



THE LOST SOULS OF JEET THAYIL'S *NARCOPOLIS*

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ABSTRACT

Narcopolis explores the lowest of the low of our country. There is not much of a plot in this novel, but when one begins reading it, there can be no stopping at all. It is full of pathos and just a mere character sketch of the different kinds of low people who existed during the 80's Bombay which in itself a separate story. The speciality of this novel is the quality of being phantasmagorical. Thayil has no hesitation in talking about these things which could mar the image of India on a global level. But as we all know, literature is a reflection of life and there are autobiographical elements which are acknowledged by Thayil himself in various interviews during the release and the promotions of the novel. The aim of this paper is to analyse the characters of this novel and their choices – both individual and societal and how these choices affect their lives.

INTRODUCTION

Narcopolis explores the lowest of the low of our country. There is not much of a plot in this novel, but when one begins reading it, there can be no stopping at all. It is full of pathos and just a mere character sketch of the different kinds of low people who existed during the 80's Bombay which in itself a separate story. Literary Critics group this novel under the term Dark India which is defined as, "a body of literary fiction which seems to have found a niche in the market, writing as it does of the underbelly of Indian society: its slums, poverty, deprivation, and destitution" (Verma 2). Jeet Thayil even portrays this in his own beautiful way that we find sympathy in our hearts for these characters.

The novel is narrated by the narrator and also by the opium pipe itself. The speciality of this novel is the quality of being phantasmagorical. Thayil has no hesitation in talking about these things which could mar the image of India on a global level. But as we all know, literature is a reflection of life and there are autobiographical elements which are acknowledged by Thayil himself in various interviews during the release and the promotions of the novel. The

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aim of this paper is to analyse the characters of this novel and their choices – both individual and societal. One of the characters in the novel says, “Yes, why not? Put our shame on display, so people understand the lowest of the low, prostitutes and criminals and drug addicts, people with no faith in God or man, no faith in anything except the truth of their own senses” (*Narcopolis* 288). This quotation reveals the very characteristic feature of the novel’s myriad characters. They had nothing and they lost nothing, all they had was the oblivion which they believed to be the ultimate truth.

Our protagonist Dom Ullis, a Syrian Christian from Kerala, is deported from New York to Bombay for the crime of the possession of drugs. Dom Ullis, our heroic narrator works as a proof-reader in a pharmaceutical company which makes it easier to get the drugs. So when he returns to India, he does not go back to his native but comes to Bombay for a change. And that change is nothing but the choice of his drug. He comes to Bombay only to fall for the opium there, befriends some of the pathetic characters there and he tells the story of those people and of the city. The major characters are Dimple – the eunuch, Mr. Lee – the Chinese immigrant, Rashid – the owner of the opium den known as Rashid’s Khaana, Newton Xavier Francis – the famous painter. There are also other minor characters such as Rumi – the failed businessman; Bengali – the old man who takes care of Rashid’s money, Pathar Maar – the stone killer, Salim a cocaine seller who is sodomized by his boss. From the very one-line introduction tells more about these characters. Let us examine them in detail.

The most important character in the novel is Dimple. Dimple is the pipe maker of Rashid’s opium den. She is a transgender who becomes the lover of Rashid. Dimple has been born as a boy who is sold by her mother when she was eight years old to a temple where she undergoes a painful castration, the pain which will haunt her till the end of her life. Thayer presents Dimple as she is – a simple, poor and pathetic woman. She starts her life as a prostitute, visits Dr. Lee in order to relieve her pains who introduces her to the ever solacing remedy – the opium through his opium pipes. Dimple gets addicted to the stuff in order to forget her pains and herself. After the death of Mr. Lee, she goes to sell his pipes where she meets Rashid and becomes the pipe maker of his opium den in the popular Shuklaji street. Rashid falls for her and she moves in with him but she stays away from his family.

Dimple seems a very practical character here. When the narrator asks about her experience regarding her sexuality, she says:

Woman and man are words other people use, not me. I’m not sure what I am. Some days I’m neither, or I’m nothing. On other days I feel I’m both. But men and women are so different, how can one person be both? Isn’t that what you are thinking? Well I’m both and I’ve learned some things, to my cost, the kind

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*of thing you're better off not knowing if you mean to live in the world.
(Narcopolis 11)*

Rashid has affection for Dimple and he takes her out occasionally to movies and all. He renames her “Zeenat”, the name of his favourite movie character and also insists that she wears burqa whenever she goes out. Though there is nothing glorifying or satisfying, Dimple is quite happy to stay with Rashid in the beginning. “...Yes, I’ve never been so happy. It’s good to run away from home when nobody needs you and you have so much love to share with the world” (*Narcopolis* 167). Even during her days in the brothel, Dimple used to read a lot. She reads whatever she gets her hands on to educate herself. There are elements of intertextuality in the novel as we come across the excerpts of various books and magazines which Dimple comes across.

