



**Narcotic Metropolis: Addiction, Identity and Polity in Jeet Thayil's
*Narcopolis***

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Abstract

The aim of the present article comprises an attempt to investigate Jeet Thayil's fictional portrait of Indian metropolitan city Mumbai under the light of addictions including opium, love, sex, gender, identity, and cultural continuity of underworld mafias with orientation of the political dimensions of socio-economic capital. Thayil endeavours plenty of to gain a prominent status to appear as the most emerging poet and fiction writer in the twenty-first-century Indian literature. He attempts all his artistry, eloquence, social milieu to move towards the various dimensions of the academic canon throughout his life. This upward explores a framework for self-analysis and discussion which facilitates the literary phenomena and consciousness.

The profound examination of the text covers theoretical analysis of characters and their multi-cultural approach in a opium torn city Mumbai. The dynamic portrait of Mumbai as a heroine of this fiction generates a thoughtfull impression that gives a leading literary potential in the field of contemporary social, economic, and political scenario. This highly acclaimed text highlights the landmark impact of metro-political culture in an individual's socio-personal standings. With these constructive arguments, this paper intends to shedding lights on Jeet Thayil's constructive knowledge shown in fictional sketches of metropolis and its influence on individual's socio-economic revenues.

Keywords: Metropolis, Narcotic, Identity, Opium, Mumbai



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In the last two decades of the twenty-first-century, fictions of Indian subcontinent have offered a new literary shape for the development of Indian writing in English. In view of this, Jeet Thayil, one of the engaging writers in the field of Indian English writings, fabulously introduced his new literary thoughts sketching Mumbai city as opium town in his Booker Prize shortlisted fiction *Narcopolis*. The literary scope of this fiction can be enhanced through multiple lenses such as metropolitan, cosmopolis, post-modern, socio-business, political-economy for exceptional reasons. In this connection, the novel received worthy praise from a literary journal “*Stylist*” in the following ways, “if heroin could write, this would be its novel. Long, intoxicating sentences weave like opium smoke into the story of Dimple – a streetwise prostitute in a Seventies Bombay opium den. Read in horror as the city quietly sows the seeds of heart-break into its drug-addicted citizens’ lives”.

The text portrays Mumbai or Bombay as it was known then, from the year 1970s as a metropolitan opium oriented city. The fiction has a fascinating portrayal of characters’ addictions to drug, brothel houses, sexuality, business and opiate life style. It is interesting to find the novel full of hallucinogenic qualities which creates dream-like state and nightmares. The author of the fiction deserves more praises for underlining suitable names of fictional characters including Dimple, a eunuch, Zeenat, Rashid, O, Rumi, Mr Lee, Bengali, Tai, Shankar, Lalaji, Pathar Maar, Gangsters, pimps, Dom Ullis, poet and narrator, and Newton Xavier. The novel extends its multiple narration styles through different voices of characters which contributes to the development of non-linear technique. The surface reading argues that the narration of the novel shifts from character to characters, places to places, time to times, and occasionally falling in and out of reality. The continuous flow of reading turned the novel into extremely lyrical in nature and departs from the conventional structure as the author himself is a poet and musician. For this reason the merit of the novel widely earns much literary praises despite the plotless nature, incoherent devices and druggy stories through different characters. In general approach it is argued that the majority of great literary works possess a landmark beginning and justified ending to discuss the merit of ideas which contextualize author’s intended purpose. Ample of examples in this framework can be seen in the classic works of English literature designed with perform of



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high literary value. It is incredible to have such literary ideas for a better indulgent of different genre of literature such as dramas, poetry, short stories, novels and many other writings as well. In this milieu, the present Indian literary productions have catalogued under rising values of literary thoughts which comparatively stands with core stream of westerns literary perception.

Author's luminous debut fiction begins with a seven-page sentence as a prologue through which narrator travels in the city and sets the tone for the rest of the discussion. The first line begins with the word 'Bombay' enhancing thematically the victory of the fiction. The opening lines are,

Bombay, which obliterated its own history by changing its name and surgically altering its face, is the hero or heroine of this story, and since I'm the one who's telling it and you don't know who I am, let me say that we'll get to the who of it but not right now, because now there's time enough not to hurry, to light the lamp and open the window to the moon and take a moment to dream of a great and broken city . . . I was sent back to India and I found Bombay and opium, the drug and the city, the city of opium and the drug Bombay . . . (1-7).

This classical opening of the text explores the account of drug scenes inside Bombay, the protagonist of the novel, discovers the themes of drugs, addiction, exploitation, business in an opium den and its connection to unknown underworld mafias. The first long sentence brilliantly captures the fragmented and cohesive images of the city. It seems completely trapped under the web of opium which dominates its role as an antagonist throughout the fiction. Though, the narrator finds in the city multiple changes with broken images when he returns from America. The text captures the time span from its setting of 1970s to 2004s. The author consciously attempts to assume the readers what actually the fiction about and traps them like opium addicts. Though the beginning of the fiction indicates that it is going to tell the tale of opium and its prominent role in the located city through numerous characters but interestingly it has different flavours then opium spread out from the starting point to the end. For such reason the novelist purposely begins and ends the novel with the same word 'Bombay'.



