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The Narrative Strategy in Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*

Dr. TK Pius
Associate Professor of English
St. Aloysius College
Elthuruth PO
Thrissur, Kerala
India

1. Introduction

Jeet Thayil belongs to a brave new generation of Indian authors; a breed that challenges established norms of writing, and doesn't fear controversy when furthering its opinion. He has taken the subcontinent's publishing scene by storm since the publication of *Narcopolis* (2013) which documents the underworld of contemporary Mumbai and has won an array of prizes. Thayil is now being hailed as the leading light of a new generation of Indian novelists, who are willing to take on the less salubrious realities of life in the world's largest democracy. The novel fits into the recent literary wave of "Dark India", 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, deprivations, depravations, and destitutions. *Narcopolis*, with its setting on Bombay's Shuklaji Street of the 1970s, and 1980s crowded with opium dens and brothels, with its cast of drug addicts, drug peddlers, prostitutes, criminals, and even a eunuch is a book which definitely sets out to depict a non-shining India, which may be a more faithful representation than what it had been the norm up until recently, of the exotic, lush, extravagant India. While presenting *Narcopolis* at the Jaipur Literary Fest in 2012, Thayil had this to say about Salman Rushdie's ban in India: "It seems there is a contingent of people at every gathering looking at a sentence or a gesture to get offended. It is cheapening of the idea of rebellion" **(**Samantara**)**. This is a sentiment that the entire younger generation in India, finds agreeable. This sort of courage and conviction, largely unheard of for many years, is a great sign of changing times in the sub-continent.

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2. Setting

His setting is Bombay, for the most part, but it is not the glorified slum Bombay of *Slumdog Millionaire* or the Anglo-influenced post-colonial India of Vikram Seth's novels or Satyajit Ray's masterful films. Thayil's rich, chaotic, hallucinatory dream of a novel is set in Bombay, a polyglot culture where all of India's languages, faiths and castes mingle, where the prevailing currency is money and its dreams are told, in those schmaltzy, kitschy Bollywood movies, and which lives on an edge, periodically blown up when terrorists set explosives, but returning to life the next day, resilient and resigned. The ingenuity of Thayil's novel lies in how he has squeezed this entire universe into an opium den in all its compelling squalor in the 1970s and '80s, with a cast of pimps, pushers, poets, gangsters and eunuchs. The Judges making an assessment of the novel said, "Bombay is the first and last word of this first novel, an urban history written by a former drug addict through the changing composition of opiates and the changing characters of their users." (BBC, 11 October 2012)

Thayil paints a stark portrait of Mumbai. Thayil spoke with Reuters about his deep relationship with Bombay, his addiction and how this book came about: "I went to school there as a boy. I went to St. Xavier's. My family left for Hong Kong when I was eight where my father was working as a journalist. Then I went to school in New York and then came back to Bombay in 1979 and joined Wilson College. In all, I've lived in Bombay for almost 20 years." (Jaiman) When he was asked why it makes him feel strongly about the city, he said: "Bombay does that to people. It makes a connection with you. It makes it difficult for you. It bludgeons you. I've been reading about that area, Shuklaji Street. It is disappearing now - Kamatipura, Shuklaji Street, the entire area between Mumbai Central and Grant Road is disappearing, being bought away by real estate sharks that are buying up all the broken-down houses and making tall buildings. So very soon that entire district will disappear, and with it a million stories. A look of Bombay will go... a certain character will go. Those people who live there now of course won't be able to afford to live there." (Jaiman)

At the end of *Narcopolis*, the author was quite indignant to draw the picture of present Bombay as a very uniform-looking place bearing a high-rise tenement kind of look of uniformity brought about by the political changes wholly supported by the right-wing, and the kind of socio-economic changes widening the rich-poor divide. The face of old Bombay that welcomed people of other communities or for that matter, anybody with talent, ambition, with

beauty, with brains was just chipped away. 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 respectable as it was the well off who did it, the upper-class Urdu-speaking elites.

