
The 'Secret History' In Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*

Bablu Karan

M.Ed Student (2017-19), Department of Education, Vinaya Bhavana, Visva-Bharati (A Central University of National Importance), Santiniketan, India.

ABSTRACT

Narcopolis, by Jeet Thayil, is a memorable Man Booker Prize shortlisted novel which glorifies contemporary Indian English writing for its exposing the 'secret history' of old Bombay, its unmistakable locale color, its command in handling of English Language and its writing style. This paper, on the basis of details study of this novel, explains how the author boldly denotes one of the secret factors working behind the progress of Mumbai from an ordinary city to one metropolitan city in the world with the change its name from old Bombay to Mumbai within the very short span of time. It also highlights how Jeet Thayil himself experienced with those social evil factors when he was in India and was deeply addicted with drugs and sex, opium and heroin for long twenty years to recover. In the galaxy of contemporary Indian English novelists, Jeet Thayil is now a shining star for his unique style of exposition, about the secret history of Mumbai's dramatic change, in the form of novel composition.

KEY WORDS: *Bombay and Metropolis, Opium and Heroin, Drugs and Sex, Addiction and Sense of Place.*

INTRODUCTION

As the most society-oriented genre the novel illustrates the true history of mankind. It represents the changing phenomenon of life and reality artistically. As a work of art it manifests the social, political, cultural and spiritual ethos of the people in our contemporary society. The interrelation between novel and society is essentially identical. While pointing out the artistic significance of the novel Michel Zeraffa observes: The novel is the first art to present man explicitly as defined historically and socially. (39) With creative imagination and keen observation the novelists record and interpret in his or her work of art; the historical, social, cultural, economic, and political situations which take place in a particular local milieu. These views corroborate the approach to Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*. It also provides a true record of contemporary society in an artistic mould. It brings a change and thereby sets a new base and values in society.

ANALYSIS

The story setting of the novel is Old Bombay, for the most part, but it is not the glorified slum Bombay of *Slum dog Millionaire* or the Anglo- influence post-colonial Indian novels or Satyajit Roy's masterful films. Thayil's rich, chaotic, hallucinatory dream of a novel is set in Bombay, a polyglot culture where all of India's languages, faiths and casts mingle, where the prevailing currency is money. The ingenuity of Thayil's novel lies in how he has captured this entire

universe into an opium den in all its compelling squalor in the 1970s and 1980s, with a cast of pimps, pushers, poets, gangsters and eunuchs which are expressed in an interview: Bombay is the first and last word of this first novel, an urban history written by a former drug addict through the changing composition of opiates and the changing characters of their users. (interview, BBC) Thayil paints a stark portrait of Bombay. He spoke with Reuters about his deep relationship with Bombay, his drug addict and how this book came about:

“I went to school there as a boy, I went to St Xavier’s May family left for Hong Kong when I was eight where my father was working as a journalist. Then I went to school in New York and then came back to Bombay in 1979 and joined Wilson College. In all I’ve lived in Bombay for almost 20 years.” (Interview, Jaiman)

Narcopolis fits into the resent literary wave of Dark India, which shows the under belly of Indian society. The novel with its setting on Bombay’s Shuklaji Street of the 1970s and 1980s crowded with opium den and brothels, with its cast of drug addicts, prostitutes and criminals, depicts a non-shining India.

The opening sentence of *Narcopolis* begins: “Bombay, which obliterated its own history by changing its name and surgically altering its face, is the hero or heroine of this story.” (Thayil, Jeet. *Narcopolis*, P.1). The opening sentence runs on seven pages and sets the main tone of the entire novel. The narrator, Dom Ullis has left New York city after being caught trying to buy drugs. Upon arrival in Bombay he immediately finds an opium den and begins his descent into the squalid world of poverty, prostitutes, and Pyali. The drug use and casual sex continue with little evidence of redeeming social value. The city, Bombay changes its name into Mumbai and opium gave away into heroine and the raw underworld continue on its merry way. As Jamal, son of Rashid, said; “He could see it on the faces and smell it in the air, cocaine and MDMA and Ecstasy, new drugs for new Bombay.” (281)

The word ‘heroin’ has two meaning in the opening sentence of the novel, indicating both a protagonist and s substance. Heroin also suggests the historic change in the business of intoxication as it overthrows the age old queen of delirium, opium. This rambling introduction of the novel in the form Prologue provides us with a glimpse of what is to come in terms of narrative structures and ever resting Bombay in which the book is set. Most of the novels set in Mumbai show the magic, the glitter. But Jeet Thayil’s *Narcopolis* shows the whole other intricate side of Mumbai. What *Narcopolis* does is that it gives us a chance to re-read the history of Bombay, the history which is not captured in the history book or which is not inconvenient. The novel basically deals with what Thayil calls the secret history of the city Mumbai- its past and present. The intricately woven narrative leads us to raise certain questions in our mind:

What is the reason behind the revolution of Bombay into one of the largest metropolitan cities in the world in such a short span of time?