*She befriends Dom and tells him about her life. And when Dom decides to leave Bombay, Dimple suddenly realizes that she cannot be there amidst the drugs and her lonely life. And so she requests Dom to take her with him. Dom leaves her in a “Safer” rehabilitation centre in the hope that Dimple will get cured. But of no avail. She goes back to Rashid to yield to her temptation. And then dies soon there. In the rehabilitation centre, a catholic fellow named Carl asks Dimple the reason for her drug addiction. To which, Dimple replies: “...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 life, that is, the intoxicated life, is the best of the limited options we are offered – why would we choose anything else?”
(*Narcopolis* 231).*

Newton Xavier is a Postmodern Painter who visits Bombay often for the exhibition of his works and for various speeches. Dom goes to meet him and ends up driving to the Rashid’s den, where Newton meets Dimple. He spends time with her and the very soon he gets back to his artistic life. He is a heavy drunk and addict from whom the odour of ‘O’ (opium) is always there. True to his profession he is a mixture of chaos and clarity combined with the post modernistic attitude. He learns about Dimple’s life, stays with her and suddenly leaves her and gets back to his “normal” life. He is of the belief that people get addicted to substances as they find solace which they are in continuous 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’t afford to. All they can afford is laughter

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and ghosts. 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. An addict, if you don't mind me saying so, is like a saint. What is a saint but someone who has cut himself off, voluntarily, from the world's traffic and currency. (Narcopolis 40)

Mr. Lee is like a father figure to Dimple. Mr. Lee escaped from China in a stolen jeep to India and settled in Bombay as he likes the sea. After his death Dimple goes to Rashid's khana to work for him. Lee recounts about his life to Dimple. His father was a writer who wrote against the Maoist government and so he was imprisoned and died there in the prison itself. His mother engaged herself in the social activities and tried to get herself educated. Lee also tells her about his love life. During his time in the army, he fell in love with the girl called Pang Mei and she was also burnt by his superiors for having loved him. Lee considers his father's final work to be his masterpiece. It tells the story of a eunuch general who tries to get back his rightful kingdom, "Then he said, I wish there was a translation of my father's book, because if there's anyone who would benefit from reading about the life of the eunuch admiral, it's you" (*Narcopolis* 99). His only wish was that he should be buried in China after his death.

And Mr Lee made a small sound. She would remember it whenever she thought about him in the years after his death, the involuntary vowel that ascended from deep inside his lungs. It communicated more clearly than words the thing he was trying to say, that it was a humiliation to die and a double humiliation to die in a foreign country. And she remembers the lie she told him. (Narcopolis 120)

Dimple fails to do so and so he haunts her in her dreams; asking her to smoke more opium. Rumi is one of the customers and he shares his experiences with Dimple and also with the narrator. Rumi's married life is stained because he is not making much money. So he seeks pleasures outside. During one of his adventures he meets a girl, beats her up badly and ends up taking her money too. The reason for his addiction as he himself says is frustration with life. He had an advertising job in LA, but when he comes to Bombay he is not able to get any proper work. So he becomes a taxi driver. But even he has an opinion on everything. "You've got to face facts and the fact is life is a joke, a fucking bad joke, or, no, a bad fucking joke. There's no point taking it seriously because whatever happens, and I mean whatever the fuck, the punch line is the same: you go out horizontally. You see the point? No fucking point" (*Narcopolis* 22). Rumi is also admitted in the rehab centre but it is believed that he is killed by the stone killer.



Other minor characters include Bengali – the old man who was a government clerk once and became Rashid’s accountant. Pathar Maar – the stone killer who worked at nights without differentiating between the poor and the rich, adults and children. Bengali used to think very high of himself and talks non-stop about anything and everything.