3. Title

The title refers to a city of narcotics. As historian Amar Farooqui has shown in *Opium City* (2006), Bombay's prosperity owed much to that trade. *Narcopolis* is set at a time when the popularity of opium is waning, and more dangerous drugs are about to invade the city. It makes the opium den look like a piece of innocent nostalgia. 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 heroine of this story...a great and broken city..." The opening sentence runs on for seven pages and sets the tone of the novel.The novel is about Bombay in the late 70s, 80s and 90s and the author wanted it to be a memorial to a vanished city and to people he knew there. He decided to call it "Narcopolis", because Bombay seemed to him a city of intoxication, where the substances on offer were not only drugs and alcohol, but also god, glamour, power, money and sex. He called Bombay Narcopolis 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. India's opium links with China are old. Amitav Ghosh's the first two novels in Ibis trilogy, *Sea of Poppies* (2008) and *River of Smoke* (2011), trace those links. British traders got China addicted to opium grown in India, and transported it on ships owned by Indian merchants. Thayil in an article in *The Guardian,* speaks about the subjective and objective reasons for entitling the book this way: " 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." (Thayil, 12 October 2012) As the title suggests, the book is about drugs and about places. But it’s about much more than that as well.

Thayil tells this story through the city's microcosm – an opium den in Sukhlaji Street, whose existence was known only to those who needed to know. His *Narcopolis* treads a neater

narrative line, but is no less adventurous in its exploration of story and place. This is Old Bombay as seen from the slums and the gutter, the city illuminated in all its sweat and temper, stories lifting from the streets like the smoke from an opium pipe. Centred on Rashid's squalid drug shack, this portmanteau novel picks up strands, weaves them with others, journeys to Mao's China, only to drop us back, mesmerised, right where we began. The story – or network of stories, for the novel is formed of several interconnected narratives, each focused on a different character – revolves around Rashid's opium establishment, which is frequented by gangsters and garad-dealers, pimps, pushers, junkies, tourists. His novel takes the reader through the Mumbai drug world's smoky alleys and features the musings of opium addicts in the late 1980s; it is a journey into a sprawling underworld written in electric and utterly original prose. Thayil has written an episodic, phantasmagorical account of the drug life.

4. Plot Structure

The plot itself is not very complicated. Thayil offers a series of vignettes, at times gritty and raw, at times melodious and soft. Setting his narrative against the backdrop of a changing India seems overarching, and parts of the text feel long and even unnecessary. Yet, Thayil is an accomplished poet and that sensibility serves him well. We slide in and out of characters' lives, emerging occasionally inside a vivid drug-induced recollection.

The plot is an odyssey into a large underworld of unimaginable depth where we meet a cast of unforgettably degenerate and magnetic characters who work and patronize the venue. 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 and begins his descent into the squalid world of prostitutes, and pyali. 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 hijra who works for Rashid preparing bowls of opium; "Bengali," who manages Rashid's money; Rumi, the unflinchingly confrontational businessman whose addiction is violence; Newton Xavier, the celebrated painter who both rejects and craves adulation; Mr. Lee, the Chinese refugee and businessman; and a cast of poets, prostitutes, pimps, and gangsters. Here, people say that you introduce only your worst enemy to opium. The seduction of opium beckons even the most stalwart of men. In this world, stray dogs lope in packs and

street vendors hustle. Prostitutes call out to their quarry as their pimps slouch in doorways in the half-light, eager to collect their due.

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. Once he vanishes, he 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. Dom's absence turns in the other "I," of the Prologue. It is through the mouth of an ancient opium pipe that we hear these stories. The ambiguous "Pipe" takes us to Dimple's perspective. We witness her encounters with Xavier 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.

Book Two, "The Story of the Pipe," (73) centres on Mr. Lee, a former soldier who fled communist China and now a Chinese drug dealer. 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. Mr. Lee's sharp a portrait of the horrors of a communist regime in the late 1940s do highlight his unusual friendship with Dimple, in whom he confides the story of his lost life and loves. Before he dies, Mr. Lee asks Dimple to bury him in China. He also leaves his family's magnificent old opium pipes, which she barters for a position at Rashid's khana, where she will make pyalis all day in exchange for opium of her own to smoke. The opium pipes bring widespread fame to the den—so much fame that that people from all over the world and all walks of life pass through it. Hippies arrive and begin to appreciate the quality of Rashid's opium, the attention to detail in pipe preparation, the warm cocooning charm of it all. Rashid's competitors are hell bent on destroying it. In that den, Rashid and Dimple build a rock-solid friendship through the years.

