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At the Intersection of Queerness, Disease, and Tropics: Walking the Streets of Anosh Irani's 'The Parcel'

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Abstract

This paper provides an analysis of Anosh Irani's novel *The Parcel,* with a particular focus on queerness and disease within the Hijra community of prostitutes in the tropical setting of Kamathipura, the notorious red-light district of Mumbai, India. The paper delves into the novel's nuanced portrayal of queerness, exploring how it intersects with the theme of disease within the tropical milieu. Extending the theoretical works of Elizabeth Outka on disease, and Erving Goffman on stigma to the queer tropics, the study explores how these elements interact and influence the lived experiences of the Hijra community. The paper highlights how the novel presents contagion and disease as a pervasive aspect of the characters' lives, shaping their experiences and identities. The tropical enclave of Kamathipura is examined for its role in compounding the challenges faced by the Hijra community, including health disparities and social stigma. This study contributes to literary scholarship on queerness and health in the Indian tropics, offering a deeper understanding of the realities faced by marginalized communities.

Keywords: Disease and Social Stigma, Queer literature, Hijra Community, Kamathipura Prostitution District, Tropical India, Anosh Irani

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Introduction: Queerness, Disease, Tropicality

This paper offers an analysis at the intersection of queerness, disease, and tropicality through a reading of Anosh Irani's novel *The Parcel* (2017). Set in the red-light district of Kamathipura in Mumbai, India, the novel focuses on the Hijra transgender community which forms part of the sex-labor and beggar forces who have a marked presence on the streets of this enclave. Employing qualitative textual analysis, this study explores diverse facets of Hijra existence, emphasizing the intersection of queer socio-cultural dynamics with notions of contagious disease and social stigma, set within the local tropical milieu.

While the portrayal of Kamathipura in the novel highlights its role in shaping queer experiences and illustrating the intersectionality of tropics and queerness, our aim is to take this further and delve into the themes of disease and social stigma. Our analysis reveals subtle traces of contagion woven throughout the novel's narrative. Drawing inspiration from Elizabeth Outka's exploration of contagious trauma in modernist literature, we extend her concepts to investigate how infection serves as a central theme in this novel and its setting within the tropical locale of Kamathipura. We further undertake to extend Erving Goffman's theory of stigma and "spoiled identity" to the Hijra community's lived experience in *The Parcel*. This reveals a broader social issue in which Hijra communities are further stigmatized and marginalized based on perceived notions of disease which reinforce existing prejudices and stereotypes. Moreover, the impact of societal stigma on the self-perception of the Hijra community is a crucial area of exploration. It shows how societal perceptions can seep into an individual's self-concept, influencing their self-image and sense of self-worth. This exploration of internalized stigma illuminates the psychological toll of societal prejudice, adding another layer to our understanding of the complex realities faced by the Hijra community.

Our study underscores the vulnerability of marginalized communities, particularly Hijra's and other LGBTQ+ identities who are often scapegoated as vectors of infection. These individuals endure not only physical ailments but also societal discrimination and stigma through their perceived association with contagion. While much discourse surrounds the challenges faced by Hijra communities, scant attention has been given to resilience in the face of diseases within an unjust healthcare system where access to medical assistance remains a luxury beyond their reach. By examining the novel through this lens, we aim to amplify the voices of Hijra communities, contributing to a broader understanding of their struggles within society's complex fabric.

Anosh Irani and the Streets of Kamathipura

Indian-Canadian author Anosh Irani was born in Mumbai in 1974, where he lived and grew up until moving to Vancouver in 1998 to pursue a career in writing. In 2003, his inaugural full-length play, 'The Matka King,' debuted at the Arts Club Theatre Company in Vancouver, earning him four Dora Awards. 'Bombay Black,' another of Irani's works, garnered acclaim, securing multiple Dora Awards. His literary journey started with the publication of 'The Cripple and His Talismans' in 2004, landing him on Quill & Quire's radar as an emerging Indian-Canadian talent to watch. Subsequently, 'The Song of Kahunsha' (2007) and 'Dahanu Road' (2010) expanded his literary oeuvre. Among his books, *The Parcel* received recognition on the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize list. For this novel, Irani draws inspiration from his Mumbai upbringing, particularly through poignant encounters within the infamous red-light district of Kamathipura.