It is quite ironical that even the drug addicts have their very own principles. The situation was under control until the arrival of the garad heroin but everything changes with that. When Salim asks Rashid to join with him in business:

It’s a funny thing, only the uneducated set so much stock by education. When you go to school you realize how little it means, because the street belongs to whoever takes it. Today it’s ours; tomorrow someone else will take our place. My problem, I don’t like garad heroin...A chanduli can smoke for years and be healthy; garadulis are impatient, they want to die quickly. (Narcopolis 154)

The arrival of the new drug is simply another herald for the decadence in Bombay signalling a drastic change for the people in the city. It should be noted that the background of the novel is the 1993 bomb blast which is projected in the novel through closed shops, broken things, fire in the city, and the on-going riot between the Hindus and the Muslims. Rashid says, “The city has changed, people wear their religion on their faces. As a Muslim I feel unwanted in many places, you should feel it too” (Narcopolis 216-17). Many opium dens are closed. The fights and the fires became escalated. Even at one instant Dimple is saved by her dressing as a Christian. Jamal (Rashid’s son) is also saved by telling Dimple as her mother.

The true image of the city is portrayed in the narrator’s words when he decides to leave Bombay for good, which in fact is a reflection of all the poor souls who lost themselves in the drugs. “...when everything had at last been arranged, I was leaving the neighbourhood, the apartment, the habit, I was leaving and I wouldn’t return – on that last day, in parting, the city was revealed as the true image of cancelled self: an object of dereliction, deserving only of pity, closed, in all ways, to the world” (Narcopolis 209). The narrator returns to Bombay after ten years but he is not able to find the old place as everything is changed there. Finally he meets Jamal who is now the seller of Cocaine and thus signalling that nothing had truly changed in this change. Rashid tells him of the others’ death after his leave. He fondly remembers Dimple.

...years after Dimple’s death, when he was old and pious and waiting for her ghost, and he heard her future words, the lovely words with which she would greet him: dreams leak and the dead return, but only if you love us. Of the dozen words she would speak in the future, he’d be struck by the word love,

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because it had never before been uttered between them, not in all their time together. By then, Rashid would know the truth of the words, though he'd be glad to hear them from her; and by then he'd be grateful, bewildered but grateful that she'd come back to pay him this compliment. (Narcopolis 188)

As the above quote suggests, all the characters in the novel lost themselves without much of an option before them. Though one cannot blame everything on the choices and situations for their fate, it is to be accepted that situations make one change one's path either towards growth or towards destruction.

The opening sentence runs for seven pages and the tone of the novel is set which is quite pathetic and gloomy shedding light on the Bombay's lowest of the low. The important point to be noted is that the author is not glorifying opium addiction as there is an autobiographical element in the novel, he sees those years of his addiction as a waste of his life. Whatever has remained of the lives of the people has been destroyed by the arrival of the garad heroine. Selling of the souls and troubled dreams fused into the lives of the addicted. Jeet Thayil has explained the title of the novel in his own words:

I decided to call it Narcopolis, because Bombay seemed to me a city of intoxication, where the substances on offer were drugs and alcohol, of course, but also god, glamour, power, money and sex; because the city was built on opium shipped to China by the British East India Company working with a small group of Parsi ship owners, a secret history omitted by most history books; because I thought of the people I used to know as Narco Polos, voyagers into the unknown, who seldom returned whole or alive; because I was living on Cemetery Road and it seemed to me I was living in a city of the dead; and because this title suggested another, a hidden title, Necropolis. (The Guardian)

This novel shows there is an existence of a friendship and camaraderie in the places where we can never imagine, despite the social and economic status of one. Talking about status, it cannot be denied that the habit of taking opium had started with the elites of our society. But in due course, it has become synonymous with the poor people who have lost their ways.

"The change from Bombay to Mumbai hints at this change, the change from this old 19th century romantic, glamorous, quiet, slow world of opium to the quick, brutal, modern, degrading world of cheap heroin. Interestingly, there took place a class shift – it is now the poorest, the absolute down-and-out street guys who take to it. Earlier when opium was happening, it was

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respectable as it was the well off who did it, the upper-class-Urdu-speaking elites.” (Pius 55)

From the above character analysis, it could be seen that *Narcopolis* is a novel of lost souls. These lost souls visit the others in their dreams or in their imagination, since that is the only place given to them. Ultimately everything comes down to “choice”. The narrator has made his choice to reform himself. Even Dimple made the same choice but she yielded to opium in the end. When we analyse her character we cannot be this judgemental. Given her childhood and castration, no wonder she has chosen the path of oblivion to everything. Rashid has made choice of sticking to opium even though he could have made money otherwise. Mr. Lee made his choice of staying in India but to be buried in China. Every character faces this dilemma of choice. *Narcopolis* deals about such choices which makes the characters lose themselves in the end.

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