The Text
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Today's advanced cities, especially metropolitan, have become the central hub of socio-economic business in which the drugs play a vital role in shaping the political agendas of drug mafias. It is not only the tale of Indian metropolitan cities such as Mumbai mapped in the text, but also indicates towards rest of global cities such as London, Paris, New York, Moscow, Tokyo, Beijing and so many others. Even in the Indian subcontinent, metropolitan cities like Chennai, Kolkata, Delhi, Hyderabad and some of others in this range are also under the web of anti-social business based on drugs. Through this assumption, it can be viewed that the location of opium in Bombay is not only related to India rather it is more specifically indicating towards the world metropolitan cities as underlined.

It would be necessary to familiarize that the paper attempts to focus primarily on the narcotic influences upon its characters, various places located inside the text including the readers as well. Like dramatic scenes, it introduces several occasions fall around opium den areas located in particular places surrounded by a group of characters. The place named Shuklaji Street, which locates at the heart of the city's redlight district Kamathipura, has a central place in the text. It exposes how opium burrows and brothel houses are merged together. It is fascinating to see the place as the drug oriented hub and how opium dens were under the ferocity during the 1970s. The prominent characters of the novel have significant movements around the places, especially Shuklaji Street. A character like Dimple, a eunuch and prostitute, works as an opium pipe maker in Rashid's opium den, appears as a character of free choice and sexual addicts. Throughout the novel, the nature of addiction moves towards not only to opium but other forms of addiction as well. For instances, "then there are the addicts, the hunger addicts and rage addicts and poverty addicts and power addicts, and the pure addicts who are addicted not to substances but to the oblivion and tenderness that substances engender" (40).

The passage from the conversation between Dimple and Newton Xavier highlights compulsion as one of the prominent themes of the novel. It clearly indicates causes and relationships between power and politics. The author argues the connection developed between the characters and the plot to hold the attention for the readers. This connectivity revolves around the lives, desires and troubled minds of the people who frequently addicts to opium dens. Simultaneously, the novel successfully attempts to establish the equal balance between money,



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language, power, art, and business. The narrator brings Newton Xavier, an artist, to the opium den where Dimple lovingly prepares the pipes for the purpose of smoking opium. Both of them carefully looked at a picture of his paintings in a magazine. For Dimple it becomes ironical as the artist is standing in front of her. As views from the text,

Dimple shook her head once. There was nothing incredible about it, she said. I thought it was so because I spoke English, because I read books, and because my parents paid for my education and my upkeep. For me everything was surprising, the world was full of wonder, the most random idiotic occurrence was incredible because my luck made it so. For people like her, for the poor, the only incredible thing in the whole world was money and the mysterious ways in which it worked (39).

The depth of the text bears immense reasons which contribute in putting emphasis on a tranquillizer look and its effect on different circumstances and places designated in the novel. The author is mapping a fantastical portrait of a group of people in a form of damaged generation of a nation who about to trade its soul. Through such ways, it attempts to capture the evolution of a great and broken metropolitan city as exemplified Mumbai. Opium, the prime subject matter of the novel fulfils this gap falls between the common people and the drug addict environment. It is also revealed in the biographical sketch of the author that he was a drug addicted for a period of twenty years. During these years he experiences almost all the things he came across in Mumbai. From this context, the surface of the novel seems to be fragmented between several short stories from the lives of ordinary people who trapped into the unmoving circle of opium web.

The encounter between Mr Lee and Dimple is another interesting episode in the text which revolves around the role of opium in their personal lives. Being a pipe maker of opium Dimple finds approaches from Lee who shared his experiences of opium pipes. The reference of such encounter indicates strongly the way opium plays its role, as inevitable object, in their daily lives. It is more acknowledgeable to find the surface environment as dull and reveal a sense of complexness. As a short reference from the passage, “she went back to Mr Lee’s. She began to visit him a few times she couldn’t make it to the khana and it was as easy as that to acquire the habit of opium, for that’s what it was, a habit, like bathing twice a day or eating vegetables” (63).



The Text
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With such few examples, the framework of the text deserve more appreciation as the narration of the novel runs in a descriptive manner, whether it is Shuklaji Street, opium dens, character's reactions to opium, drugs, chemicals, heroine, backdrop of beggars, eunuchs and others. The style of description seems in perfect sense which gives the novel enough space to creates this fictional representation with scenes of precision. In many ways, the novel boosts both the readers and the listeners with the fragrance of opium through its excellence in parts and completeness in wholeness. The novel has very much air of opium, it has possibilities to leave a narcotic impression upon the people. It is also considering that most of the people may or may not have affected from the several narcotic encounters, especially through the strange and lasting experiences of real like characters sketched in this fiction.