The district of Kamathipura is notorious for its long history associated with the prostitution industry. Inaugurated after 1795 through the construction of causeways that connected the initial seven islands of Bombay/Mumbai, the locality obtained its present name from the Kamathis, the construction laborers from diverse regions of the Indian subcontinent who came for work, and settled in the then swampy wasteland area. Between the 19th and early 20th centuries, a surge of women from as far as continental Europe, Japan, and China were trafficked into Kamathipura serving as prostitutes for British soldiers and Bombay townspeople (Fischer-Tine, 2003; Tambe, 2005).

After independence, and now under Indian government administration, Kamathipura's sex business continued to grow. The district attracted women from other parts of the country who were suffering economic hardships, and the area was the end stop in sex trafficking which traversed the subcontinent. Gang activity increased in the region during the 1970s and early 1980s (Lewis, 2009), and by the early 1990s it had transformed into the most prominent district in Asia linked to sex labor. Densely crowded brothels dotted the area, where sex workers would wait outside on the street enticing patrons to rent an available bed. A crackdown in the 1990s during the AIDS epidemic reduced the number of prostitutes and made land available for sale, which caused social upheavals for the residents, and a boom in apartment developments surrounding the red-light district. Within the red-light enclave there are some 3,000 buildings, the majority of which are in a state of disrepair, and there is a severe lack of sanitation services and potable water. The streets of Kamathipura comprise a mishmash of fourteen lanes, reflecting the geographical origins of its original immigrant construction workforce (The Hindu, 2013). These lanes thus form a complex cultural streetscape, a miasmatic atmosphere at the intersection of squalor and tropicality,

which is further associated with the prominence of Hijras, other prostitutes, and beggars walking the streets.

Although a work of fiction, *The Parcel* (2016, 2017) intricately weaves Irani's personal observations and experiences with the marginalized Hijra community in Kamathipura. Through this narrative, he sheds light on the struggles of Indian transgender communities, grappling with poverty, criminalization, and societal discrimination. Irani draws inspiration from personal encounters and reflections on his Bombay/Mumbai upbringing, particularly his fascination with nearby sex workers:

> It's a grim reality that has taken decades to sink in. One of my earliest memories is a single snapshot: a brothel and a woman standing outside it. In my mind's eye, the scene is glimpsed from a height because my mother was carrying me as we walked through Kamathipura, one of the most notorious red-light districts in the world. (Irani, 2017, Nov 29)

These encounters and growing up on a compound at the edge of Kamathipura deeply influenced his writing, motivating him to create a literary style that challenges conventional norms in its beauty of phrase and its brutal descriptions.

The Parcel: Plot Overview

The Parcel is a thought-provoking story that almost swamps the reader in the harsh realities of Kamathipura with depictions of its pervasive sex industry and criminal activities of sex trafficking and drug dealing. The core of this novel revolves around the experiences of Madhu, an intrepid Hijra who identifies as transsexual. Born male but choosing a eunuch's path, she's entrenched in a tight-knit community of transgender sex workers. The story unfolds with interspersed memories of Madhu's childhood as a young boy growing up in an apartment block next to the red-light district. Madhu encounters Guru Mai, an elderly Hijra who visits Madhu's parents at their apartment one night and informs them that their son belongs to the community of Hijras. This visit prompts a keen awareness in Madhu who starts wandering the streets around Kamathipura until he arrives at the Hijra house in the red-light district. Guru Mai encourages the boy in conversation and social interaction with the Hijras. Eventually, the young Madhu decides to join Guru Mai's household, changing his gender to female. She also makes the ultimate decision to be castrated as part of her total transformation into a Hijra. Following her castration, she enters the sex work industry, but neither her new identity nor her work is entirely satisfactory. Frequently, she becomes engrossed in memories of her estranged family, including her younger brother, who assaulted Madhu when he was a child.