Book Three, "The Intoxicated," (132) depicts the tumultuous crumble of the mostly mellow opium dens into the brutally effacing world of chemical heroin. Bombay becomes Mumbai and for Rashid and Dimple that change arrives in the form of heroin from Pakistan. It is a drug that seems to herald a new world order, one more savage and hopeless than anything that went before. All the regulars switch and the city's underbelly become ever rawer. Those

in their circle still use sex for their primary release and recreation, but the violence of the city on the nod and its purveyors have moved from the fringes to the centre of their lives. 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 decides to leave the brothel in order 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 is expected to act as Rashid's sex partner whenever he is in the mood. Soon the "I" narrator, Dom, makes a brief return to the narrative. He deposits Dimple in rehab: a last-ditch effort to save her and then leaves. In the mean time, the other characters that flit in and out of this story disappear or die. Dimple too dies. Still, Rashid cannot forget Dimple. Dimple, he tells Dom Ulisis, haunts him every day. She is always there, always will be. "Dead do not always become ghosts," Dimple told Rashid. "We are like dreams that travel from one person to another. We return, but only if you love us." (214)

Book Four, "Some Uses of Reincarnation," (263) returns narrator Dom to Bombay. It is 2004 (the year also of Thayil's return). Those he knew are almost all gone, but the passion he feels for them and for the city is revealed. 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 fiancé, Farheen, to a club. Cocaine and ecstasy is the new flavour of the hour, and Jamal 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 and 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 signalling the circularity. Thayil completes the story that began in the 19th century through Lee's pipe, as it becomes the instrument of escape for the city's tormented souls.

Thayil presents the reader in an interesting authorial device, not only with a single omniscient narrator to guide the uninitiated through the potholed journey on Shuklaji street, but with a cast of narrators, each taking over the telling of the story so seamlessly that sometimes it is unclear whether one narrator has left off and another has picked up. There is,

very occasionally, the voice of the omniscient narrator towards the end of the book, but for most part, the narrative voice switches from character to character and it is not always clear who the first person narrator is. The multiple narrators, the slippage from one voice to another, the very long sentences and monologues are reading experiences which disorientate the reader, as does non-linear timeline which moves in leaps and jerks, perhaps intentionally giving the reader the simulated experience of being in an opium drug haze, where time, and even facts, are somewhat fluid and uncertain. This mental state is induced from the start of the book where the opening sentence runs for seven pages.

None of Thayil's characters are particularly reputable, and some critics have called them "uninviting" and certainly, although they tell coherent stories, and are consistent within themselves, it is impossible to ascertain if their accounts are accurate or drug induced confessions and fantasies. Their less than respectable, fairly unorthodox, alternative, marginal life-styles, their drug-abusing habits and addictions, their rants, their desperation, all combine to render the characters' seemingly unreliable narrations. On the other hand, there is also a case to be made for the reliability of these narrators despite their lacking conventional credit or social capital: the narrators often demonstrate high degree of self awareness, awareness of the world, and often present what appear to be bleak, uncompromising versions of realities, which come across as convincing and reliable because there is no attempt to euphemise whether this is basis enough on which to trust such narrators to lead the reader through the landscape of menace and drug abuse, disregard for and devaluation of human rights, dignities, and life, is a question each reader needs to decide individually. However reliable, or otherwise, collectively, these narrators patch together a riveting portrait of the seedier side of Bombay.

The novel has a very unreliable quasi-narrator in Dom Ullis, whose return to 1970s Bombay from New York, and his immediate descent into an opiatic languor, opens the novel. The readers rarely hear the narrator's name. Dom is absent for much of the book, and what we know about his personal history doesn’t extend far beyond snippets. Dom, like the author, is from Kerala, but spends his time in New York, working in an editorial capacity as a proof-reader for a pharmaceutical company, and comes and goes from Bombay and the readers can easily guess his drug habit. Thayil and Dom could both be regarded as providing a certain "staged marginality" which denotes "the process by which marginalised individuals or social groups are moved to dramatise their subordinate status for the benefit of a majority or mainstream audience" (Huggan 2001).

