

## NEBULOUS NARRATIVE: DECODING POSTMODERN ELEMENTS IN JEET THAYIL'S "NARCOPOLIS"

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### **Abstract:**

This study is an attempt to unravel the layers of meaning hidden under the text of *Narcopolis*, a complex, paradoxical, chaotic, yet passionate piece of fiction. Jeet Thayil gives a prominent place to drug usage in all his works and his general attitude is that of moral pluralism and a tendency to celebrate the culture of the margins. This novel passes the test of postmodern fiction through its outstanding, diffused and dreamy narrative. This paper decodes the Postmodernist elements in it, thus exposing the political, economic and cultural aspects of the city of Bombay, beneath the drug-infused world of the novel. It also evaluates other literary techniques in the novel.

**Keywords:** Nebulous narrative, elements, modernist etc

Jeet Thayil, a phenomenal poet, guitarist, journalist and writer, represents the pains and sufferings of distorted drug addicts, whose lives are dominated by sex and death. He has authored four collections of poetry in English and is also the editor of *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets*. His *Apocalyptia*, with its surreal humour and dense texture, echoes of other poems. Thayil responds to the literature of other lands as if it were his own. He is one of the few Indian poets who exhibit literary cosmopolitanism. These characteristics are reflected in his first novel *Narcopolis*. This study looks into his handling of the themes of love, death, religion and choices in life, which sets the non-moralising and addiction-loving tone of Thayil.

*Narcopolis* speaks about a group of deranged people and their life, centred in an opium den in Shuklaji street, which is known as the red-light area in Bombay. There is a short digression to China that encapsulates the nation's history during the infamous revolution. Shuklaji street, known for its opium dens, heroin trade and human trafficking, is where most of the events in the novel unfold. It is described in the novel as, "Street was a fever grid of rooms, boom-boom rooms, family rooms, god rooms, secret rooms that

contracted in the day time and expanded at night” (1). The opium dens are peculiar places whose interiors visually arrest the reader. Everything inside is conducted at the floor level with no chairs or couches. The rooms are very clean and lighted with oil lamps. The sick smell of opium is in the air. People talk in whispers, which gives a weird feeling of being in a place of strange congregation, where eccentric engage in an occult-like ritual. The opium smokers are deceived into believing that it is better than anything else in the world. Thayil, in an interview with, mentions that there were about 30 to 40 opium dens in that street alone, which was the epicentre of the opium trade in Bombay.

The characters in the novel are people living in the dark, who do not have an identity of their own. The plot of the story revolves around these characters and the author tries to portray a hidden history of Bombay, as to how it evolved into the financial capital of India. The period happens to be the heady 1970's when the world-at-large was witnessing an outburst of violence, riots, drug trade, sex revolution and so on. The author traces the history of Bombay, when the East India Company and other Western nations traded opium to China and other Eastern nations, having their base in Mumbai. After setting up their fortune there, they switched to building roads, highways, colleges and art schools, thus becoming self-professed philanthropists very quickly. The people swiftly and conveniently forgot that this money was made on the backs on the opium trade. Thayil brings to light the reasons that made Bombay the ultra-modern city of today. This underbelly of the city cannot be found in any history book and thus the author pays tribute to the Bombay of olden times.

Postmodern discourses that denote new artistic, cultural or theoretical perspectives which renounce Modern discourses and practises. The prefix post signifies an active rupture with preceded it. This rupture can be interpreted positively as liberation from old constraining oppressive conditions and as an affirmation of new discourses and ideas. Postmodernity can also be interpreted as a deplorable regression, as a loss of traditional values, stabilities, or as a surrender of those valuable elements of modernity. The prefix also signifies dependence on modernity, leading some critics to conceptualize the postmodern as hypo modernity. Postmodernist deploys the term to characterize a rupture or a break in western history. It is the culmination of all the thoughts that existed during and before the twentieth century in the Western world.

Postmodernists purposely disrupt the form, but with no inherent meaning behind the disruption, except that it symbolize the chaos in real life. Fragmentation, in terms of plot, characters, time, history and language is a defining character. the absence of a consistent point of view, a merging of factual history and fiction, blurring of the line between fantasy and history, highlighting popular or mass cultural practices, fragmented style of narration and a sense of play within the narrative are some of the important features.

Narcopolis has many of these characteristic markers. Throughout the novel there are different people narrating incidents which happen during a particular period, which helps the reader understand Bombay from the margins, that is from the people who are mostly outcasts. Using multiple narrators, the author successfully gives voice to many of the issues surrounding Bombay's underworld. This technique is better than using a single narrator because it might end up being simplistic and narrow-minded. Dimple, a prostitute who is cut off from normal life and pushed to a world of sex and addiction, talks of what she thinks of the world around her, about her status as a pimp in Shuklaji street and her customers. This makes it easier for the reader to empathise with her and look at Bombay through her eyes.