During her time in the Hijra household, Madhu develops a deep affection for her client Gajja with whom she forms a lifelong friendship that goes beyond physical relations. She also forms bonds within the Hijra household with her sisters Bulbul, Tarana Anjali, and others. As she gets older, Madhu conveys to Guru Mai her decision to discontinue her involvement in the sex trade. As a result, she is compelled by Guru Mai to engage in street begging in order to continue to pay her way. At this juncture, Madhu is merely eking out an existence but remains part of the Hijra household. Her life changes when Guru Mai directs her to undertake a task requested by Padma, the madam/owner of one of the district's more prominent brothels. Padma has received "a parcel," a euphemism for an underaged girl, who has been sold into the sex industry. Madhu is entrusted with the responsibility of initiating Kinjal, the eleven-year-old Nepalese girl who has been trafficked by her aunt. Most "parcels" are broken into the sex trade through physical violence, but Madhu uses psychological manipulation instead, shaping Kinjal's perceptions of her future as a prostitute and breaking any hope for rescue or escape. During the process of Kinjal's breaking in, Madhu develops sympathetic feelings towards the girl. When Madhu learns that Kinjal's arrival at the brothel is tied to curing an unnamed contagious disease afflicting an elderly man, which is presumed curable through intercourse with a virgin, Madhu undergoes a profound awakening, recognizing echoes of her own hardships in Kinjal's plight, and ultimately takes action to save her from a fate she herself once endured.

The narrative introduces the reader to the vulnerability of the marginalized Hijra community and their work in prostitution and street begging. However, Hijras have not always been in this position. This current scenario has a long history that leads us back through the by-lanes of Indian mythology, British colonialism, and postcolonial independence.

Hijras and Histories

Within India, the term 'hijra' encompasses eunuchs, intersex individuals, and transgender people. They live within communities that adhere to a kinship structure known as the guru-chela system (Nanda,1986a, p.36). Hijras have been acknowledged since ancient times. In the narrative of Lord Rama's exile from the sacred city of Ayodhya, his loyal subjects follow him as he embarks on the journey into the forest. At the border of the river, he addressed his disciples with the words, '[L]adies and gents, please wipe your tears and go away' (Nanda,1986b, p.37). Subsequently, the majority of the populace adhered to his command and returned to the city. However, a distinct group lingered at the forest's periphery—neither classified as men nor women – these individuals, known as Hijras, patiently waited fourteen years for Lord Rama's return. This steadfast loyalty earned them a significant place in

Hindu mythology. Although the tale's origin remains enigmatic as it is absent in early renditions of ancient Hindu texts, the story has evolved into a crucial component of the Hijras' identity. Likewise, Hijras played a noteworthy role in India's Muslim history, serving as the gender-neutral guardians of Mughal harems (Gettleman, 2018, para 2).

Thus, hundreds of years ago, under traditional Indian culture, Hijras enjoyed a certain degree of respect. However, when the British colonized the subcontinent in the mid-19th century, they brought a strict sense of judgement regarding sexual mores, criminalizing "carnal intercourse against the order of nature" (Gettleman, 2018, para 20). This marked the beginning of a mainstream discomfort in India regarding homosexuality and transgender people. According to the article titled "India's Relationship with the Third Gender" (2018) in the UAB Institute for Human Rights Blog, the primary cause for the ostracization of Hijra's can be attributed largely to the British colonization of India. As the British assumed direct control and dissolved the British East India Company, officials sought to impose Western ideals on the citizens of India, enforcing moral laws that banned practices deemed unclean by Western standards. Notably, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, enacted in 1858 (and only declared unconstitutional on September 6, 2018), criminalized "unnatural offenses" against the perceived order of nature, leading to the mistreatment and punishment of Hijras, and the LGBTQ+ community. This imposition of Western disdain for those outside the heterosexual and cisgender norm took root in Indian society, pushing the Hijra community from esteemed roles in religious and governmental spheres to social outcasts. This social exile has contributed to the socio-economic and medical challenges faced by Hijras as they encounter discrimination in education, employment, and various other aspects of their lives.