That our narrator is atypical and largely undefined says a lot about the way the book works. As it turns out, narrator Dom is only one of our narrators, only the vessel, most of the time, for our other narrator, an omniscient voice spanning the length of history and breadth of the globe. To whom does this all-seeing eye belong? It is actually all explained in the prologue, though one may need to spend a spell deciphering it, given that the prologue, though over six pages long, is one continuous sentence: clauses, details, explanations, voices strung together in a way that shows chronology and clear-cut narration are not the goal here. Speaking about his choice of long sentences in the narrative, Thayil said:"The opening sentence, the prologue, I wrote that about halfway through the writing of the book, and when I wrote that sentence, I realized this is the way the book should be. And I rewrote the book, changing the language of it with long sentences ... rather than short sentences because I realized the only way to write about opium was to write long, open-ended sentences where the writer who is writing it has no idea where the sentence is going to go. So you follow it and there is a sense of discovery - for the reader as well, I hope. You couldn't write a book about opium, which is a very slow, long process, with short quick Hemingway, journalistic, telegraphic sentences. So once I kind of stumbled on that, it changed everything. Then the book happened very fast." (Jaiman) Having set the stage for the twisting narrative that follows, Dom abandons his reader for the drug. Dom resurfaces periodically, although he is almost entirely absent from the whole middle of the novel.

Thus, this rambling introduction provides us with a glimpse of what's to come in terms of narrative structure, and in terms of the tumultuous, ever-changing but never-resting Bombay the book is set in. The prologue introduces us our unconventional narrators, and it tells us quite straightforwardly not to expect linearity. Dom warns us that "the I you're imagining at this moment...who's arranging time in a logical chronological sequence, someone with an overall plan, an engineer-god in the machine ... isn't the I who's telling this story." (*Narcopolis*, 1) He further clarifies: "That's the I who's being told," which, though perhaps not immediately transparent, is actually the key to understanding the book's somewhat unusual style of narration. It's not tidy, but neither is what it is apparently about, addiction or Bombay. It is Dom whose voice we hear in that seven-page first sentence, in which he introduces us to the idea that there are more narrators to a given story, the I and the other I.

Dom is a very appealing narrator whether reliable or otherwise; unlike many caught up in the snares of the underworld, he has not lost his humanity and still attempts to understand

and treat others with respect. In a city teeming with danger, violence, addiction, sensations, and most casual of brutality and commonplace cruelties, perhaps finding in Dom a narrator who attempts to hold onto his principles and basic decency may well be reason enough to trust him. Thus, Dom is not a reliable narrator, although it is hard to tell, sometimes, when he is narrating and when he is not. He is rarely present, and when he is there, he is a mess. Within the novel itself Thayil discusses the use of reliability of the various narrative voices, demonstrating his awareness of unreliability of narrators, but making the case that reliability was not necessarily something to be aspired to: "I told Dimple that the Professor, if that what he was, seemed to be unreliable source, though he was entertaining enough. I said there was nothing wrong with being unreliable. Who wasn't? what in any case was the point of being reliable, like a dog or an automobile or armchair? I said it was fine with me as long as he didn't call himself a historian or moral scientist. (15) But the question of truth, and of reliability, is one that bleeds through the whole novel, setting up one of its many binary challenges. We are asked to consider "hero" as the opposite of "heroine" as well as "heroin" on the first page, but heroin is also opposed by opium; Hindu by Muslim; clean by dirty but also by addicted; rich by poor; real by not real; I by not I. And in Dimple, Thayil asks one of his largest questions – who is a man, and who is a woman, and how do we know?

In the last sentence of the novel, the narrator disclaims responsibility for reliability disingenuously claiming that "this is the story the pipe told me. All I did was to write it down, one word after the other, beginning and ending with the same one, Bombay (292). As always, things are never quite clear or certain in the novel: which pipe does he refer to? Is it a real pipe, a literal pipe, perhaps a pipe inherited from Lee, given to Dimple, then to Rashid and finally to Dom? Or is the pipe merely a metaphor, standing for drugs in general, or standing for stories of the people through whose hands it has passed? How reliable a narrator is a pipe? In passing responsibility onto the inanimate pipe, Thayil shifts the burden of realism and authenticity, and in parallel Dom Ullis, shifts responsibility for the story's outcome by claiming that he in turn was guided. Of course, story-telling is neither transparent nor a translation of life, merely to be written down one word after another - this is wholly disingenuous and conceals the hand of the craftsman and the design, selection and manipulation processes of writing a novel. As Tabish Khair (2001: 4) points out, "Fiction is not same as fact and a novel is not sociology or history or anthropology. And yet there is an intricate relationship between fact and fiction, between sociology, history, anthropology and creative writing". Nevertheless, the attempt to deny that

relationship and disclaim responsibility is an interesting one. Thayil chooses seduction over prescription as the method of convincing instead of claiming authority, the narrator leads the reader into unfamiliar lands thus disconcertingly turns shrugs and claims to know no better than the reader.