What is the impact of Bombay riots and underworld den in shaping the lives of degrading and broken metropolis?

How Bollywood industry has influenced the transition of Bombay into Mumbai?

And finally, how do the changing fortunes of the characters in the novel reflect the changes to the city over the decades?

Narcopolis draws the evolution of a great and broken metropolis. The history we are told in *Narcopolis* is not only of the narrator, Dom Ullis's but it extends far beyond. Here, Thayil has created a painful portrait of a cluster of people whose stories compel us to think. To describe the stories of people of Bombay, Thayil has divided the book into four parts. Book one, "The Story of O" begins with Dom's arrival in Bombay. It is late 1970s, and he quickly weaves himself into the fabric of Bombay's sordid underbelly, specially the opium dens. Here he meets Rashid, owner of a Khana on Suklaji Street where much of the novel takes place and where Dom makes his first pipe; Dimple, the beautiful Hijra who works for Rashid preparing bowls of opium; Bengali who manages Rashid's money; Rumi, an businessmen; Newton Xavier, the celebrated painter who both rejects and carves adulation; Mr. Lee, the Chinese refugee and businessman, and a cast of poet, prostitutes, pimps and gangsters. Here, people say that the city introduced only its worst enemy to opium, may be Dimple, is the worst enemy; "Here people say you should introduce only your worst enemy to opium maybe Dimple your worst enemy"(6) and here prostitutes call out to here quarry as their pimps slouch in doorways in the half-light, eager to collect their due.

Once the narrator vanishes, he is replaced by a third person omniscience and his absence turns in the other "I" of the prologue. It is through the mouth of an ancient opium pipe that we hear these stories. The ambiguous "Pipe" takes us to Dimple's perspective. We witness her encounters with Xavier and follow her into dreams. The narration swoops back in time, when Dimple is experiencing body pain as a result of hormonal changes from being gelded at a young age. She visits a Chinese man called Mr. Lee, who provides her opium to ease her pain. Book Two, "The story of the pipe"(73) centres on Mr. Lee: the life story he tells Dimple as he grows closer to death. We witness his childhood and youth, his falling in love, his time in the army, and his subsequent exile and lifting to India and, eventually, Bombay, which he hates but stays in because he is drawn to the sea.

Book three, "The Intoxicated", (132) depicts the tumultuous crumble of the mostly mellow opium dens into the brutally effecting world of chemical heroine. Bombay becomes Mumbai and for Rashid and Dimple that change arrives in the form of heroine which comes from Pakistan. It is a drug that seems to herald a new world order and the city's underbelly become ever rawer. Dimple leaves the brothel to Rashid's home to find out better future but she is derailed by new drug of choice in the city. She acts as sex partner of Rashid. Soon the I narrator, Dom, makes a brief return to the narrative and Dimple too dies. Still, Rashid cannot forget Dimple. He tells Dom, Dimple haunts him every day. She is always there, always will be: "Dead do not always become ghosts", Dimple told Rashid, "We are like dreams that travel from one person to another. We return, but only if you love us". (124)

In Book Four, "Some Uses of Reincarnation", (263) the narrator again returns to Mumbai. It is 2004, the year also of Thayil's return to Bombay. Dom first visits Rashid's Old Khana and finds that Old Khana is now transformed into a new business office run by Jamal, Rashid's son. The opium changes its name into heroine and Bombay also becomes Mumbai, one of the famous Metropolises in the country. Seeing these changes, Dom surprised and be memorized the past history of Bombay. As Dimple said, "the world is ending, she said, anything can happen to anyone at any time."(199) The city shines more and more but the bottom line is totally destroyed as Fereen says; "Dance or we die."(284) Thayil has ended the book in the same place where it started:

All I did was write it down, one word after the other, beginning and ending with the same one, Bombay. (292)

The final line suggests that the way the story is told is as important as the story itself. Indeed it is a key to understand the story.

