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Bombay and Mumbai, the City in Transition and its 'Secret History' through Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*

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Abstract:

This paper argues that the presentation of a degrading metropolis has become one of the important themes for literature in recent times. Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* is an intricately woven tale based on the story of an opium den in Bombay, where no-hopers, the prostitutes and eunuchs, the dealers and the users hang out, and Rashid's opium den is the most famous. The variety of characters enabled Thayil to portray the marginalised, the addicted and deranged and people who are routinely called the lowest of the low. Decades pass to reveal a changing Bombay to Mumbai, where opium has given way to heroin. The novel is portrayed a damned generation in a nation about to sell its soul. The city, which is as much the centre of the novel as the narrator, remakes itself in the course of the novel. Thayil may have celebrated a way of life in his book but his intention is not to glorify drug addiction.

Keywords: Metropolis, Opium, Addiction, Heroin.

The presentation of a degrading metropolis has become one of the important themes for literature in recent times. And in both popular and academic literature Bombay (present day Mumbai) is typically characterized as India's most modern city which has a long history of transition. Much has been written about the degrading and broken metropolis but such moments are rare indeed these days when one takes a book in the hand and have to go through a test in the first few pages to enter into the story of the novel. That can happen if someone started reading Jeet Thayil's debut novel *Narcopolis*, published in Feb, 2012. The book opens with a hypnotic sentence that runs into six and a half pages, effectively for connecting time and space to make chronology between dreams, conversations and visitations from absent friends, setting up the mood of the story. *Narcopolis* begins as "Bombay which obliterated its own history by changing its name and surgically altering its face, is the hero or heroin of this story" (Thayil 2012: 1). The word 'heroin' has two meaning in the opening sentence of the novel, indicating both a protagonist and a 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 of 'Prologue' provides us with a glimpse of what's to come in terms of narrative structures, in terms of the tumultuous, ever changing but never 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. This paper attempts to say something about Jeet Thayil's writing it is because this novel has moved us as none other did in the recent times. 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 inconvenient. The novel basically deals with what Thayil calls 'the secret history' of the city, Bombay – its past and present. The intricately woven narrative never loses its grip on its readers and leads us to raise certain questions in our mind –

- I. What is the reason behind the evolution of Bombay into one of the largest metropolitan cities in the world in such a short span of time?
- II. How Bollywood Industry has influenced the transition of Bombay into Mumbai?

- III. What is the impact of Bombay riots and underworld den in shaping the lives of a degrading and broken metropolis?
- IV. And finally, how do the changing fortunes of the characters in the novel reflect the changes to the city over the decades?