Rashid is the owner of an opium den named Khana. It is a place where opium is served in pipes to both foreigners and Indians. People from different backgrounds come to smoke opium in its unique form that is in Chinese pipes, which were reputed around the world for the quality of smoke they supposedly give. The author does not narrate the events happening in the den from Rashid's perspective. He narrates it from the point of view of the different people who visit the place or those who work in the den. This in turn gives an open-ended, intoxicating and multi-dimensional view of the den and helps to prevent the reader from taking a singular moralistic stand.

The first sentence of the book goes on for seven pages. Directly addressing the reader. This is an unusual feature in a novel. Thayil tries to make the reader feel that the narrator is under the effect of opium, as he narrates his unusual story. There are open-ended dreamy sentences that give spontaneity to the novel. Bombay is addressed like a hero or heroine of the story. There follow the different aspects that shape the city through the ages to the bustling metropolis of today. Thayil writes "Bombay, which obliterated its history by changing its name and surgically altering its face, is the hero or heroine of the story and since I'm the one who is telling it and you don't know who I am,..." (1). Thus, the author undermines the existing grand narratives on the history of Bombay.

He wants the readers to know how it is to be intoxicated, as he goes on narrating the events in a vague, non-stop and poetic manner. As the entire plot is pinned upon opium addiction and its trade, the style contributes towards bringing out its effects. The author does not take a stand in judging the characters' ways but leave it to the reader to see the reality in which such people are pushed into this horrifying life and those responsible for it. The nebulous narrative accounts for a sense of play, for reader gets confused with the author's intended. The big question is what the novel truly is about: the effects of opium, the Oworld, the underworld of Bombay, Shuklaji street and its pimps, the beggars in rags, God or no God, stories of many outcasts, the failed dream of India's democracy and socialism, the humanness of eunuchs, the atrocities of rich men, the adaptable Christianity of Malayalee Syrian Christians or any religion, the present glitzy metropolis of Mumbai with its shady

heroin or cocaine outlets, the people's growing intolerance over religious issues and the controversial subject of young Muslim boys turning into fanatics and fundamentalists.

The dreamy narrative and multiple narrators make the whole novel to exist in bits and pieces. Though there is, in a very restricted sense, a moment in the plot, the book seems to be a journal of sorts of people from the lowest walks of life. Chunks of incidents from people's lives have been put together in a sort of collage, for the reader to pick up the fragmented bits and weave together a story. The end of the story contains no significant climax. Hence fragmented and freakishly open-ended narrative, where the reader may be drawn into the O world is a working Postmodernist technique.

The novel encompasses a short digression to china where the author talks about the Cultural Revolution that took place there, with a character called Lee. Lee has worked in the Chinese army and escaped to India to become an opium dealer. Factual data and fictional elements are merged to narrate the issues faced by the Chinese and the situation that prevailed during the vital moment of transformation of the country's economy politics and culture. The financial conditions of the Chinese of the times, their occupation lifestyles and there social and economic conditions that push the country to civil war are touched upon. The rise of the communist party and the stringent rules and regulations that were evoked to suppress the people are indirectly pointed out. Opium was widely used by the people leading to the collapse of many families, which inturn affected the economy of the country. All of this is hinted through the life of Lee.

Thayil's major focus is on the under-world of 1970's Mumbai that thrived with human trafficking and drug trade which helped in the sudden boom of the economy. The author amalgamates history and fiction to create a world where people are brought together by opium. There activities, ways of life the society around them and the author's descriptions of even the trivial details of the city give the reader a clear picture of it was decades before. The East India Company was the biggest drug pusher of the Yester age and being a seaside city, Bombay was a convenient trade centre. Ironically, the trade centre of India has risen today because of the vast sums of money created due to the sale of opium. Bombay was the city of dreams after the independence and the dreams became tatters when the economic and cultural divide grew too wide. It has become a place consisting of two kinds of people, the rich and the poor. People without money can get lost in the red-light areas, drug traders or race induced violence.

Jeet Thayil never comes to any conclusion in the novel. He does not blame a single person for anything. He wants the readers to look into the issues in the society with a broader mind and understand the many histories of the India of today. Narcopolis helps the reader understand the workings of society from a nuanced outlook. The author's technique of mixing up historical and fictional elements drives home the point that there is no absolute

truth without being sentimental or biased, he helps the reader approach the world as consisting of many realities and truths. He neither glorifies the past nor vilifies the present. By taking a neutral stand he tries to tarnish the pseudo image that every common man has about the world, by looking through at Bombay through the Postmodernist lens.

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