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**Title of the book:** *Narcopolis*

**Author:** Jeet Thayil

**Publisher:** Faber and Faber

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Several novelists have set out to chronicle the mystery that is the city of Mumbai, or Bombay, as many of them prefer to call it, with its mystical streets and by-lanes. Examples include Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* among others. In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Rushdie describes Bombay as "the bastard child of a Portugese Indian wedding, and yet the most Indian of Indian cities...It was an ocean of stories; we were all its narrators and everybody talked at once" (350). JeetThayil's debut novel *Narcopolis*, published in 2012, also delves into this ocean of stories albeit with a crucial difference – it views the drug infested underbelly of the city through the eyes of several opium addicts. Through the experiences of the narrator, Dom Ullis, Dimple, a eunuch who prepares the opium pipe at Rashid's opium den and Mr Lee, a Chinese citizen who is forced to flee his country to escape Mao's regime, Thayil weaves together a wide canvas image of a part of the city that has seldom been portrayed with such honesty. The result is a hard-hitting piece of writing which is characterised by the stark contrast between its begrimed subject of exploration and its poetic style of writing.

The beginning of the novel is set in the 1970's, a time when Mumbai was still called Bombay and when India was relatively sheltered from foreign influences which would finally enter the country during the wave of globalisation in the 1990's. Even as Thayil never mentions this process during the course of the narrative, one can distinctly feel the many transformations brought about in the urban landscape of the city. Bombay has always been home to people from different communities and many works of Indian English fiction have focused on its cultural heterogeneity. A significant fraction of this corpus of literature concerns itself with experiences of minorities and the place they occupy within the secular vision of nationhood. Mistry's *A Fine Balance* draws attention to the Parsi community in Bombay and the tussle between preserving their own traditions and assimilating into the larger strand of Indian culture. Thayil's novel is also about people who have been ostracised or forced to leave mainstream society for some reason. Dimple was sold by her mother into prostitution at a very young age and Mr. Lee fell victim to the practices of the Mao regime. The characters of *Narcopolis* belong to a different kind of minority, these are people who have been driven away from or disappointed with traditional notions of life, and find temporary solace in the opium dens of Bombay.

By and large, the novel revolves around the theme of drugs and addiction. The hallucinatory world of narcotics has given rise to several works of literary excellence including the likes of Thomas de Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* etc. Thayil's work is a worthy member of

this elite club as it ruminates on the very essence of addiction. The issue is probed both from a social and a philosophical point of view. At one point in the novel, Dimple asks the narrator why someone in his social position, i.e. someone who is educated and has the resources to live a comfortable life, would get addicted to drugs. Clearly, Dimple believes that impoverished people like her don't have the luxury of choice, they are in some evil way, destined to fall prey to addiction. Much later in the novel, a more philosophical answer to the above mentioned question is offered in the form of Sopor's address to a large gathering of recovering addicts, where he asks the captivating question that eventually remains unanswered – Is addiction an expression of free will? Or, as Thayil puts it, “Are addicts free? Are they in fact the freest of men?” (249).

Towards the end of the novel, the onus shifts to the image of the new Indian metropolis with its newly constructed roads and shining buildings. That Thayil is starkly critical of any simplistic notions of progress and modernity is evident in his description of the transformed urban landscape. He writes, “The city had changed, but it was still a conglomeration of slums on which high-rises had been built. There were new highways but all they did was speed you from one jam to the next” (268). The criticism is not limited to the physical landscape of the city but also extends to its sociological constitution. Through the character of Jamal, Rashid's son, Thayil reveals the many fissures that scar the vision of a peaceful, secular India. Jamal's traumatic experience during communal riots in Bombay, coupled with other events where he suffers discrimination, force him to harbour distinctly sectarian beliefs.

Priyamvada Gopal asserts that the “narration of the nation gave the Anglophone novel in India its earliest and most persistent thematic preoccupation” (6). In other words, the Indian English novel mirrored the dreams, aspirations and anxieties of citizens of India and was preoccupied with the emergence of India as a nation-state. Couched within the hallucinatory tone of writing and the eclectic mix of characters, this novel addresses a similar theme i.e. the fate of a young and developing nation as it undergoes a series of socio-cultural transformations.

Before writing *Narcopolis*, Thayil had established a reputation for himself as an accomplished poet. Not surprisingly then, the writing style of the novel has traces of his poetic sensibilities and this gives rise to a unique form of writing. This novel doesn't quite have a linear or composite plot; instead, it is shaped as an ensemble of fragmented stories detailing the lives of poignant characters. These vignettes are sown together by the poetic writing style of the novel which successfully generates an abstract feeling of wholeness. Some of these characters like Dimple and Rashid are more developed as they command more narrative space than others like Rumi and Newton Xavier. However, even minor characters manage to strike a chord with the readers as they are somehow mired in the landscape of Bombay. They seem to share a very organic relationship to the city of Bombay and their very existence is shaped indelibly by its urban landscape. Therefore, the claim made by Thayil right at the beginning of the novel that Bombay is “the hero or heroin of the story” (1) does not go unjustified.

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