Narcopolis tells the 'secret story' of Bombay that the drugs and sex activities play the major role behind the transition of old Bombay to becoming one of the most famous metropolises in all over the country within a short period of time. Thayil had expressed it from his practical experiences, as he was addicted to both these activities for twenty years in old Bombay. Thayil exposed this true history through the narrator. Dimple explained her intention for such sexual commitment. She said she did such work only for money because: "the only incredible thing in the world was money and the mysterious ways in which it worked." (39) Thayil says the best sources of money income in Bombay were the drug and sex activities. The narrator explained it through characters of Xavier, Dimple, Rashid and the Tai. When Xavier entered into the Tai's brother's, Lakshmi, another eunuch, brought him a beer and before it finished he ordered another one and, he asked the Tai how much money he had to pay to spend a night without a girl. The Tai replied three hundred and with the girl, it will be cost six hundred:

"The Tai gave him the first figure that came into her head: three hundred for a night. How much with a girl? He asked. The Tai said six hundred. So a room costs the same as a girl? The Tai laughed at him." (47)

So, Thayil said that these are the root causes to becoming Bombay into Mumbai within a very short period of time. Sex and drugs were the prime factors for earning money on Bombay's Shuklaji Street. The customers spent their money in both purposes which had no value actually. The customers used sex theoretically which had no reality. For this type of sex used, Lakshmi said, "men are dogs. We know and they know. Only women don't know. Isn't that right, darling? She told the customer. Aren't you a dog sniffing around my ass for a free fuck?" (128). In Bombay sexual activities were so complicated that women forgot their own identity. Thayil expressed it through Dimple who continued prostitution all through her life. She did not identify herself by explaining; "women and men are words other people use, not me. I'm not sure what I am." (11) Day after day, year after year, she continued this job only for money. She is the representative of social condition of Bombay. Like Dimple, Rashid, the Tai, and Lakshmi there were many people who were involved in this job. Dom said that in Bombay you could not live without drugs and sex activities. The drugs and sex captured the city's people violently. It became one part of their lives which could not be separated: "Drugs are a bad habit, so why do it? Because, said Dimple, it isn't the heroine that we're addicted to, it's a drama of the life, the chaos of it, that's the real addiction and we never get over it." (231)

Narcopolis is a vivid picture of socio-economic of Bombay. It clearly points out that the people of the city were so addicted that they became dead. The drugs addiction and sexual commitment were the main reasons of degradation of metropolis. Dom said it became more complicated at present time. It became clear when Rumi said Spoor in book four: "if I ask for money you're going to give it to me. You're going to let me do whatever in other words the fuck I feel like." (261) In a conversation Rumi said Sporo that; "you're already dead...." (261). It means that not only Sporo but also all the Mumbai people are dead for so much addiction. "You" mean the people and drugs addicted society of new Mumbai. To describe the violent condition of Bombay,

Thayil draws the two figures in this novel which have very practical significances. Actually, he wants to sum up a live focus with these drawings:” FIG.8, DEVOTI ON TO WATER (P.194) AND FIG. 9, CHAMPAKI AI CHAMPAKALI”(P.197). He used these pictures to show how much Bombay people were addicted to the drugs and sex and how much their addiction complicated were (FIG.8) and how they became headless figure only (FIG9). That’s why Dom said Dimple, “I tell you what it really is, we’re katharnak sister fuckers, all of us on Shuklaji Street.”(199)

If someone wants to write a story about Bombay one has only to connect the dots of history as Thayil did in his novel. A city made of islands where all of Indian languages, faiths and castes mingle, where the prevailing currency is money as Dimple says – “Mumbai money is the only religion,”(199) and its dreams are spoken, and also the unforgettable colourful lives of Bollywood movies which played a major role day to day in social life. The characters in this novel are also influenced by it as there are again and again references of movies – “Hare Krishna Hare Rama”, “Desh Premee”, “Namake Halam”, “Shakti”, “Polyester Khadi’ and so on. He also mentions film stars like - Amitabh Bachchan, Dilip Kumar, Dev Anand, and John Travolta who influenced the society of Bombay. The film world also helps Bombay to become Mumbai. Thayil had blamed films through Rashid. When Salim asked Rashid whether he had seen Amitabh Bachchan’s new movie, ‘Polyester’, Rashid replied: “No, he hadn’t seen it and he wasn’t planning to, he had better things to do than watch Amitabh fucking Bachchan.”(139) Thayil remains lucid enough to document the secret history of Bombay through his novel *Narcopolis*. As Umasanker says – “the result is a scorching saga of a city traced through its narcotic dens and warehouses housing a motley crew of addicts, prostitutes, eunuchs, drug-lords, murderers and religious fanatics” (Umasankar. P.1). Bombay has variously been maximum city, underworld den, city of dreams. The novel is not our typical Bombay book as Thayil regrets: “It did not feature the great figure of independence or Colonial history, or even the bit players.” (Interview) The theme of the novel is more in common with Meera Nair’s film “Salam Bombay” which also captures the Bombay around the same time when Thayil’s novel is set.