Narcopolis contains stories, narratives colliding and being passed on almost arbitrarily, changed, lost. It would seem that Thayil is implying this is the only possible way to render an accurate account - by undermining traditionally accepted markers of reliability and accuracy. As U.P. Mukherjee (2010: 128) explained "learning to see oneself with other eyes, eyes that belong to the lost and the broken, is made possible in the novel only when melodrama is staged by borrowing folk theatre idioms of heightened emotional language mythic morality and judgement...". Perhaps this method is the most faithful possible and least compromising of the integrity of both tale and reader.

5.2. Intertextuality

The significance of text extends beyond code switching and ear candy. There are clear similarities 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 is 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'(25) " (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.

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 from his previous popular literature and whose content was incendiary enough to the Maoist government that the author was thrown in a labour 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 centre of it all was a character who was neither man nor woman."

Mr. Lee's story is the most consistently chronological narrative in Narcopolis—it tells his entire life start to finish, in one (fairly) continuous stream. Yet it comes in the middle of the book, is buried between layers of other characters' stories (and contains a few Russian tea doll texts of its own), is related to us second hand (or third depending how you spin it), and is one of the only major stories that takes place outside of Bombay (other stories are hinted at, like the narrator's time in New York City, for example, and Rumi's story of chauffeuring the rich in LA). So why China? Simply put: the opium connection. Thayil has said that living in India and China gave him knowledge of the two historic "poles" of the opium trade. And this is where Narcopolis is anchored. After all, it's Mr. Lee's story, but it's also the story of the pipe, our narrator, who originally belonged to the senior Mr. Lee—and was his constant companion during the writing of Prophecy. It seems Dom is not the only one writing down a book based on what the pipe has told him.

5.3. Multi-layering

The jumble of genres and narratives in the novel is to certain extent an essential ingredient in a postmodern narrative. Scattered throughout narrative are references to other texts and other stories, which make the novel 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. Dimple has a parallel vision too. Before he drops her at rehab, Dom takes Dimple to Chowpatty Beach and has a "moment of clairsentience" where he reports that Dimple was looking for the ghost ship on the horizon, reflecting the ghost ship Mr. Lee looked for recalling what his father had written about Zheng He. Dimple later writes a story, that Dom finds, in which a boy has similar visions.

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What we have in the novel are many different stories, many different storytellers, and many modes of seeing these same stories. We are also made to realise layers of perspectives: is the story we read, 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. This dream's significance becomes clearer as the book unfolds. We begin to understand 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.

Dreams almost merge reality and there is "only a veil... a transparent veil as flimsy as the one that separates you from your dreams" (20) It is not important if dreams touch reality and facts for " You've got to face facts and the fact is life is a joke, a fucking bad joke, or, no, a bad fucking joke" (22) Facts are like the clothes we wear. They are costumes and disguises. "The image has nothing to do with the truth. And what is turth? Whatever you want it to be. Men are women and women are men. Everybody is everything" (57). Our sense of reality has this one feature. We are dogged by a constant thought, "Anything can happen to anyone at any time" (117)

Dreams too are layered, and often contain important messages in the form of secrets or revelations of the future. "With the dreams came memories, or perhaps they weren't memories at all but fantasies she imagined were memories" (239) Dreams of a character do not just remain within the head of the dreamer. Dimple's dream of Mr. Lee leaks into Rashid while they are having sex, and Rashid sees a dream vision of his own future which Dom later witnesses come to pass. These different dimensions of reality blend with one another. For instance, Dimple says of her memories of her mother that come to her when she is detoxing (and which mix with Mr. Lee's memories of his mother): "With the dreams came memories, or perhaps they weren't memories at all but fantasies she imagined were memories."

Memories contain pain like the way dreams contain lessons. Dimple's mother gave Dimple away at age seven or eight to the tai at the brothel where Dimple is castrated, and where she spends many years of her life. Upon explaining what she can remember of her past to her new father, Mr. Lee, Dimple is told: "Forget is best." She agrees, tired of the emotional burden:

"Why remember and make yourself sad?" The slippery nature of recollection is evident in Mr Lee's response. "Why remember when anyway you memory wrong, all wrong."

