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JEET THAYIL'S NARCOPOLIS - A CRITICAL REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Narcotic drugs have inspired much storytelling and literary dreaming, if rather less actual writing. Of those few novels that slide out of the smoke on to paper, we assume addiction is a requisite for authenticity and yet an enormous hindrance to productivity. After all, it is hardly playing by the rules of decadence and dereliction to find the willpower and tenacity to finish a manuscript. But a tiny number do convince the public that theirs is a genuine account of an addiction whose clutches the writer escaped for long enough to scribble down a compelling narrative. The first sentence of the novel begins, "Bombay, which obliterated its own history by changing its name and surgically altering its face, is the hero or heroin of this story, a great and broken city." The opening sentence runs on for seven pages and sets the tone of the novel. The narrator 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. Episode after episode for year after year for more than 30 years, the drug use and casual sex continue with little evidence of redeeming social value. The city, which is as much the center of the novel as the narrator, remakes itself in the course of the novel. Called Mumbai since 1995, it is now the commercial and entertainment center of India. As the novel makes clear, however, efforts to stamp out the lawlessness that it endured when the novel opens in the 1970s have not worked. Opium gave way to heroin and the raw underworld continued on its merry way. This review takes a critical look on the very work, effects, style, prose and criticism.

INTRODUCTION

Having emerged from a prolonged nada of substance abuse, Thayil remains lucid enough to document the 'secret history' of Bombay through his first novel, Narcopolis. The outcome is a scorching saga of a city traced through its narcotic dens and whorehouses housing a motley crew of addicts, pimps, 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 and garadulis in microscopic detail, their execrable lives, their



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abysmal despair and the many tiers of deaths that they undergo.

The story is told in the voice of Dom Ullis who has been deported from the States for attempting to possess drugs, circa 1970s. Back in Bombay, he quickly finds his way to Rashid' khana where opium and opium smoking is a cult. He runs into Dimple, a pretty, mysterious eunuch who is a master of preparing perfect opium pipes. She is a also an adept guru who initiates the new customers into the fine art of smoking, "wait now, light me up so we do this right, yes, hold me steady to the lamp, hold it, hold, good, a slow pull to start with, to draw the smoke low into the lungs, yes, oh my, and another for the nostrils, and a little something sweet for the mouth...." We learn more about Rashid, an educated Muslim and a Bachelor of Arts and the master of the den, dedicated to finest opium, Bengali, his bookkeeper and other regulars to the place.

Buried in Dimple's poignant memories is an unloved childhood, her abandonment and sale to a priest by his widowed mother and her transformation into a eunuch, her betrayal of Lee, a deeply suffering Chinese army man who had escaped his torturous country in a stolen jeep. Lee had discovered soon that he had driven himself out of the frying pan into the hellfire of India, a filthy and chaotic land. He had smoked opium to reduce the interminable pain, just like his father. He had taken Dimple into his fold and rescued her from the sickening pain, launching her on the irreversible journey atop smoke pipes. Dimple had graduated well in the intricacies of smoking opium and had moved out of the whorehouse to a room above Rashid's den.

For such a perturbing subject matter, Thayil has pulled a book of sparkling beauty and startling sensitivity in Narcopolis. The book opens with a hypnotic sentence that runs into six and a half pages, effectively vapourising chronological time and space between dreams, conversations and visitations from absent friends, setting up the mood for the rest of the story, tightening the vicious grip. He has drawn undoubtedly from the dark treasure of his personal experiences, but the vividness with which he has described the varied hallucinations, frozen suspensions, mutable liquid nightmares and bubbling despair puts it alongside prose epics of the highest order. His language is lyrical but intricate, unfolding layer by layer. Narrative is in synch with emotions, languorous when speaking of the blue smoke, leaden when describing nightmares, grisly when dealing with depravity, sublime when courting with reason.