Despite achieving independence from Britain in 1947, India has only recently initiated efforts to dismantle legislation historically wielded against the Hijra and LGBTQ+ community. Generations of subjugation have left a lasting impact, embedding colonial prejudices against LGBTQ+ individuals into India's cultural fabric. Despite advocacy campaigns and a growing support base, the majority of Indians still harbor opposition to Hijras, undervaluing their worth. While Hijras, following tradition, are still invited to auspicious events to bestow blessings as they are viewed as bringers of good luck and spirit wardens, pervasive discrimination forces many into dancing for event entertainment, begging at traffic lights, and working as prostitutes, as they remain largely excluded from employment opportunities (UAB, 2018). Beyond employment challenges, Hijras encounter difficulties in accessing basic medical care. Instances of medical malpractice against Hijra individuals are unfortunately common.

While acknowledged as a culturally recognized third gender for an extensive period, legal recognition of Hijras as a third gender in various South Asian nations has only

recently emerged (Hossain, 2017). The Supreme Court of India granted transgender individuals the right to identify as a third gender and mandated the central and state governments to provide comprehensive legal recognition to them. Presently, individuals identifying as transgender, irrespective of whether they are castrated or not, often face skepticism and mockery, with some attributing supernatural powers, such as sorcery, to them (Varma & Najar, 2015). The paradox remains that Hijras, who played vital roles in ancient Indian society, continue to face ostracization and persecution in modern India.

This history of Hijra's has also been reflected in diverse literary texts. Indian literature boasts a rich diversity encompassing sacred texts, myths, epics, and poetry, many of which feature transgender characters and themes. In the ancient Hindu epic, the Mahabharata, the narrative of Shikhandi, a transgender character pivotal in the battle of Kurukshetra,[1] is prominently featured. Additionally, Hindu scriptures such as the Kama Sutra[2] recognize the presence of a third gender, referred to as "tritiya prakriti," emphasizing the acceptance of non-binary identities (Maheshwary, 2023). In theatrical works like Mahesh Dattani's 'Seven Steps Around the Fire'(Singh, 2012), the struggles and richness of Hijra lives find expression, offering diverse perspectives and narratives that unveil the societal intricacies surrounding gender identity in India. In recent years, contemporary Indian literature has witnessed a surge in works exploring transgender identities and experiences. From the ancient wisdom texts to contemporary narratives like A. Revathi's poignant memoir *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010), their portrayal resonates deeply within the literary landscape. In the epic tales of Amir Hamza[3] or the modern complexities depicted in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2018), Hijra characters emerge, challenging norms and embodying multifaceted identities. These literary works serve as poignant reflections that invite readers to explore, understand, and appreciate the vibrant diversity of human gender and sexual experiences within Indian society. Irani's novel *The Parcel*, joins this long list of literary texts that reveal the lived experiences of Hijras.

[1] The Kurukshetra War, also known as the Mahabharata War, is recounted in the Hindu epic poem Mahabharata. It emerged from a dynastic conflict between two sets of cousins, the Kauravas and the Pandavas, vying for the throne of Hastinapura. This war serves as the backdrop for the events unfolding in the Bhagavad Gita.
[2] The term "Kama Sutra" translates to "Aphorisms on Love" or "Rules of Love." It is an ancient Indian Sanskrit text attributed to Vātsyāyana, believed to have been written between the 1st and 6th centuries CE. Despite its reputation mainly for its chapter on sexual techniques, the Kama Sutra is a comprehensive guide that covers various aspects of relationships, courtship, marital life, and human behavior. Its content extends beyond just physical intimacy, encompassing guidance on love, attraction, and relationships.
[3] Amir Hamza, a legendary figure in Persian and South Asian folklore, is featured in tales known as "Dastan-e Amir Hamza." These stories often include Hijra characters, intertwining their roles with mystical elements within the narrative.

