay, is a narrative of the dark lives of a wide array of inconsequential people who throng the alleys of the city for momentary pleasures through drugs. Yet, their expressions, aspirations and pains narrated by Thayil, is anything but inconsequential. Futehally, on the other hand, paints a fine picture of the conflicts in the lives of her novel's main protagonist, Zohra, along with the two men closest to her. Set in the backdrop of a Nawabi family in Hyderabad, the portrayal of the three main characters amply contributes to the narrative of this conflict and its irresolution.

Key words: Characterisation, conflict, drugs, sub-culture, tradition, urban centre

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Introduction

Narcopolis and *Zohra* are novels that are set against the backdrop of two large metropolis of India – Mumbai and Hyderabad. Through the characters in the two novels, the novelists not just narrate the stories of two distinct sets of people in these cities, but also portray the sub-cultures where they live and die. As such, the characterization of the various persons in the novels is an elemental and indispensable way to understand the sub-cultures the novels portray, especially to the reader unfamiliar with these sub cultures. The characters in *Narcopolis* are those from the world of addicts, prostitutes, pimps and drug dealers, whose conversations and interpersonal relations bring out the various travails of their lives, their near-hopeless futures and unfulfilled desires, a world where drugs play as important role as characters themselves. In *Zohra*, similarly, the chasm between the ambitions and realities that the three main characters: Zohra, her husband and

brother-in-law, encounter is a reminder of the conflicts that often come to the fore in the evolution of traditional societies such as that in pre-independence Hyderabad, where the characters live.

Nacropolis

Jeet Thayil's first novel charts the evolution of a great and yet, broken, metropolis over a span of three decades through the lens of its protagonist who arrives from New York to find himself confronting Bombay's (the author consistently refers to this city by its earlier name) underworld, in particular an opium den and attached brothel. In the conversations, activities and intercourses he has with the many characters, he uncovers and presents before the reader the travails and agonies of these characters, as much as the pains of a decadent city. Essentially a drug narrative (readers may often be reminded of Gregory David Roberts' *Shantaram*, an immensely popular narrative on Mumbai and its underbelly of drugs), focusing on the addicts, the dealers, the victim, and all those connected to drugs, set during the three decades from the seventies in Bombay. Years later, the novel reveals to the reader a much-changed Bombay, not in progress the city would have made, but in the pattern of drug abuse: addicts replacing opium with heroin, which had found their way from Pakistan, and Bombay's dark sides becoming even darker. Apart from sex and drugs, there is another element that has entered the city's characters and its residents for their primary release and recreation: violence, mainly of the communal character. The violence of the city and its purveyors has moved from the fringes to the center of their lives. It is in this evolution or decadence that the city and many of its characters in the novel find their true expression. Other than that, the focus of the novel remains on the gritty, gross, twisted, and dark underbelly of an urban center, the context of which provides the perfect background for the hallucinatory conversations and complex interpersonal relations that characterize its many complex characters.

Read with a certain view, the background of the novel set against the life and times of Bombay of the 70s gives a good description of the city of that period. But the characterization of the individuals is more vivid, interesting and to a reader of novels of this genre, somewhat unique. It is not really about the mafia or the politics but the characters that exist in the life and times of Bombay around the opium dens of Shuklaji street around the Hindu Muslim riots, religious differences, 70s and 80s Hindi ('Bollywood') films and the stars of this glamour industry, and the Chinese Communist propaganda that forms the basis of the human relationships and their dynamics weaved into this novel. All the characters appear real despite the hallucinatory conversations and strong overtones of drugs, violence and sleaze that characterize almost the entire novel. Whether it is Lee, a Chinese runaway man; Rashid, the owner of *Afeem Khana* at Shuklaji Street which is the central place of the novel; Rashid's employees, Bengali and Dimple, the latter's characterization being the centre around which much of the novel revolves; Rashid's son, Jamal; random addicts such as Rumi and Salim; or the narrator, Dom Ullis, the novel revolves around their surreal and interesting relationships and conversations. Rashid and Dimple's relationship, Rashid's idiosyncrasies and religious paradoxes, Rumi's unfettered near-lunacy, Mr. Lee's Chinese past and even *Pathar Maar*, the stone killer, the character of the city can be discovered in each of these characters, paving the way for developing an almost unforgettable image of the dark and unknown alleys of Bombay. The *Pathar Maar* himself is a murderer of the voiceless and forgotten lives who live in the streets and alleys of the city and who is, perhaps, a dark personification Bombay itself.