Stories mix and meld into each other and states of reality are interwoven together. Indeed, flux, and the mixing, shifting, changing, defying, reincorporating of norms, expectations, cultures, languages, codes, stories, reality, etc., is central to the book, which intriguingly often departs from norms yet conforms to them at the same time.

5.4. Magical Realism

There are some "magical" elements like the dead speaking to the living, a talking pipe, a prophetic book called *Prophecy* and so on, but this "magic" is confined to the land of dreams and drugs. Its magical features actually lend strength. We are not able to dismiss anything as unreal, because it is real to the characters and perhaps even real within the book's reality as well. Possibly, a dream, an opium nod, a heroin vision, all these could also be a glimpse behind that veil separating the reader from the realm of the magical. Surely it is not a coincidence that so many of the dream apparitions directly speak of this very thing. That the magical stuff happens in the realm of dreams or the realm of the intoxicated means we have no way to dismiss it. Of course, it becomes easy to forget that the pipe's all-knowing narration comes through Dom—who has himself spoken of the impossibility of reliability. Is the pipe really speaking to him, or does he just think so? Is *Prophecy* really prophetic, or is the whole thing, indeed the entire book, a story he has made up? The sense is that it is genuine, as genuine as it can be anyway, but the very fact that we can't be sure makes those magical moments all the more powerful.

5.5. Subjective Secret History

"Bombay," the book begins, "which obliterated its own history by changing its name and surgically altering its face, is the hero or heroine of this story." Narcopolis is not a typical Bombay book. It did not feature the great figures of Independence or Colonial history. It is a peculiar subjective secret history told with lot of intimacy and familiarity about the world of opium dens familiar to Thayil. He had witnessed the garad heroin destroy that culture and many people's live. The history we're told in Narcopolis is easily Thayil's as much as it is the narrator, Dom Ullis's but extends far both of them. *Narcopolis* is about a specific India in a specific time period. We hear references to historically significant events throughout: the pathaar maar

killings, when a "stone killer" preyed on Bombay are most destitute, bashing their heads in with a rock while they slept. These killings remained unsolved in the objective history of investigation but in *Narcopolis* do offer a potential answer to the mystery: a stone killer perhaps saw himself as a force of benevolent violence, the only solution to a broken world. And the destructive chaos of the Bombay riots in the early 90s accompanies the characters' own descent into ruin. But the book is also a timeless and universal story. As a chiromancer claims to predict the course of a human life from a line on the palm, so *Narcopolis* dares to tell the past 30 years of then-Bombay's history from the vantage point of a single street. That street is Shuklaji Street - since the days of the Raj the heart of the city's red-light district but by the end of the novel undergoing gentrification.

6. Conclusion

It may seem rambling to a reader whose primary pleasure is plot development, but *Narcopolis's* narrative style is perhaps the only way to come close to depicting the inexpressible nature of addiction in the ineffable nature of a place like Bombay. The narrator gets sucked into the city's seedy underworld, rife with opium and prostitutes. The narrator is high on opium (or heroin, later) for much of the book, so the novel contains much long, poetic, drug-induced rambling. In that way, the book's postmodernism, which some readers or critics might wrinkle their noses at, is actually serving a much more modernist, realistic goals. In many ways it is not the typical Indian novel, but in the end, we ask how else to depict India this novel strives to? Throughout the book, characters talk about the difference between the slow use of afeem and the fast use of garad heroin. The novel works the same way, relying on the same slow, rather ritualistic assembly and smoke of the pipe. The language makes one want to go slowly, to smoke it like opium and lie around with the thoughts and dreams it evokes, but the narrative accelerates and one has to keep reading to keep up. The book tells the story of addiction but also freedom and readers wonder if they are the same thing. It talks about homeland and exile, which again, seem to have no real distinctions in the novel. Like its central character, it is neither, either, and/or both. The reader would get the feeling that in the end *Narcopolis* is Dom's story only as much *My Antonia* belongs to Jim, or *The Great Gatsby* to Nick. His eyes let us see these other people, particularly Dimple, for the wholly realized people that they are. This is a story in which "dreams leak," and in which we are compelled not just to entertain, but to embrace, the idea that "the addict wants to think of time the way a tree does."

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