Tropics and Disease

In the novel, Madhu's journey unfolds against the backdrop of diverse cultures that continue to make up the complex streets of the red-light district. Although the original migrant laborers who first settled the area have long passed, the district continues to receive wanderers from across the Indian subcontinent who create its unique milieu. As Madhu grapples with the multiplicity of identities thrust upon her, the tropical setting adds layers of complexity to her narrative. She describes herself in the following words:

> I go by many names, none of my own choosing. I am called Ali, Aravani, Nau Number, Sixer, Mamu, Gandu, Napunsak, Kinnar, Kojja—the list goes on and on like a politician's promise. There is a term for me in almost every Indian language. I am reviled and revered, deemed to have been blessed, and cursed, with sacred powers. Parents think of me as a kidnapper, shopkeepers as a lucky charm, and married couples as a fertility expert. To passengers in taxis, I am but a nuisance. I am shooed away like a crow. Everyone has their version of what I am. Or what they want me to be. My least favourite is what they call my kind in Tamil: Thirunangai. Mister Woman. (Irani, 2016, p.7)

Madhu, like the tropical milieu, is a fusion of contradictions. A sense of tropicality, with its diverse ecosystems, reflects the varied identities that Madhu is forced to embody. The names bestowed upon her resonate like the rustling leaves of palm trees and the shrill of insects, each carrying a different connotation, a different expectation. The tropical climate, with its sticky intensity, mirrors the societal attitudes that both revile and revere her. In the tropics, where the lines between earth and sky blur in the radiant heat, Madhu finds herself in a space "neither here nor there, neither desert nor forest, neither earth nor sky, neither man nor woman" (Irani, 2016, p.8). Tropicality is like the liminality she experiences in her own identity. Her self-assertion, encapsulated in the term 'Hijra,' takes on a new dimension. The word itself, Urdu for "migration," resonates with the constant movement and adaptation required in this environment. Madhu, "indeed a migrant, a wanderer" roaming "through the city's red-light district like a ghost" (Irani, 2016, p.8), becomes a metaphor for the migratory nature of the tropics, where life dissolves "like the hot vapour of chai" (Irani, 2016, p.8). Madhu's struggle with displacement, a central theme in the narrative, becomes intertwined with the ever-shifting landscapes of the tropical city.

This subtle, yet pervasive, sense of tropicality, also intersects with disease – especially contagious disease. The imaginary of the diseased tropics has a long legacy and has

been particularly prevalent in western discourses, ranging from ancient Greece, through the colonial era, and into the present. “This historical imaginary arose with Aristotle’s notion of the tropics as the ‘torrid zone’…it persisted in colonial imaginaries of the tropics as pestilential latitudes. The tropical sites of colonialisms gave rise to urgent (western) studies of tropical diseases which lead to… the creation of institutes of tropical medicine…” (Lundberg et al., 2021, p 2). In effect, the tropics are associated with miasmas, contagion, and pestilence. This association has been particularly acute on the subcontinent, indeed: “The tropical countries of the Indian Ocean have often been described as a disease zone and India, in particular, as a quagmire of diseases and epidemics” (Priyanka, 2021, p. 295).