This is not a typical novel which shows the subcontinent's familiar literary lights as the novelist here introduces a new kind of format for novel writing which is more in common with the Russian novels. Above all, it is a fantastic portrait of a beautiful and damned generation; about to sell its soul. With the use of Thayil's poetic craftsmanship and unconscious prose language *Narcopolis* draws the evolution of a great and broken metropolis. The history we are told in *Narcopolis* is not only of our narrator, Domm Ullis's but it extends far beyond. Here Jeet thayil has created a painful portrait of a cluster of people whose stories compel us to think. The book is broken in four parts. The first part is "The Story of O" which opens in Bombay in the late 1970s as its narrator Dom first arrives at Bombay and he quickly finds himself entranced with Bombay's sordid underbelly, specifically the opium den. Here he first meets with Rashid the owner of a Khana¹ on Suklaji Street around which most of the actions of the novel takes place. Dom comes in contact with unforgettably degenerate and magnetic characters who patronize the venue including Dimple the beautiful eunuch and Tiresias-like figure who works for Rashid preparing bowls of opium; Rumi, the frustrated businessman; Bengali who looks after Rashid's money; Newton Xavier, the famous painter and poet who sketches a controversial picture of Jesus; Mr. Lee, the Chinese immigrant and a variety of other characters. But after the second half of the third chapter the narrator vanishes from the story and then turns out the other "I" (which Thayil defined pipe as the other "I" narrator) resumes the narration. It is through the mouth of an opium pipe that we come to know about Dimple's interaction in the youth with Mr. Lee who provides her opium to ease her pain and treated her like a father. The second book "The Story of Pipe" talks about the childhood and youth of Mr. Lee; his love and his time in army; and his exile in India and final settlement in Bombay, the city he hates but stayed back only because of the sea. We also come to know that after the death of Mr. Lee Dimple joins in Rashid's Khana for making piyalis² by using Lee's old opium pipes in exchange for opium of her own to smoke. The third book "The Intoxicated" shows the transition of opium dens into the brutally effacing world of garad³ heroin and Rashid's Khana is also affected in this change. Dimple moves from brothel to Rashid's home to find out better future but she crashed out from the track by the new drug of choice in the city. Furthermore we come across to the early 90's and get the experience of the horrific Bombay riots that burned and inflamed the city population, where heroin is more easily available than the food. Here our narrator Dom appears and prepares himself to leave Bombay for his too much addiction with heroin. But before leaving the city he makes his last effort to save Dimple in dropping her in the rehab centre, better known as "Safer", where later on we find Rumi. Again the next section precedes by the other "I" narrator. The fourth book "Some Uses of Reincarnation" deals with Dom's return to Bombay and his visit to Rashid's old Khana. It is 2004 and Dom finds that old Khana is transformed into a new business office run by Jamal, Rashid's son. We get a glimpse of new generation by following Jamal and his fiancé Farheen selling cocaine in the club. The city shines more and more but the bottom-line is totally destroyed as Farheen says "Dance or we die" (284). After coming to know the death of Dimple from Rashid, Dom discovers the ancient opium pipes from the belongings Dimple left to Rashid. Thayil has ended the book in the same place where it started by saying-"All I did was write it down, one word after the other, beginning and ending with the same one, Bombay" (292).

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 India's languages, faiths and castes mingle, where the prevailing currency is money as Dimple says "Bumbai 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 in day to day social life and our character in this novel is also influenced by it as there are again and again references of movies. Though it gets terrific blow from the terrorist, it returns to life in the very next day. Thayil remains lucid enough to document the ‘secret history’ (FCC 2012) of Bombay through his novel, *Narcopolis*. As Umasankar 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. He knows the blue smoke inside out and is familiar with the valleys and plateaus of intoxication like the back of his palm. He has observed the *chandulis*⁴ and *garadulis*⁵ in microscopic detail, their execrable lives, their abysmal despair and the many tiers of deaths that they undergo” (Umasankar 2012). Bombay has variously been maximum city, underworld den, city of dreams.

Narcopolis is not our typical Bombay book as Thayil says: “It did not feature the great figure of Independence or Colonial history, or even the bit players” (Bonn 2012). Though the most part of novel is set in Bombay but it is not the glorious presentation of slum Bombay of *Slumdog Millionaire* or the Anglo-influenced post-colonial India of Vikram Seth’s novels. Its theme is more in common with Meera Nair’s film *Salam Bombay* which is also captures the Bombay around the same time when Thayil’s novel is set. The film is about a railway slum of Bombay like the Suklaji street in our novel which portrays similar kind of characters like Krishna who comes in Bombay to earn five hundred rupees but till the end of the movie he cannot fulfil his desire; Silim who at last dies because of drugs; The sixteen Year old who hails from Nepal has no other but to become prostitute in that attached brothel and this has resemblance to the story of Dimple; and the character like Baba gives us the sense of Rashid in *Narcopolis*.

