



Margins of Mumbai: a Study on Representation of Margin in Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*

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ABSTRACT

The study tries to analyze the representation of minority in Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* against the tradition of Bombay novels. It performs a thematic study on the novel and also the representation of the androgynous protagonist.

KEYWORDS : Bombay Novels, Minority, Eunuch, Androgynous protagonist, Opium, Opium dens and Addiction

"Bombay was central, had been so from the moment of its creation: the bastard child of a Portuguese English wedding, and yet the most Indian of Indian cities . . . all rivers flowed into its human sea. It was an ocean of stories; we were all its narrators and everybody talked at once." (Rushdie 350)

Starting from the *Midnight's Children* and *The Moor's Last Sigh*, the city has become the setting of several novels in English owing to its cultural, social and ethnic diversities that form a conglomerate. It was followed by a number of novels of Rohinton Mistry (*Such a Long Journey, A Fine Balance*), Nissim Ezekiel, Shama Futehally (*Tara Lane*), Manil Suri (*The Death of Vishnu*), Anita Desai (*Baumgartner's Bombay*) and Kiran Nagarkar (*Ravan and Eddie*) which all dwell with certain minority factions of Indian society. The most recent in the 'Bombay Novels' genre is *Narcopolis* by Jeet Thayil. The novel deals with the deterioration of the city in the clings of narcotic siege in the 1990s. It differs from the preceding novels set in Bombay in its characterization and treatment of theme.

Though all Indian cities can claim a certain constitutive diversity, Bombay is distinguished by the presence, in significant numbers, of a variety of minority or marginalized communities from Parsis, Muslims, and Jews (of different denominations), to Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Dalits. Their complex relationship to the larger project of 'India'—at once integral but often sidelined—generates unique stories which can evince critical and questioning attitudes to both nation and community. (Gopal 117)

Bombay in *Narcopolis* is the new 'Wasteland' in microcosm. It is a city representative of the larger nation that fell into the clutches of global mercantile and cosmopolitanism. A degenerate world of sordid experiences, cruel sexual assaults, pimping and prostitution, crime and debauchery wrapped in opium addiction – the scene leaves a horrific memory of Bombay in 1970s. Kevin Rushby says that: This is an India that itself was dreaming, wrapped up in Gandhian ideals of self-sufficiency and simplicity, ignoring the tsunami of change that would not strike until the 1991 economic liberalization (*The Guardian*).

Pervaded by characters who adorn the marginalized and decentered identities, the metropolis in the novel evolves throughout into a debauched being. Flexibility and mobility of gender roles and sexuality is fortified through the delineation of androgynous character and overt expression of promiscuousness. The presence of the marginalized communities in this novel differs from other similar 'Bombay novels' in that they concern with the 'extreme margins'. Of them, the central figure is Dimple whose tragic fate projects the malicious cosmopolitan narcotic hub that Bombay had degenerated into. As the narrator Dom says, "I found Bombay and opium, the drug and the city, the city of opium and the drug Bombay" (Thayil 7)

The novel passes through the narrative voices of Dom Ullis, an American deported to India as he reaches the opium dens of Shuklaji Streets in Mumbai. The characters in this novel are linked by a single strand of opium. There are people who have become addicts due to social pressure as well as those who have chosen it deliberately 'just for the heck of it.' Dimple the protagonist of the novel is a Tiersian character, a eunuch whose emotions are also divided like her sexuality. She was separated from her mother at the age of eight and cruelly

castrated resulting in her erasure of distinct sexual identity and consequently addiction to opium. She works for her husband Rashid who is also the den owner.

Other people whose lives centers around opium include Salim, a cocaine peddler who is brutally sodomized by his master; Newton Xavier, a famous artist and junkie drunk and Mr. Lee a Chinese drug dealer who initiates Dimple towards opium. It also deal with two kind of people put together in the same society – the one with choices and the one without them (Ahrestani 2) While Dimple, Salim and Mr. Lee are caught in the 'den' due to pressures of life like debilitating pain and identity crisis, poverty or exile. Mr. Lee always wanted to return to his country after the fall of Communist regime but unable to achieve that he asks his daughter like Dimple to take his ashes to his mother country. Unlike in many other novels based on the metropolis, the characters in this novel are always confiding on each other to escape from isolation. In *Death of Vishnu* the plot progresses against a frame narrative of a dying man who is neglected by the other members in the building. In *Narcopolis* however, the 'addicts' and 'sellers' are united by a mutual sense of filiations and helplessness. This includes the friendship between Rashid and Dimple and filial emotions emerging between Mr. Lee and Dimple. Further, the other kind of drug users who puzzle Dimple happens to be the people from well off families with education and social standing, those who 'have a choice' in life and yet opt for a life of addiction. Newton and Dom come under this category. The actor chooses this life only to experience it and draws clean in front of his audiences at the end. Dom who is presumably an autobiographical character of Jeet Thayil also is unable to answer Dimple's question as to why they have chosen such a degrading life. This seems to be the question the author himself is posing before the readers and to himself.

The transformation of the city takes place in three phases – based on the shifting addiction of the people from opium to heroin to cocaine. In the beginning Rashid's den becomes the haven for opium addicts round the world and his business prospers in Dimple's efforts. But when Opium and Garad begins getting replaced by Heroin, their business fails and they eventually lose control over their lives. The disintegration becomes complete with the appearance of Cocaine – which is sold in market by Jamal, Rashid's son who belongs to the younger generation. Bombay now is no more the city Dimple or other den dwellers knew – "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 . . ." (Thayil 209).

Baumgartner's Bombay again paints a Bombay of isolation, violence and continued struggle over scarce resources. Baumgartner is an aging Jew eternally on exile whose life is permanently defaced by the pre-partition bloodshed. This is a similar situation in which Dimple is placed in *Narcopolis* once the opium den is shut down. The Bombay riots of 1990s and the proliferation of heroin in the Indian market threatens the growth of Dimple and Bombay. "As in *Balance*, Bombay is a place where even the disenfranchised feel relatively privileged for there is always someone living in a greater degree of degradation (Gopal 126)."

In the end however, it is the people who did not have a choice in their life who are perished by the onslaught of changing market and social

conditions. Dimple becomes the scapegoat to a brute society that denies her identity and right to life. In the beginning she served the industry by producing high quality opium. In course of time as the market crashes, she is stripped off her livelihood and place to live by the same industry. Newton uses her for sex and in the end she dies a tragic death. Her shift from the brothel to Rashid's Khana and at last to Safer is her movement on exile in search of identity and belonging.

The novel draws on the author's own personal experience as a drug addict, the "lost 20 years" of his life. Thus while the jury of 2012 Man Booker Prize "admired his perfumed prose from the drug dens and backstreets of India's most concentrated conurbation," the novel distinguishes itself by the author's take on a sensitive experience emerging right out of his own life.

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