Literature arising from the subcontinent has long addressed the social impact of diseases, including contagious outbreaks, on the lived experiences of vulnerable populations. This is likewise the case in *The Parcel*. An overarching and highly relevant theme in the novel revolves around the concept of disease, rendering it particularly pertinent to the contemporary era. Throughout the narrative, vivid depictions of ailments and decay abound. The story subtly references diseases such as HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis (TB). HIV/AIDS serves as a persistent backdrop within the realm of queer culture and the lived experiences of the queer community in the area of Kamthipura. In the context of the novel, the experience of Hijra’s living in Kamathipura is akin to being in a state of emergency. “That is what the area was called by the municipality…E Ward” (Irani, 2016, p.17). According to Madhu, “It was the most appropriate name for where they were located: E for Emergency” (Irani, 2016, p.17). The exploration of disease in the novel not only reflects the broader societal context but also delves into the nuanced intricacies of queer existence, weaving a narrative that resonates with the complex interplay between health, identity, and societal perceptions.

In her book *Viral Modernism* (2019) Elizabeth Outka explores modernist literature through the prism of contagious diseases, particularly the 1918 influenza pandemic. Her examination, with a focus on “gaps, silences, atmospheres, fragments, and hidden bodies” (Outka, 2019, p.8), takes on a theoretical lens that reveals the veiled nature of the pandemic's impact on the literary milieu of the twentieth century. While Outka’s analysis encompasses a wide array of literary works from the Northern temperate zone, our study adopts a more focused approach, centering exclusively on the novel *The Parcel*, and the queer lives within the red-light district. In the novel, Kamathipura becomes a tropical battleground where diseases like tuberculosis, AIDS, and dengue entwine with the harrowing plight of prostitution. Furthermore, the “miasmic atmosphere” that Outka (2019, p.16-17) discerns in modernist literature takes root in the narrative landscape of *The Parcel*, echoing the mysterious yet potent presence of contagion. Embedded within the narrative, contagion is manifested either through

direct reference or through implicit allusions to diseases such as HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis (TB), and to a lesser extent to tropical vector diseases such as dengue. Throughout the novel, the characters, primarily Hijra's, are depicted as frequently "muffling their coughs" (Irani, 2016, p.14). This recurring action serves as a poignant symbol of their struggle with undisclosed health issues and the societal pressure to conceal health vulnerabilities. The act of stifling their coughs underscores the pervasive fear and stigma surrounding illness within their community, as well as the necessity for them to maintain a façade of strength and resilience in the face of adversity.

The Parcel masterfully conveys the insidious impact of contagion on the Hijra's and prostitutes, serving as a powerful commentary on the haunting repercussions of unchecked contagion upon marginalized communities, underscoring the societal indifference that perpetuates their suffering. The glaring absence of concern for the health and hygiene of Hijra's and other prostitutes reflects a stark societal apathy, akin to the neglect often witnessed during times of large-scale contagion. Against the backdrop of this tropical enclave, where aspirations are shattered, the novel echoes the tragic toll of diseases, with each character bearing the burden of ailments that mirror the lush, yet bleak surroundings. Disease emerges not only as a physical affliction but also as a metaphoric representation of societal ailments and emotional decay, inviting reflection on the vulnerabilities of human existence in the red light district.

Social Stigma and Spoiled Identity

Erving Goffman's (1963) influential work on social stigma and the concept of "spoiled identity" (p.169) provides a way to analyze the impact of contagion on the Hijra community in the context of *The Parcel*, through the novel's complex metaphorical association of negative stereotypes with the term "positives." Goffman, in *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), explores how individuals with stigmatized attributes navigate societal interactions and manage their identities. The Hijra community, marked by the metaphoric association with "positives," faces the challenge of social stigma attached to contagious diseases. The term "positives" becomes a stigmatizing label, influencing how society perceives and interacts with Hijras:

> She gave her blood only once to get it tested, and the waiting shook her up so badly it was mathematics all over again: x (Madhu) + y (disease) = suffering. She had refused to go collect the results. She preferred not to know…. She preferred to be kept in the dark, because once the light shone, it could be blinding. (Irani, 2016, p.)