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NARCOPOLIS; THE BOOK AND BACKGROUND

The ingenuity of Thyil's novel lies in how he has squeezed this entire universe into an opium pipe. And when the narrative dissipates into smoke, it leaves a deceptively addictive odour, with memorable characters at the margins of society. There is Dimple, the eunuch keen to read and learn; the Bengali who pretends to know more than he does (or maybe he does); and Rashid himself, who runs the opium den with disdain that's at once sardonic and laconic. There are others too, given peculiar names drawn from Bombay slang, but most try to do no harm, and often show heartwarming humanity. The unobtrusive narrator is Dom, whose soul-killing job is as a proof-reader of publicity material in a pharmaceutical company (with easy access to chemical substances). Just alongside the den are other vices - prostitution and crime.

Broader events, like the 1993 bomb blasts that rocked the city, sound like a faint thud. We experience the attacks through the closed shops, the climate of fear, the single shoe discarded on the street. Thyil presents a credible portrayal of the emerging divisiveness in the city. The addicted, sadistic businessman Rumi's rage against Muslims builds up slowly; Rashid tries maintaining the old decency, and yet his own son Jamal gets politicised by the images of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In between are exceptionally funny sections, such as a long rant against various communities, and caricatures of well-meaning Dutch tourists. The most striking section is in the middle, when Thyil introduces us to Lee, the elderly Chinese man who gives his pipes to Dimple. Lee has come to India escaping Mao's cultural revolution. Thyil provides an engrossing account of the trance propaganda can produce, as he shows how the party destroys the lives of Lee's parents, his girlfriend, and many, many more.

India's opium links with China are old. Amitav Ghosh's Ibis trilogy, of which the first two novels, Sea of Poppies and River of Smoke, are already published, traces those links. British traders got China addicted to opium grown in India, and transported it on ships owned by Indian merchants

NARCOPOLIS; REVIEW

The novel is broken up into four "books." Book One, "The Story of O," begins with Dom's arrival in Bombay. It is the late 1970s, and he quickly weaves himself into the fabric of Bombay's sordid underbelly, specifically, the opium dens. Here he meets Rashid, owner of a khana on Shuklaji Street where much of the novel takes place (and where Dom smokes his first pipe); Dimple, the beautiful



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hijra who works for Rashid preparing bowls of opium; “Bengali,” who manages Rashid’s money; Rumi, the unflinchingly confrontational businessman; and an assortment of other characters.

Dom has several run-ins with a poet, Newton Xavier Francis, before disappearing near the middle of Book One and not returning until well into the second half of Book Three. Our “I” narrator simply vanishes, and is replaced by a third-person omniscience that suddenly steps in to tell us the inner workings of other characters’ minds and their personal histories. This narration has the ring of the truth, or at least what the characters themselves see as the truth. How would Dom know all this? Is this even Dom’s perspective? Where is Dom anyway? Turns out (if you hadn’t keenly parsed the prologue, you’re given other chances to catch this) it’s the other “I,” the I who’s telling, that’s narrating now. It is through the mouth (in both senses) of an ancient opium pipe that we hear these stories.

The pipe takes us to Dimple’s perspective. We witness her encounters with Xavier (who feels to her like the devil but speaks to her of saints), and follow her into her dreams. The narration swoops back in time to when a much younger 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 and winds up her surrogate father.

Book Two, “The Story of the Pipe,” centers 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 flight to India and, eventually, Bombay, which he hates but stays in because he is drawn to the sea. When Lee dies, he leaves Dimple his family’s magnificent old opium pipes, which she barter for a position at Rashid’s khana, where she will make pyalis all day in exchange for opium of her own to smoke.

Book Three, “The Intoxicated,” chronicles the tumultuous crumble of the mostly mellow opium dens into the brutally effacing world of chemical heroin. Rashid’s khana is shut down, reopened, and shut down again. Dimple leaves the brothel she has worked at nearly her whole life to live at Rashid’s, on the half landing between the khana and the upstairs floor where his wives and children live. Dimple has been determined throughout to leave the brothel, to make her own future. Her move to Rashid’s could be a positive one but is derailed by the new drug of choice in town. Not to mention that she’s expected to act as Rashid’s sex partner whenever he’s in the mood.



