
**JEET THAYIL'S *NARCOPOLIS* AS A REFLECTION OF POSTMODERN
CONDITION IN INDIA**

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Abstract

Winner of the Sahitya Akademi award, Jeet Thayil is an Indian novelist, but he is best known as a poet. *Narcopolis* is his debut novel which concerns about opium. This novel is based on the author's own experience. The novel captures broad attention for its intimate portrayal of Mumbai's opium dens and decadent drug scene and also explores the culture of India's hijra people, who are often transgender. This novel won the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature, and also shortlisted for both the 2012 Man Booker Prize and the Hindu Literary Prize. The novel deliberately mirrors the changing culture and also the struggles faced by the people. It also features a collaborative storytelling relationship with the audience. This paper argues that Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* as a reflection of postmodern condition in contemporary India.

Keywords: Sahitya Akademi, novel, storytelling, Hindu Literary Prize, .etc

Postmodern literature emerged as a separate genre in America and France. Writers under postmodernism break away from all the rules and seek alternative principles of composition conforming to their content of existentialist thought. In Indian English Literature, postmodernism explores fragmentations in narrative and character construction in a different way. In Postmodern literature, there is a preoccupation with insecurities in the existence of humanity, and it manifests the chaotic condition of the world. In Indian English Literature, it is however different from that of England or Europe rejects such ideas, beliefs, culture, and norms of the Western.

Jeet Thayil belongs to Kerala. His poetry collections include *These Errors Are Correct and English*, and he is also the editor of *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets*.

Narcopolis is his first novel. Thayil is hailed as the leading light of a new generation of Indian Novelists because only a few people portray the pain and sufferings undergone by poor people in India. According to Thayil, Bombay seemed to be a city of intoxication and infamous for cultural degradation. In this novel, he depicts how things have changed before and after the British Colonial rule. Now everything has changed. Every individual has the rights to determine their own lives and their own future. But many of them knowingly or unknowingly use them irresponsibly rather than responsibly.

Narcopolis is set in 1970s Old Bombay. The novel's narrator arrives in Bombay, where he becomes addicted to the opium. From the beginning itself, *Narcopolis* depicts a polyglot culture where all of India's languages, faiths and castes mingle, where their main motive is money and they lead their entire life by moving through their dreams. But they don't know if their dreams ever come true. People in Bombay, live on an edge, periodically blown up when terrorists set explosives, but returning to their life the very next day. The ingenuity of Thayil's novel lies in how he has squeezed this entire universe into an opium den with a cast of pimps, pushers, poets, gangsters, and eunuchs. Critics making an assessment of the novel said,

Bombay is the first and last word of this novel, an Urban history written by a former drug addict through the changing composition of Opiates and the changing characters of their users. (BBC, 11 October 2012)

The title *Narcopolis* refers to a city of narcotics. In Bombay, people's main business during the 1970s is selling Opium i.e. the city's prosperity owed much to that trade. It's the time, where more dangerous drugs are about to invade the city.

Thayil tells the story through the city's microcosm – an opium den in Sukhlaji street, it was the center of the Opium trade in Bombay. There were around forty opium dens of different sizes on the street, who lived in that world had been smoking opium for decades. The plot is an odyssey into a large underworld of unimaginable depth where we meet a cast of unforgettably degenerate and magnetic characters, who work and patronize the venue. The novel is broken up into four books namely, *The story of O*, *The Story of the Pipe*, *The Intoxicated*, and *Some Uses of Reincarnation*. Book one begins with the arrival of Dom Ullis in Bombay. He is the narrator of this novel. He appears only at the beginning of the novel, later he reappears at the end of the novel. It is the late 1970s, and he quickly weaves himself into the fabric of Bombay, where he meets Rashid, owner of a Khana on Shukhlaji street in which much of the novel takes place. Dimple, the beautiful hijra who works for Rashid prepares bowls of Opium and also manages Rashid's money; Rumi, the unflinchingly confrontational businessman whose addiction is violence.

All the characters in this novel have their own stories. Each character undergoes different pain and sufferings. Here opium acts as a healing effect for those people who want to forget their sufferings temporarily. Each character has their own story but they are unable to find a solution

to their problems. Dimple is one such character who is unable to forget her past memories. So, she underwent medical surgery and change herself into a man in order to safeguard herself from society. At first, she experiences severe body pain as a result of hormonal changes from being gelded at a young age. In such a condition, she visits a Chinese man called Mr. Lee, who provides her opium to ease her pain. At first, development in the medicinal field mesmerized Dimple. All the things that she thought were impossible in this world appeared possible. Then she observes the culture which the city follows and everything is changed. Again, she is hypnotized by technological development in every field. By observing all the things, she felt into a dilemma whether they are real or unreal. It is one of the postmodern technique called Hyperreality. The term Hyperreality is associated with Jean Baudrillard. He states that people are inundated with information, technology has become a central focus in many lives, and our understanding of the real is medicated by simulations of the real.