The medical tests portrayed in Madhu's story serve as a representation of the stigmatized identity faced by Hijras. Testing positive is to suffer not only disease but social stigma.

Within the Hijra and wider prostitute communities, the medical system exacerbates their marginalization by disregarding their health concerns. Instead of being treated seriously, they are perceived as superfluous. For instance:

> There was a new report each month, from some quack with a medical degree who had a deal with all the brothel owners in the area. Sick or not, the prostitutes got a clean bill of health, as spotless as the marble floor of a five-star hotel. Real tests were a waste of time, money, and blood. Even if the report was genuine in the morning, by the end of the day, five truck drivers had entered the woman. The “pojeetives,” as they were called, were in the thousands. They looked fine until they became sick and weak and fell like flies, only to be swept off the next morning with the lazy swish of a broom (Irani, 2016, p.25).

Goffman (1963, p. 84) defines stigma as a discrediting attribute that reduces an individual's social identity to a tainted one. In the case of Hijras undergoing medical tests for disease, the association with being "positives" becomes a discrediting attribute, leading to a spoiled identity: “pojeetives”. The tests not only diagnose potential health issues but also amplify the societal judgment and discrimination faced by Hijras due to the metaphoric link with contagious diseases. Goffman (1963,) introduces the concept of "spoiled identity" (p.169), emphasizing that individuals with stigmatized attributes experience a degradation of their overall social identity. Hijra’s, alongside other sex workers, are often labeled as vectors of disease, their bodies perceived as both objects of desire and potential sources of contagion:

> Their bodies, once butter, were now layered; these were women whose girth would certainly be noticed on any street corner outside the district, but inside this frenzied menagerie they were insects, insignificant yet capable of transmitting disease. Way above these women, on the rooftop, three men lay sprawled like panthers on a tree branch, scanning the labyrinth of streets below. These were the “watchers”, the eyes of the brothel, who noticed the movement of the flora and fauna beneath. Even a slight deviation from any of their prostitutes, a single attempt to move beyond their allocated boundaries, and they were beaten with wooden sticks…. (Irani, 2016, p.26)

The novel is replete with images of disease associated with the sex workers of Kamathipura, particularly those with queer identities. In this red-light enclave with its myriad brothels, queerness and disease become embroiled in the tropical imagery of a frenzied menagerie of insects – perhaps malarial mosquitoes – where prostitutes are captives walking the jungle-like streets picking up clients, their movements traced by panther-like gazes.

As Madhu in her older life, moves from prostitution to begging on the streets, she faces further rejection from the public due to the perceived risk of contagion she may pose. An incident in the novel vividly illustrates this social ostracism: “She moved closer to him and breathed into his face. All that TB, which she did not have but could” (Irani, 2016, p.13) feels like the dense, humid air of the tropics, saturated with the incessant coughs of its inhabitants, reflecting an eerie echo of a city enclave besieged by a health crisis. The Hijra community, subjected to the metaphoric association with "positives," grapples with the spoiling of their social identity through the lens of contagious diseases. The medical tests, while intended for health diagnosis, contribute to the ongoing process of identity spoilage, reinforcing societal perceptions and prejudices. In Goffman's terms, individuals with a spoiled identity engage in "information management" (p.231) to control the disclosure of their stigmatized attributes. The Hijra community, aware of the stigma attached to being "positives," strategically manage information about their health status during and after medical tests: “Perhaps it was the advantage of refusing to see the doctor. It was best to be blind to the symptoms of your illness and weakness. That way, they had no power over you” (Irani, 2016, p.68). This strategic information management becomes a survival tactic within a society prone to judgment and discrimination based on contagious diseases. Moreover, Goffman's theory of stigma illuminates the impact on self-perception within the Hijra community. The medical tests not only externalize the societal stigma but also internalize it within the individual Hijras. The constant negotiation between their identity and the stigmatizing label of "positives" influences their self-concept and contributes to the challenges of building a positive self-image.