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The characters descend further and more inescapably into ruin as garad heroin becomes increasingly available and pervasive. By now, we've come to the early 90s and the horrific Bombay riots that leave the city burning and the population inflamed. Heroin is easier to get than fruit. Our "I" narrator, Dom, returns to us. He is making arrangements to leave Bombay. He, like everyone else we've been following, has developed a heroin habit since we last saw him ten or so years ago (though we wonder where, since he says he hasn't seen Dimple in that long). Before leaving Bombay, he deposits Dimple in rehab: a last-ditch effort to save her. His "I" leaves us again for the rest of Book Three, and the rehab center, appropriately called "Safer," which comes to house both Dimple and, later, Rumi, are the locus of the rest of the section.

Book Four, "Some Uses of Reincarnation," returns narrator Dom to Bombay. It is 2004 (the year also of Thayil's return). After running into an old acquaintance, Dom decides to visit Rashid's. He arrives at Shuklaji Street to find the area disorientingly different. The former red light district has transformed into stores, businesses, and fast food restaurants, and Rashid's khana is now an office, run by his son Jamal. Dom speaks with the aged Rashid to find out what happened to his friends. We catch a glimpse of the newer generation when we follow Jamal and his fiance, Farheen, to a club. Cocaine and ecstasy are the new flavor of the hour, and Jamal (a "businessman" even at the age of six) follows in his father's footsteps, as a cocaine salesman. Shiny surfaces abound—in the club and, more and more, in the city—but what's below them is doubtless no less raw, no less depraved. It will always go on; the story doesn't end ("Dance or we die," says Farheen to Jamal).

Dom goes through the belongings Dimple left at Rashid's. Among them, he finds the opium pipe. The book ends in the same spot it started: Dom and the pipe and the account they've now made together, a metatextual call out signaling the circularity: "All I did was write it down, one word after the other, beginning and ending with the same one, Bombay."

As the ouroboric final line suggests, the way the story is told is as important as the story itself—indeed it is a key to understanding the story. Language is a clear focus throughout, and the book is filled with lines that beg to be read aloud: Xavier "outdid the Romantics' antics," is "permanently drunk on booze, broads and beauty," and is "mad, bad, and slanderous to know." The place Dimple develops her taste for opium is called by its patrons "Mistah Lee's or Mister Ree's."

The significance of text extends beyond code switching and ear candy. There are clear similarities



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between the way the book is told and both Bombay itself and the drug state itself. The book is highly intertextual, containing references to invented texts and real-world ones, stories within stories from a broad mix of genres (magazine articles, poems, books, song lyrics, films), and repetitions of key phrases and narratives. Among this assortment of texts, layers of reality mingle and swirl so that it's not always evident what is dream, what is nod; what is fact, what is fiction; what is past, present, future, or prophecy.

The intertextual elements of the narrative are so ubiquitous it feels we are reading or hearing a story within our story just as much as we're reading "the" story itself. In the first thirty or so pages alone, we have extracts from Time magazine ("What a big name for a small book," Dimple says), Free Press Journal, the Daily Mail, and several other papers talking about Newton Pinter Xavier, "a postmodern subversive who rejected the label 'postmodern'" (could this be true of Thayil as well?); the enigmatic S. T. Pande, whose texts appear several times throughout the book; and a few poems by Xavier himself. One of these tells of a boy in a dystopian future who becomes separated from his family and homeland. As a teenager, he and his band of outsiders one day come to a spot he knows is the place he is from. He recognizes much of the city but can't spot his own home. As he starts his trek toward the city, he gets it: He hasn't spotted his house because it's no longer there—it's been transformed, now "a mansion with a pool and garden." He turns back and decides not to visit after all:

"It wasn't that I wanted to go home,
Who knew home? I only knew alone.
What I wanted was to be elsewhere,
Somewhere, anywhere but there."

This story of exile, an apocalyptic future, a child running or being forced away from home and returning later, to see that it's not the same and never can be is one we see again and again. Bombay (and drug addiction—the two are often synonymous, as when Dom says, "I found Bombay and opium, the drug and the city, the city of opium and the drug Bombay") is a place of exile for many of the characters, or a second home. It's surely not a coincidence that St. Francis Xavier, the poet's namesake, is the patron of navigators and aimless travelers.