The novel's narrator, Dom Ullis, was born into a respectable family and received decent education, but he, like the other characters, falls prey to drug addiction. The addiction, likewise, is the fountainhead of his relationships with all kinds of people mentioned above: prostitutes, addicts, pushers, pimps, wife beaters, the abused and the abusers - living on the edges of society and in the filth of Bombay's crime-prone districts. They all come and go hazy in a hazy world and the novelist has ensured that none of the characters are very strong anywhere in the novel. This seems to be the high point of the novel as it is the weak who fall to drugs and other evils, epitomizing the general human weaknesses and human failings, and the efforts or otherwise to emerge out of these.

Dimple or Zeenat is, by all accounts, the most interesting character of *Nacropolis*, not just because of the duality associated with the man-woman and body-mind paradox. She (the narrative mostly borders around Dimple's feminine side, rather than her masculinity) is multifaceted and deep, as also sad and lonely, almost haunting the environment she dwells and converses in. Her being a eunuch is nothing more than a part of her general being, it is never elevated to the core of her character, of who she is. This restraint on the part of the novelist gives her presence in the novel a beautiful dignity. At times when she takes over as the narrator, lending life and dynamism to the plot and preventing it from drying up till she talks. It is Dimple that lends the novel the proverbial silver lining in the otherwise overpowering dark clouds that have been purposefully made to overcast in the entire plot. Despite the bleakness of her surroundings, she continues to search for beauty in all places surrounding her—at the movies, in pulp magazines, and even in a new burka-wearing identity.

It is through Dimple's eyes that the reader is able to see the layered vision of something as elemental in the novel as drugs. "Drugs are a bad habit, so why do it? Because, said Dimple, it isn't the heroin that we're addicted to, it's the drama of the life, the chaos of it, that's the real addiction and we never get over it; and because when you come down to it, the high life, that is, the intoxicated life, is the best of the limited options offered" (*Nacropolis*, pg. 231), says Thayil, effectively capturing the complexity of the collective minds of almost all characters in the novel Dimple has had any interaction with.

The characters in the novel follow different and sometimes even unexpected trails of evolution as the novel progresses. This is amply brought out in the episodic approach taken in the novel. For instance, the largely non-communal basis of love-hate relationships among different characters slowly gives way to communal undertones in their relations. A watershed period of this changeover is the Bombay riots of 1992, which takes a toll in the interpersonal equations of even the drug addicts. These addicts belong to both Hindu and Muslim communities, and their talks begin including narratives of their differences in terms of ethnicity and religion. Yet, this communal undertone remains just that, an undertone, for the city's social outclasses and the drugs that binds them into a small community, howsoever transitory, come out as more significant than their communal differences. This is possibly the novelist's statement about his conviction of the strength of social relationships that transcend the boundaries of communities, which various other writers have also commented upon with respect of the city of Bombay.

The tone of the novel is largely of melancholy, with the novelist helping the reader pick up occasional threads of life in an otherwise dreary desert of death and decadence. By the end of the novel, the melancholy tends to deepen as it laments the gradual sinking of cultures of an era gone by in the tides of consumerism and the new civilization. More importantly, the loss of people to addiction, the very people who had lived in their make-believe world of hallucinations, primal instincts and respite, howsoever transitory, reverberates in this tone of melancholy. These people are as much oblivious to the world outside their own little world in the city, as the city is oblivious of them. Yet, the people and their complex social intercourses, despite the squalor and debauchery of the environs where these take place, and despite the pronounced dark shades of their own personal and social lives, offer rich exposition into the minds and lives of the forgotten and marginalized sections of the megalopolis.

Zohra

The novel *Zohra* gives us a glimpse into the world of the Muslim royalty during the pre-independence era. Into this family is born a girl who, from her early life, wants to break barriers and traditions and live a life of creativity. The novel gives us a description of Indian Muslim life which is a mix of Hinduism and Islam. Her liberal nature can be seen in her behavior towards men whom she feels attracted to. Her urge for independence closely resonates with Indian's struggle for independence, which forms the backdrop of the novel, as she is trapped in a complex and traditional society.

From an early age, Zohra is different from other girls of her age. For instance, her thoughts about her piano teacher who is not married, is different from others. While others think that the teacher is old and so is not able to marry, Zohra understands that since the teacher has been betrayed in love, she did not want to

marry. In such a thought, we find a sensitive young girl with a mind free from the prejudices that otherwise strongly influence the minds of young people of her age.

