

## **Addicted Nation: the India in Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis***

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The novel begins when the narrator reaches at Bombay in 1970s. The prologue describes Bombay as a third world metropolitan city with the 'roads mined with garbage with human and animal debris' and 'everywhere the poor and deranged stumbled in their rags or stood and stared.' From there onwards each character that the narrator sees is an addict in some way or another and the aim of these characters are different from one another. The protagonist Dom Ullis, a Syrian Christian from Kerala, is deported from New York to Bombay for the possession of drugs. The Narrator's profession as a proof reader in a pharmaceutical company and that made him easy to get the drugs. When he leaves New York, he doesn't go to his native but Bombay, for a change.

The most important character of the novel is Dimple. She is the pipe maker of Rashid's den and a transgender who later becomes the lover of Rashid. Thayil presents Dimple as an economically poor and a pathetic woman. She starts her life as a prostitute and reaches at Lee who gives her a remedy through the opium pipe. Dimple gets addicted to the stuff in order to relieve the pain of her life. Rashid takes her for outing and cinemas. Even though it is struggle and pain Dimple is happy there with Rashid and his Khana. Thayil presents Dimple as the model of every suffering woman in India. It is not in the Bombay of 80s but even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century too in India one can say educated Indians are treating women as subordinates to men. Dimple's mother's abject poverty forced her to leave Dimple on the hand of priest. At the age of seven or eight she was castrated, and priest gave her to Tai in the red street of Bombay and Mr. Lee got her from there and he sheltered her till his death. From there he introduces opium as an antidote of pain to Dimple. After the death of Lee, she comes to Rashid the opium den owner of Shuklaji Street. She got a job there as opium pipe maker and many used her body too. Out of hallucination Dimple dreams of a house she had never lived in and of a family she did not know. Towards the end of her life she is taken to a rehabilitation centre from where a Catholic Carl asks her, 'Drugs are bad habits, so why do you use it? She answers without a single thought.

Because it isn't the heroin that we're addicted to it's the drama of the life, the chaos of it, that's the real addiction and we never get over it ; and because, when you come down to it, the high, that is, the intoxicated life, is the best of limited options we are offered. (Narcopolis, 231).

The gap between the haves and have-nots as well as the struggles of poor and the role fame and richness in India is portrayed brilliantly by the author. Dimple, the poor eunuch is sexually used by an Indian painter named Newton Xavier, a drunk and a junkie with fame and fortune and has

scores of admirers around the world lives in London. Because of his wealth and position he simply walks away from it and cleans up and makes an appearance in front of adoring, unsuspecting fans. Thayil picks the complexities, contradictions and hypocrisies of Indian life with great grace. The 'good' Muslim selling heroin, the queenly beggar woman who makes the street her living room and the Hindu prays in church, etc. are some of them. Rashid, a typical Indian father who sells heroin, scolds his six years old son for buying cigarettes from the beediwalla. *Narcopolis* is about the specific India of a specific period. The novel documents the secret history of Bombay. The blistering tale of a city traced through its narcotic dons, addicts, pimps, prostitutes, eunuch, drug lords, murderers and religious fanatics etc. Being a drug addict for 20 years, he knows the effect of blue smoke inside.

In the opening sections, the novel talks about opium and the culture formed out of it. While describing the life of Mr Lee, Thayil shifts the location from Bombay to China to trace out the old opium trade relationship between India and China. Spanning three decades of life in the city Bombay, the novel focuses the city's darker side by exploring the various characters and their experiences in the city and the 'wrong' side of Indian culture. Thayil depicts the brothel system in the novel. The protagonist Dimple has sexual relationship with many of the characters in the novel. The Thai, the brothel keeper is the representation of brothel culture in Bombay. Most of the customers who came in Thai's brothel want the beautiful eunuch Dimple which shows the sexual pervasion and moral degradation of the society.

Rashid in his young age is an ambitious and selfish man whose desire is to make money. He believes in his religion but when he is filled with opium or drug, he feels that god is nearby him. 'When he was high it was never like this, but when he was opium sick and sober – yes then, then God was always close' (*Narcopolis*, 137).