It is through Mr. Lee, himself an exile, who "lost a war and a homeland at one stroke," that we receive perhaps the most significant text within text. Lee's father, we learn, wrote a book in 1957 that broke



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from his previous popular literature and whose content was incendiary enough to the Maoist government that the author was thrown in a labor camp, branded a revisionist, a forced to carry a sign reading, "I am a monster." Lee finds the book, *Prophecy* (another fitting title), after his father's death. As the contents are unveiled, a stir of recognition sparks, and grows the more we hear. *Prophecy* is "presented like a biography but there were things in it that no biographer could know, for instance the things that men and women were thinking at important moments in their lives" and "at the center of it all was a character who was neither man nor woman."

The book is also similar to the poem about the exiled boy: a Cherokee archaeologist in 2056 "fleeing a cataclysm in an unnamed city, arrives in a landscape that's somehow familiar to him. He recognizes it from the remembered stories of his tribe." The story then moves on (back in time to the Ming Dynasty era) to tell of a ship in the fleet of Zheng He, and "the author" (Lee's father) appears for the first time to tell us that he believes Zheng He, not Columbus, discovered America. The book's third section, again, back in time, and again with a fluctuating narrative (between third person and the admiral's head), tells of Zheng He's upbringing (he was born Ma, a Muslim, then brought to Ming and castrated) and of the voyage the emperor sets to him, to sail to the end of the horizon—the end of the world, into the realm of the unknown. At its close, the book moves forward in time, two generations to Zheng He's grandson, a boy called Soporó Onar (a keen reader will notice this name again later in *Narcopolis*). Soporó tries to find Zheng He's final resting place, which is somewhere in India, somewhere on the west coast (Lee says this is perhaps why he came to Bombay).

Soporó "builds a monument to him in the pages of a book"—yet another book, Soporó's book, within Lee's father's book, within the story of Lee's life, as told to Dimple, within the pipe's narration, as told to narrator Dom, within the book *Narcopolis* by Jeet Thayil.

This jumble of genres and narratives is to some extent an essential ingredient in a postmodern narrative, but in some spots its haphazardness creates less a sense of pastiche than of choppiness. When, for instance, Rumi says, "Let me tell you about the singer," and then launches into a first-person anecdote, one wonders if this tell-not-show announcement could have been more tempered, the story better integrated. Certainly someone with Thayil's impressive command of prose is capable of a bit more finessing.

In any case, these references to other texts, other stories are scattered throughout the book, and



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often are multi-layered. Books appear within dreams. Mr. Lee is visited by visions of his father's novel when he grows older and closer to death, and later, so is Dimple. Before he drops her at rehab, Dom takes Dimple to Chowpatty Beach and has a "moment of clairsentience" where he feels Dimple looking for the ghost ship on the horizon, the ghost ship Mr. Lee looked for, that his father wrote about, that Zheng He sailed on. Dimple later writes a story, that Dom finds, in which a boy has similar visions.

We have many different stories, many different storytellers, and many modes of seeing these stories. The layers to parse through are not just story layers, but also perspectives: is it a true story, a fable, a dream, a drug-induced vision, a memory? Near the beginning of Book One, the nod takes Dom and he dreams he is visited by the spirit of deceased Dimple. Though at first we may see it as "just a dream," it becomes clearer as the book unfolds that these dream visitations may actually be from spirits, traversing time and space, to visit people who know them. Dimple tells Dom that her spirit is always there, just beyond a veil, behind a mirror's reflection, or under the surface of water. Spirits hover nearby, she says, just waiting for someone to listen.

STYLE AND POETRY

Thayil has been writing poetry since his adolescence, paying careful attention to form.

In his prose, as in his poetry, he has introduced new areas of feelings and emotions to Indian literature, and has often concerned himself with the pleasures and pains of drugs and alcohol, sex and death – emblematic of Keats and Baudelaire. He is said to have more in common with figures such as William S. Burroughs and Roberto Bolano than writers traditionally connected with the firmament of Indian literature. The Indian poet, Dom Moraes, in his introduction to Thayil's first book of poems (with poet Vijay Nambisan), Gemini, said that Thayil did not trouble his mind with the concerns of many Indian poets, their Indianness, that he did not make statements that were irrelevant to his work, that his concerns were mainly personal. Thayil, Moraes said, "works his feelings out with care, through colourations of mood rather than through explicit statements."