The relationship between the pipe and the opium travels in the novel in a similar way as the connection between the people and the Mumbai city. The book is divided into four books, the second book entitled, "The Story of Pipe" determines in detail the significance of introducing opium pipes and how the characters essentially possess a new kind of experience of smoking opium with these pipes. The chapter three in this segment named 'Opium-smoking bandit', captures the communication of Chinese characters of Mao Tse-tung, and Mr Lee. The novel has the digression of around fifty pages in which the novelist attempts to portrait the surface level of Chinese cultural ideology. The comparative analysis looks upon Indian and Chinese characters in their relation to opium, drugs, chemicals, heroin, cocaine, it suggests very fair to deny inevitable influences of Chinese modern culture on Indian metropolitan cities including Mumbai. Dimple, the prominent character in the novel experiences several encounters with Chinese sociology. Mr Lee also shares experiences of his father about opium pipes to Dimple in the following lines from the novel, "he worked in his usual offhand manner, writing in half-hour bursts, as if his only aim was to take a break from the opium pipe . . . Lee's father was a revisionist, it was said, and he should be sent to the countryside for manual labour. He was an opium bandit" (89).

The novel surrounds with mysterious identities and fictional recordings of unknown characters give a new dimension to the narrative style revealing more about the lives of such unidentified but with acknowledgeable characters. The nameless character Pathar Maar, the stone killer, whose victims are anonymous and invisible poor, surprises readers mysteriously. It



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compels them to relocate such identities and hidden purpose behind their setting. Though at the surface level it appears if they have no intrinsic values and purposes as the novel runs on the track of opium. There are possibilities to have their unrevealed links to the opium sellers. In today's socio-political scenario it would be unbelievable to avoid the existence of underworld mafias whose economic trade and business totally based on drug tradings. Even, the present scenario of metropolitan cities, like Mumbai of the novel, directly or indirectly highly influenced by the drug business of mafias. They create an unimpaired social gulf between the high profile and ordinary localities. Sometimes it appears as the extraordinary threat to the communal harmony and peace. The author offers numerous references to preserve the equality of balance in the text through such lines, "the world as a manifestation of the estranged mind, and the three major religions- Islam, Hinduism, Christianity- as evidence of estrangement" (25-26).

Like above several other orientations in the novel revolves around the theme of opium, drug businesses, prostitutes, socio-political movements and so on. The numerous readings of the text may relocate the readers in a world of narcotic vibes full of imagination, chaos and frustration of smoking opium through pipes. The intensity of the novel is not to fall in the spectrum of opium rather having fallen for a deep love for the feelings comes while reading the text. Even the prominent subparts of the fiction such as 'Dimple', 'In Spain with Mr Lee', 'Light me a cigarette', 'Twice Abducted', 'To Bombay', 'A Walk on Shuklaji Street', 'The Sari and Burkha', 'Business Practices among the Criminal', 'A Chemical Understanding', 'The Intoxicated Entity', and 'The Citizen', stretch immense contributions in shaping the author's intention to squeeze the entire world into a house of opium.

Conclusion

The fictional portrait of Bombay as a metro-cum-cosmopolitan city presents a new challenge for modern readers, scholars, and critics. The fiction captures a vivid and complex treatment of relationship defined in terms of contemporary socio-political milieu. The influence of opium architected in the fiction is not only imaginary but also gripped with deep context of cultural clashes that goes beyond people's normal confusion. With a group of significant characters such as pimps, poets, artists, visitors, businessmen gangsters, eunuchs, the novel dramatically captures the old Bombay of the 1970s and its transformation to the new Mumbai of



The Text
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2004s. It is very acknowledgeable to point out the extent of times the novel located in. Artistically, it takes almost three and a half decade which introduces novel as a narcotic transformation into a new generation of drug addicts, especially in Mumbai like metropolitan city.

As the novel begins and ends with the name of ‘Bombay’, it portraits the city as the modern hero suffers from multiple sequences of crimes, prostitution, drugs, chemicals and opium. The text can be observed from the comparative perspective as well where it meets a traditional constant clash between the protagonist and the antagonist which shapes the constructive events in plotting the events. Though, the narrative style is very linear as the novel departs between from the main story which gives an unforgettable experience to the readers and locates them again and again in the opium den street of Shuklaji. Therefore, the author of *Narcopolis*, Jeet Thayil, deserves high quality praise for providing a fabric of multiple colours drenched in the fragrance of opium through an innovative pattern of experiences, enjoyment, and inventive depth of narrative style. On drawing arguments from various academicians, the fiction depicts the changing socio-political environment that have influenced author’s literary reputation over the decades. For this reason, the journal named “*Independent*”, offers a few appreciable words for the novel as, “Outstanding debut novel . . . The ingenuity of Thayil’s novel lies in how he has squeezed this entire universe into an opium pipe”.

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