Bombay and drug addiction – the two are often synonymous, in words of Dom, “I found Bombay and opium, the drug and the city, the city of opium and the drug Bombay.”(7) The story of Mr. Lee and China is not an inconvenient portion of the novel. What Thayil wants to do by exposing lee and china is that he wanted to trace out the history of opium and Bombay, a city which becomes one of the greatest cosmopolitan metropolises in India and the Centers of financial market. And even now it is the commercial and entertainment hub of India. But, how these changes have taken place within a short period of time? And the novel shows opium as the reason of that transformation and in that point Lee and China is linked with Bombay. It’s become clear by Dom’s speech when he arrived at Mumbai:

“The brothels and drug dens were gone. In their palace 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)

India’s opium links with china are old and its reference we should get a detailed description in Amitav Ghosh’s novel, *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*. As historian Umar Farooqui has also portrayed Bombay’s prosperity as the result of opium trade in his *Opium City*, and Salil Tripathi

describes “*Narcopolis* is set at a time when the popularity of opium is waning, and more dangerous drugs are about to invade the city. It makes the opium den look like a piece of innocent nostalgia. Thayil complete the story that begins in the 19th century through lee’s pipe, as it becomes the instrument of escape for the city’s tormented souls.”(Interview)

Narcopolis is not a typical drugs book like *Opium City*. But, in an interview, Thayil says that he used drugs in his novel as a hanger to portray his multi-varied characters and to draw the social life of Bombay, a “Crazy fucking city”. (211) the novel shows that Rashid runs good business of opium with the help of his sex partner Dimple, but after her death, Rashid’s den is shut down. The city which once welcomes all to fulfill their desires is now divided in the name of religion, caste, regions and so on. And it is this reason the narrow speaks: “the city was revealed as the true image of my cancelled self.....I lost track of time. I could have been anyone, I lost myself.....”(209)

Narcopolis is a book about the city, which compares the contemporary history with the old. It depicts the horrible Bombay riots that leave the city burning and the population inflamed. As Dimple repeatedly used – “the city was burning and heroine is easier to get than fruit. Dimple says: Tell me why Chemical is freely available when there are no tomatoes in the market.”(199) The 1992/3 Bombay riots thus have a number of implication in regard to understand the changing city space. Bombay riots play the violent role for its transition into metropolis which Thayil narrates through Rashid – “The city has changed, people wear their religion on their faces. As a Muslim I feel unwanted in many places, you should feel it too.”(217) Thayil had said in an interview that he would love to live his whole life in a city of intoxication and here he celebrates the time of opium and the city life of Bombay. “This is the old Bombay as seen from the slums and the gutter, the city illuminated in all its sweat and temper....original and vital.” (Thayil, cover page) and by the time he comes in contact with garad heroine he loses his all hope in the city and leaves Bombay by saying: “the city had changed, but it was still a conglomeration of slums on which high-rises had been built.” (269) He hates Bombay as it did not fulfill his desire. Finally, Thayil has agreed that the future of this city is going to be worst and Rashid repents: “Garad wrecked everything. If we’d stayed with opium my place would still be open.....so many people would be alive.”(285)

CONCLUSION

It is true that *Narcopolis* is a special tale of Old Bombay of the 1970s which Thayil tells very smoothly and secretly. In the novel like the narrator, Thayil also struggles very hard to overcome his twenty years addiction at least in 2002. Whatever Thayil portrays here in this novel about the Bombay’s social life and the opium dens – all these come out from his own experience. He knows very well about the world of opium den and he witnesses how garad heroine destroys culture and many people’s lives in Bombay. This is the secret history of Thayil and not only his own history but also the secret history of the evolution and abolition of opium and the city, Bombay as well which are expressed deeply through words: “The sense of place is intoxicatingly horrible, and the author’s poetic style makes some things iridescently lush and night marish out of the squalor of recent Bombay.” (Thayil, Cover Page, Sunday times).

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