Zohra is married when she is still young and studying. Bashir, the man she is married to, is considered a perfect match as he is foreign educated and doing well in life, apart from belonging to a 'very respectable' family. But marriage to Bashir does not make Zohra happy. Although he is a good and caring husband, he does not share her love for poetry and art and cannot be the ears for the expressions of Zohra's suppressed emotions and thoughts. It is her constant search for a soulmate, one who she can speak to uninhibited and be inspired from, that makes her seek friendship in other men, a search that haunts Zohra almost to the end of her life. It is for this reason that she totally surrenders to love, when she finds it, deriving profound happiness from this surrender. It gives meaning to her life.

Bashir is the typical face of Muslim royalty and as such does not have Zohra's passion for life. He, however, tries very hard to be a good husband, but possibly their age gap comes in the way of creating any vibrancy in their relationship. More importantly, his traditional thinking and reluctance to do anything that may break the set norms of a traditional society, makes him uninteresting to Zohra. Without the excitement that she has been looking for, their marriage becomes dry despite Bashir's efforts to prove himself a good husband. There are, of course, times when the gap between them narrow, for instance, during their holiday at Mussorie. The holiday gives Zohra the reason to help Bashir overcome his shyness. The novelist uses the narrative of Zohra's relationship with Bashir to explore the agonies and ecstasies of independent-minded women from a society that really does not encourage such independence and the conflicts that these women go through all their lives, for instance, constantly encountering a choice between security and freedom. She feels like a young girl in the presence of Shiraj. He is nothing like Bashir, who is strict and studious. She loves the fact that Shiraj is fun loving and loves a good conversation. When she becomes pregnant, however, she maintains distance with Shiraj.

It is in Hamid, Bashir's younger brother, that Zohra finds her soulmate. Hamid belongs to the current generation and is devoted to India's freedom struggle, very much influenced by Gandhiji's non-violent movement. From the time he arrives from Europe, Zohra and Hamid feel a strange connection to each other. Hamid is a free spirit, one who cannot be bound by marriage. His love for Zohra is unbridled but even he suppresses his emotions because of social moorings. He has had a series of affairs while in Europe, but none transformed into any serious relationship. The moment he sets his eyes on Zohra, he feels for her. When at last he confides in her his love, he leaves home to participate in India's freedom movement just to keep his mind absorbed as he considers even the possibility of their union a sin. He again engages in a series of affairs to keep himself busy and returns only when Zohra is in her death bed. When she finally dies, he lets out his emotions uncontrollably. It is to the novelist's credit that the intensity of their love is portrayed with a rare sensitivity, as the narration could have easily slipped into pulp fiction and voyeurism.

Though the novel is not overtly feminist, one cannot help notice the subtle hint the novelist has thrown of the absence of opportunity or conducive social environment where Zohra can give words to her thoughts even to the two men closest to her. There are arguments and counter-arguments, for instance, between Bashir and Hamid about modes of political protest leading to India's independence. Hamid is married to the Gandhian methods of non-violence, while Bashir has no faith in such philosophies. Hamid follows the Gandhian philosophy of dressing in Indian clothes, while his brother does not think twice before donning suits even in the sweltering heat of Hyderabad. But the point to note is that though Zohra observes all of these differences and has her own opinions about the issues being debated between the two brothers, she remains a silent witness. Although she tends to be inclined more with the political philosophy of Hamid than with her husband, she makes no comment on the subject. The background and Zohra's conflict is remarkably similar to what Bimala went through in Tagore's *Home and the World*.

Conclusion

Nacropolis and *Zohra* being novels of completely different genres, their characters are as different as chalk and cheese. While the former narrates the dark lives of a forgotten world in the dark lanes of Bombay,

the latter reveals the aspirations and pains of not achieving them of characters of a traditional Muslim household in Hyderabad. However, at a very fundamental level, there are common threads that bind these vastly different characters of the two novels. These are the threads of their multipronged desires, even if the characters know of their inability to fulfill many of them. Whether it is Dimple and Rashid of *Narcopolis*, or Zohra and Hamid of *Zohra*, the two novelists, Thayil and Futehally weave two fine narrations of human aspirations through the characters of their respective novels, set against the aspirations of the cities they live in.

Lastly, it is interesting to note that like the aspirations of the characters, those of their cities are hardly fulfilled. The slums and dark lanes of Bombay in *Narcopolis* remain the same over three decades. Poverty coexists with wealth, and drugs remain entrenched in the shady world of the novel, only its form changes from opium to heroin. Hyderabad of *Zohra*, likewise, does not offer the Zohra the breather one would expect in a city life where winds of change *a' la* the independence movement comes right to her doorstep. She lives and dies being rooted in a sub-culture which is an antithesis to her own independent mind. The novelists, perhaps unconsciously, bring out the oft-quoted element of India's urban life: the more things change, the more they remain the same.

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