His idiom is the result of a cosmopolitan blend of styles, and is yet, quite clearly, his own. About Narcopolis, Thayil said, "I've always been suspicious of the novel that paints India in soft focus, a place of loved children and loving elders, of monsoons and mangoes and spices. To equal Bombay as a subject you would have to go much further than the merely nostalgic will allow. The grotesque may be a more accurate means of carrying out such an enterprise."



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LIFE AND CAREER

Born in Kerala, Thayil is the son of the writer and editor TJS George, who at various times in his life was posted in several places in India, in Hong Kong and New York. Thayil was mostly educated abroad. He received a Masters in Fine Arts from Sarah Lawrence College (New York), and is the recipient of grants and awards from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the Swiss Arts Council, the British Council and the Rockefeller Foundation.

His first novel, *Narcopolis* (Faber, 2011) is set mostly in Bombay in the 70s and 80s, and sets out to tell the city's secret history, when opium gave way to new cheap heroin. Thayil has said he wrote the novel, "to create a kind of memorial, to inscribe certain names in stone. As one of the characters [in *Narcopolis*] says, it is only by repeating the names of the dead that we honour them.

He is the editor of the *Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets* (Bloodaxe, U.K., 2008), *60 Indian Poets* (Penguin India, 2008) and a collection of essays, *Divided Time: India and the End of Diaspora* (Routledge, 2006). He is the author of the libretto for the opera *Babur* in London, commissioned by the UK-based Opera Group with music by the Zurich-based British composer Edward Rushton. At the work's core is an exploration about the complexities of faith and multiculturalism in modern-day Britain. Its action hinges on an imagined encounter between a group of religious fundamentalists and the ghost of Babur, who challenges their plans for a suicide strike.

Thayil is also known as a performance poet and musician. As a songwriter and guitarist, he is one half of the contemporary music project Sridhar/Thayil (Mumbai, New Delhi). He has worked as a journalist in New York, Mumbai and Bangalore. In 2012, Thayil's poetry collection *These Errors are Correct* was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award for English. Thayil lost 20 years to addiction. After five years living in Bombay the opium dens were closed and gangs started pushing even harder drugs. "All the people who had been living fairly healthy lives smoking opium switched to heroin. It was deadly. Very soon, they were dying." Thayil managed to stay alive, holding down a steady job as a journalist, both in India and New York. But his writing ambitions were lost in an opiate fog. "I feel it was 20 wasted years. I did no real work."

Only when he finally kicked the habit a decade ago did he begin to work seriously as an author. He has since written and edited several books of poetry and produced a libretto for an opera, *Babur*,



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about the ghost of India's first Mughal emperor wandering modern-day Britain. *Narcopolis* took many years to write. While poetry came to him in a flash, struggling through prose was a joyless slog, locked in a room from nine to five. Now living in Delhi, he is close to completing a second novel in which one of the characters who fleetingly appears in *Narcopolis* takes centre stage. The new novel has nothing to do with drugs or Shuklaji Street. That part of Thayil's life is over. Still, he harks back to those times. "When I think of the opium days I am filled with nostalgia," he says. "Opium fills a hole, perhaps a God-shaped hole. And I have to say, I do miss it."

IN ASSOCIATION

Then there are the comparisons between *Narcopolis* and its literary ancestors. The jacket copy compares Thayil with Burroughs and Baudelaire, although I think it might be more apt to link him with Paul Bowles, or with other Commonwealth writers like J. M. Coetzee or Margaret Atwood; the prose is much more coherent, and less weighted, than Burroughs or Baudelaire. I also found the writing quite unlike that of India's literary greats, especially Salman Rushdie, and it was in this difference that I found myself most affected by the characters I encountered in *Narcopolis*, and by the perilous, intricate stories Thayil told about them.

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