Bombay and drug addiction—the two are often synonymous, as Dom says, “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 is made of seven islands reclaimed by the British within a short period of time becomes one of the greatest cosmopolitan metropolises in India and the centre 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 time? And the novel shows opium as the reason of that transformation and in that point Lee and China is linked with Bombay. India's opium links with China are old and as its reference we can get a detailed description in Amitav Ghosh's novels, *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*. British traders got China addicted to opium grown in India, and transported it on ships owned by Indian merchants. As historian Amar Farooqui has also portrayed Bombay’s prosperity as the result of opium trade in his *Opium City*, and Salil Tripathi also says-“*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 completes the story that began in the 19th century through Lee's pipe, as it becomes the instrument of escape for the city's tormented souls” (Tripathi 2012).

Narcopolis is not a typical drugs book like Burroughs’. 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. The novel captures characters from almost all sections of the society. Whether it is Rashid who runs a very good business of opium and lives a happy life with his family and his business partner as well as sex partner Dimple whom he named as Zeenat after the famous heroine of the movie ‘Hare Rama Hare Krishna’; or Dimple who also leads a happy life by making piyalis for Rashid in her neither/either/both condition, but when this garad heroin comes in the market and they vehemently affected by it. Dimple ultimately dies

and Rashid's den is shut down. The city which once welcomes all to fulfil their desires is now divided in the name of religion, caste, regions and so on. And it is this reason the narrator 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 belongs to an interesting lineage of books on the City, where contemporary history mingles with the narrator's comment on the present. We have come to the early 90s and the horrific Bombay riots that leave the city burning and the population inflamed. As Dimple repeatedly used – ‘the city was burning’ and heroin is easier to get than fruit. The 1992/3 riots thus have a number of implications in regard to understanding the changing city space. It is even clear in the words of Jim Masselos – “In breaking down the integrity of the city into its disparate parts, the 1992/3 riots thus highlighted awareness of the full extent of what Bombay/Mumbai, the effective city, had come to be: an extraordinarily complex and dynamic entity which somehow or other managed to retain some sense of unity, whatever the conflicts over what kind of a city and whose city it should be.”(Patel 47)

Thayil might have said in an interview that he would love to live his whole life in a city of intoxication (Thayil CNBC TV18) but here in his novel he does not talk about the chemical drugs rather celebrates the time of opium and the city life of Bombay. And by the time he comes in contact with garad heroin he loses his all hope in the city and leaves Bombay. He may hate Bombay as it did not fulfil his desire but he has great attraction regarding the city and wants to do something for the people. We come across his love for the city in the novel when the narrator before leaving flood affected Bombay says-“Water lapped against the city's ruined buildings. . . People waded on the street, soaked to the skin, their faces ecstatic in the charcoal light. I knew them as my brothers as I stood in the rain. I spread my pitiful, deluded arms wide. I wanted to hold the city, each woman and child and animal and man. I wanted to save them.” (220-221) 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 alive.” (285)

To clap it all, it is true that “*Narcopolis* is a rich hallucinatory dream of a novel that captures the Bombay of the 1970's in all its compelling squalor. Stretching across three decades, with an interlude in Mao's China, it portrays a city in collision with itself”. It is a special tale which Thayil tells very smoothly and secretly. In the novel like our narrator he also struggled very hard to overcome his twenty years of addiction at last in 2002. Whatever Thayil portrays here in this novel about the Bombay's social life and the opium dens- all these are come out from his own experience. He knows very well about the world of opium den and he witnesses how garad heroin destroy the 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. We can reframe this discussion with the remarks of Hari Kunzru- “Jeet Thayil's Bombay is a city dreaming troubled dreams, and *Narcopolis* will change the way you imagine it” (Thayil, Cover Page).

Notes:

- 1) Opium house or opium den, where people could go to smoke the drug.
- 2) The amount of opium can be put into pipe to smoke it out at a time.
- 3) The word *garad* is used to mean heroin.
- 4) *Chandulis* and *charasis* were like cockroaches, he said, they would survive anything, including the end of the world.
- 5) A *chanduli* can smoke for years and be healthy; *garadulis* are impatient, they want to die quickly.

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