The exploration of Goffman's theory of stigma and "spoiled identity" underscores a significant aspect of the Hijra community's lived experience in *The Parcel*. The social stigma and the struggle with identity associated with being "positive" reflect a broader societal issue. It reveals a society that marginalizes individuals based on their health status, reinforcing existing prejudices and stereotypes. The Hijra community's strategic management of information about their health status, a survival tactic within a society prone to judgement, underscores their resilience in the face of adversity. The novel thus becomes a testament to their courage and determination to assert their identity amidst societal stigma and discrimination. Moreover, the impact of societal stigma on the self-perception of the Hijra community reveals how societal perceptions

can seep into an individual's self-concept, influencing their self-image and sense of self-worth. This exploration of the internalized stigma illuminates the psychological toll of societal prejudice, adding another layer to our understanding of the complex realities faced by the Hijra community.

Closing: Towards Healing

The Parcel serves as a poignant critique, shedding light on the societal apathy directed towards vulnerable communities, particularly queer communities facing discrimination. It directs attention to the often-overlooked experiences of those on society's periphery, compelling readers to confront the harsh realities these marginalized individuals endure. Within the confines of Kamathipura, where lack of healthcare and familial rejection force queer individuals into hazardous spaces, *The Parcel* becomes a thought-provoking literary piece. Irani adeptly captures the intricacies of social relationships in this setting, offering readers a compelling and profoundly poignant encounter. Traversing the themes of contagion and disease, the novel subtly alludes to the discrimination faced by already oppressed queer communities, and highlights the dire repercussions of infections upon them. The heightened vulnerabilities and community battles during health crises underscore the consequences of societal neglect, emphasizing the community's yearning for dignity, safety, and basic necessities. Through Irani's beautiful prose, which renders a brutal reality, the novel vividly brings to life the hopes, struggles, disappointments, and aspirations of characters whose narratives are often silenced.

Through our analysis of Anosh Irani's *The Parcel*, we have hoped to reveal the subtle layers of disease within the tropical setting of Kamathipura, and its profound impact on the lived experiences of the Hijra community. Our journey, extending the theoretical work of Elizabeth Outka and Erving Goffman to a queer tropical setting, shows how the narrative presents disease as a crucial aspect of the characters' lives and identities. The miasmatic setting of Kamathipura, with its seething underbelly of crime, and descriptions of squalor, further compounds the struggles faced by the Hijra community, particularly in terms of health disparities and societal stigma. Moreover, our exploration illuminates the novel's nuanced portrayal of queerness, and its intersection with disease, stigma, and the tropical milieu. These insights not only deepen our understanding of the complex realities faced by marginalized communities in tropical India but also contribute to scholarship at the intersection of ongoing discussions in literary studies, public health, and cultural studies, underlining literature's pivotal role in reflecting and critiquing societal issues.

We close with another depiction of Madhu, and her ongoing quest for social and self-respect, for within the Hijra world disease is also entwined with healing. In her older age, Madhu, no longer a striking prostitute, is reduced to earning her keep as a beggar,

interjecting her presence in the street traffic and presenting herself at car windows to ask for alms and offer blessings.

> "May God fulfill all your dreams," she said, raising her right hand, her palm facing the man, sending healing rays his way, from her palm to his forehead, to provide him with instant calm. It was a reminder that she was no common beggar. She was a mangti hijra – a mendicant who provided blessings in exchange for a meagre sustenance. Indian mythology had afforded her a special set of skills, but this man seemed to have forgotten that.
>
> All he saw was a *thing* in a green sari. A sari that made her resemble a parrot, a gaudy creature that sat croaking on one's windowsill. She had a beak for a nose, and she had often thought of herself as a crow – her dark skin made her feel so – but today the green sari gave her a parrot's sheen, made her two birds at once. (Irani, 2016, p.5)

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