Like Dimple, all the other characters in this novel are fascinated by the development of the city. People in Bombay adapt themselves to the changing culture and they move on in order to achieve their goal. Each one wants to earn more money in order to lead a better and peaceful future, for that they undergo several painful sufferings.

Book two centers on Mr. Lee, a former soldier who fled from communist China and now a Chinese drug dealer. We witness his childhood and youth; his love story, his time in the army, and his subsequent exile and flight to India and, eventually to Bombay, which he hates but stays in it because he is drawn to the sea. Even though he had money and all other prosperous wealth, he feels alienated from the people and from the society. He hates the contemporary society of Bombay. In his opinion, no one is true and all are selfish. For that reason, he withdraws himself from the others. In order to get rid of his sufferings, he intakes opium. For him, opium is the only thing which helps him to forget his pain. Here, opium acts as a healing medicine. But he believes only in Dimple. Both of them have undergone several hardships in their past. Mr. Lee had an unusual friendship with Dimple, with whom he confides the story of his lost life and love. Though they led their life by moving from person to person, both of them had a fear of death because of the change in culture and development in opium dens. All these things led them to paranoia. It is another popular postmodern technique which can be found in contemporary society. It is a kind of mental disorder, where nothing can be explained or understood. Paranoia, for many, is a quest with emptiness as the aim. It is more or less like wandering. The quest can be for anything related to our daily life. Both Dimple and Mr. Lee have enough money to live their life. But they are not satisfied with their present life. They wander without certainty. Before he dies, Lee asks Dimple to bury him in China. He also leaves his family's magnificent old opium pipes, which she barter for a position at Rhasid's Khana, where she will make pyalis all day in exchange for opium of her own to smoke. The opium pipes bring money and fame to the den. After the death of Lee, Dimple builds an intimate friendship with Rashid. While working

with Rashid, Dimple sometimes questions her purpose of living in this world. But her quest for life never ends.

Book three, depicts the tumultuous crumble of the mostly mellow opium dens into the brutally effacing world of chemical heroin, Bombay becomes Mumbai, everything was changed, and for Rhasid and Dimple that change arrives in the form of heroin from Pakistan. It is a drug that seems to herald a new world order, one more savage and hopeless than anything that went before. All the regulars switch and the city's underbelly becomes ever rawer. Those in the circle still use sex for their primary release and recreation, but the violence of the city on the nod and its purveyors have moved from the fringes to the center of their lives. Due to tremendous violence, Rhasid's Khana is shut down, reopened, and shut down again. Even though Rhasid's main aim is to earn more money among his other competitors, he was not happy in his life. He is the one, who was fascinated by the culture and at the end of the novel, he hates the culture which the city follows. Meanwhile, Dimple decides to leave the brothel in order to make her own future. After Lee's death, Rhasid would be positive but is derailed by the new drug of choice in town. Sometimes, Dimple is expected to act as Rhasid's sex partner. In the meantime, the other characters like, Rumi; Newton Xavier and a crew of poets, prostitutes, pimps and gangsters who fit in and out of this story disappear or die. Dimple too dies. Still, Rhasid cannot forget Dimple. Dom who is the narrator of this novel again re-enters. Rhasid shares his feeling for Dimple with Dom. Throughout this novel, characters like Dimple, Mr. Lee, and Rhasid doesn't find happiness in themselves but they long for the other company. Each character has undergone different sufferings. But they are united in a different situation in name of friendship. While sharing his feeling for Dimple with Dom, Rhasid remembers the words of Dimple.

Dimple told Rhasid

Dead do not always become ghosts
 We are like dreams that travel from
 One person to another
 We return, but only if you love us. (214)

The above words uttered by Dimple about death which was applicable to her. Her life was like a dream to her. Throughout her life, she underwent injuries, both physically and mentally. Starting from her childhood, she lost her mother at a very young age. Before her mother's death, her mother insists her to transform herself as a man in order to fit along lead a peaceful life. Later part, without interest by hating herself, she acts as a sex partner. Through her entire life, she used to travel from person to person. But she was remembered by those people only who loves her like Rhasid.