The young and beautiful Dimple resembles young, beautiful and intelligent India who has the potential to get out of pothole. This implies that the westerners had "docked and gelded" India by their colonization and the partition of the land, but that India has the potential. But the slow and easy opium life in the best opium den in Bombay is forcibly supplanted by frightening the cheap hallucinatory chemical laced heroin. During this time, Dimple becomes increasingly sick. Likewise, India itself is getting sicker from the negative influences of modernization. As time passes Dimple's name changes, as did Bombay's and other identities were lost in the harsh new world. Thayil has no hesitation in talking about these things which could kill the image of India on a global level. Literary critics Verma defines this novel as a dark one because it seems to have found a niche in the market, writing as it does of the underbelly of Indians society, its slums, poverty, deprivation, and destitution.

Newton Xaviour, a post-modern painter who visits Bombay often for the exhibition of his works and for delivering speeches is a drunkard and drug addict. He spends his nights with Dimple and at day time just utters 'excuse me' to her. He has the belief that people get addicted to substances as they find solace which they continuously search in their lives.

Only the rich can afford surprise and or irony. The rich crave meaning. The first thing they ask when faced with eternity, and in fact the last thing, is excuse me, what does this mean? The poor don't ask questions, or they don't ask irrelevant questions. They can afford is laughter and ghosts. Then there are addicts, the hunger addicts and rage addicts, poverty addicts and power addicts and the pure addicts who are addicted not to substances but to the oblivion and tenderness that substances endanger (Thayil, 40).

Everything is controlled by power and money. Another character, Rumi, since he is not able to get any proper work, becomes a taxi driver and a drug addict. The reason for his addiction as he himself says is the frustration with life. Rumi's married life is stained because of his poverty. He seeks pleasures from outside.

The novel depicts the tragedy of the clashes between Hindus and Muslim in the post Babri demolition era. Many Muslims were killed. New drugs arrive at Bombay which is simply another herald for drastic change of the people in the city. The novel projects the 1993 bomb blast which is shown through the image of closed shops, broken things, fire in the city and the ongoing riots between the Hindus and Muslims. In an occasion Dimple feels that the world is going to end. Rashid says,

The city has changed. People wear their religion on the faces. As a Muslim I feel unwanted in many places, you should feel it too (Thayil, 216, 217).

A secular nation which fights years for acquiring its freedom from the colonial powers with struggle by great leaders and common men unless their religion and caste and obtained its freedom is now fighting in the name of religion.

The man told her how the riots started, because of a rumour that a Hindu family of six had been burned alive, and the killers were Muslim, and the children's scream could be heard far away. It was only a rumour but now there were real fires all over the city, though Shuklaji Street was so far untouched. (Thayil, 184).

The story of the falloff the country becomes an epic tragedy written with grace, passion and empathy. Even the city is burning on a side, drugs flows through another side. Dimple says: "Tell me why chemical is freely available when there are not tomatoes in the market" (Thayil 199).

Narcopolis is the story of an addicted India in which each of its players is with individual addictions, whether to narcotics, money, sex, violence or self-destruction. As the characters slide down into the spirals of inevitable ruin, Thayil reveals their tragic fates. In a painful scene, while detoxing from heroin the character describes the graphic rape of a child, which brings muck, violence and evil together. The narrator vehemently declares "This is India" which suggest that India

itself is responsible for the horrific lives of the characters. India, by way of expanding the opium and heroin industries, traded the lives of her citizens for profit. Thayil makes a convincing narrative that India has left many of her people with escape into drugs and addiction as their best available life choice. There are riots, revolutions, and tragedies. It speaks of a crazy, ravenous and epileptical astuteness which circles the Indian culture to reveal its true face.

This is a story which is not to prove the Indianness or the suburban fantasy. It is a shriek of pain and frustrations. This is the story of the shining nation which needs to be heard. It is about addiction not only to narcotics but also to sex, alcohol, religion etc. Thayil explores some of the inherent contradictions in Indian life like the good Muslim who sells heroin while complaining about brazen women. In many ways one gets less of a flavour of the so called *arshabharata* from this novel.

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