Book four depicts Dom's return to Bombay. It is 2004, the year also of Thayil's return. He arrives at the Shuklaji street to find the area entirely different. The former red-light district has transformed into stores, businesses, and a fast food restaurant. Rhasid's Khana is now an

office, run by his son Jamal. Dom speaks with the aged Rhasid to find out what happened to his friends. Cocaine and ecstasy is the new flavor of the hour, and Jamal follows in his father's footsteps, as a Cocaine salesman. Dom goes through the belongings Dimple left at Rhasid's. Among them, he finds the Opium pipe.

The novel opens with a very unreliable quasi- narrator called Dom Ullis, who return to Bombay from New York, and his immediate descent into an Opiatic languor. Dom is absent in much of the narration, and his personal history is known only in snippets. Dom, like the author, is from Kerala, but spends his time in New York, working in an editorial capacity as a proofreader for a pharmaceutical company, and his frequent visits to Bombay foreshadows his drug addiction.

Dom is a very appealing narrator. Unlike many caught in the snares of the underworld, but he has not lost his humanity and still attempts to understand and treat others with respect. In a city teeming with danger, violence, addiction, sensations, and most casual brutality and commonplace cruelties, perhaps finding in Dom a narrator who attempts to hold onto his principles and basic decency may be reason enough to trust him. Thus, Dom is not a reliable narrator. He is rarely present, and when he is there, he is a mess. Thayil, in this novel, discusses the use of reliability of the various narrative voices, and mostly the voices shift from one person to another and it is difficult for one to identify the speaker. The novel is mostly fragmented in the narration. For example, Dimple wants to convey something to the narrator, but her ideas are fragmented and it is difficult for one to understand her inner sufferings and the narrator don't have any idea about what she wants to tell. But the question of truth, and of reliability, is one that bleeds through the whole novel, and setting of its many binary challenges. Readers are asked to consider hero as the opposite of heroin as well as heroin on the first page, but heroin is also opposed by opium; Hindu by Muslim; clean by dirty; rich by poor; real by not real; I by not I. And in Dimple, Thayil asks one of his largest question of gender- who is a man, and who is a woman, and how we know?

In this novel, the opium pipe acts as a metaphor. Indeed, the pipe inherited from Lee is given to Dimple, then to Rhasid and finally to Dom The passing of opium pipe from one person to another person is very significant because the folk tales of our culture are also passed from one generation to another generation. The narration is an oral technique that requires not only quality of words, but how the person narrates. Narration in postmodern literature is a phenomenal technique that it brings the dark sides of mankind to the limelight, which for many decades hidden from the society. Indeed, in postmodern narration, the social taboos are often disclosed and it is narrated with psychological effects, i.e. how the characters suffer from the pain of their nightmare. The social taboos are always oppressed and the social customs forces the character to not express. This causes tremendous impacts upon the characters as well as in their narrative techniques.

It tells his entire life from start to an end in one continuous stream. Mr. Lee's life history comes in the middle of the book, is buried between layers of other character's stories, and is one of the major stories that take place outside of Bombay.

In this novel, dreams almost merge with reality and there is “only a veil...a transparent veil as flimsy as the one that separates you from your dreams” (20). Dreams too are layered, and often contain important messages in the form of secrets or revelations of the future. “With the dreams came memories, or perhaps they weren't memories at all but fantasies she imagined were memories” (239). Dreams of a character do not just remain in the head of the dreamer. For instance, Dimple says of her memories of her mother that comes to her when she is detoxing “With the dreams came memories, or perhaps they weren't memories at all but fantasies she imagined were memories”.

Narcopolis's narrative style depicts the inexpressible nature of addiction in the ineffable nature of a place like Bombay. In this novel, the narrator gets into the city's underworld, rife with opium and prostitutes. Throughout the book, characters talk about the difference between the slow use of opium and the fast use of heroin. The novel works the same way, relying on the same slow, rather ritualistic assembly and smoke of the pipe. The language makes one want to go slowly, to smoke it like opium and lie around with the thoughts and dreams it evokes, but the narrative accelerates and one has to keep reading to keep up.

In this novel, Bombay symbolizes India. Although Delhi is the capital. i.e. Bollywood stands for India. Thayil chooses Bombay to comment on the changing culture and he clearly depicts the problems faced by the people through *Narcopolis*. A postmodern condition in this novel is explored through hyperreality, paranoia, fragmented narrative technique. Indeed, Thayil brings the changing trends and culture in postmodern society. Once drug culture, transgender, and identity crisis were considered to be social taboos, but now these things are recognized and accepted into society. In contemporary society, they are no longer neglected rather they are seen as a part of the society.

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