

NARCOPOLIS: AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract:

The novel Narcopolis is about an Indian city named Bombay that has undergone a drastic change over three decades. The author does not present an innocent and aesthetic picture of the city rather he explored the ugly reality of the drug culture and day-to-day social transaction of the underworld. Thayil remained successful in portraying the true picture of the drug-ridden city. Thayil's candid narration, which includes the use of many graphic scenes and strong language, may shock the prudes.

Key Words: *Indian City, aesthetic picture, drug culture.*

This article deals with a novel written by Jeet Thayil. Thayil is also a performance poet, songwriter and guitarist. The novel is set in Bombay in 1970s. A city, which is a den of drugs. The word Narcopolis is a portmanteau of the words 'Narco' and 'Polis'. According to the Oxford Dictionary, the word 'Narco' is an informal word for narcotics or illegal drugs while the word 'Polis' has Greek origin which means a city-state in ancient Greece, especially as considered in its ideal for philosophical purposes. The word 'Narcopolis' is very similar to the word 'necropolis', hence can create a confusion, that means a large, designed cemetery with elaborate tomb monuments. The name stems from the Ancient Greek nekropolis, literally meaning "city of the dead". The polis of the title is Bombay, which in Thayil's words, has obliterated its history by changing its name. The author does not reveal the changed name anywhere in the book that is of course Mumbai.

Bombay' is an Anglicization of the Portuguese name "Bombaim," which is believed to derive from the phrase "Bom Bahia," or "Good Bay." (Portugal held territories in western India until 1961. The author himself believes that Bombay stands for and has always stood for. It was a place where anybody was welcome as long as you had talent, ambition, a desire to work very hard... if you had these, the city welcomed you with open arms. In a way, it's a tragedy that Bombay no longer exists.

The action of the novel revolves around five characters namely Dimple, Dom, Mr. Lee, Rashid and Rumi. The book begins with a prologue titled 'Something for the Mouth'. The peculiar thing about the prologue is its first sentence, which spills over almost seven pages containing 2294 words making it one of the longest sentences in the English Literature. The sentence is written without a semicolon. The author sets the rules for readers that it is not a typical Indian novel and the reader must prepare oneself to encounter such oddities throughout the novel. This style is suggestive of the of James Joyce a classical author who wrote in the tradition of modernism. For example, his sentences just like Thayil's, run over several pages. Molly Bloom's soliloquy in the James Joyce novel Ulysses (1922) contains a sentence of 3,687 words. However, this sentence is simply many sentences without punctuation. One of the longest sentences in literature is contained in William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! (1936). The sentence is composed of 1,288 words (In the 1951 Random House version) Another author who employed similar stylistic features is Marcel Proust who used many long sentences in his work. Thayil talks about the inspiration for writing such a long sentence. There's actually a book by a great Turkish author called Dancing Lessons for the Advanced in Age by Bohumil Hrabal. The entire book is one sentence

The prologue sets the tone of the novel with the disturbing imagery of sickness, dirt, brothels and

murders.

One afternoon, I took a taxi through roads mined with garbage, with human and animal debris, and the poor, everywhere the poor and deranged stumbled in their rags or stood and stared, and I saw nothing out of the ordinary in their bare feet and air of abandonment, I smoked a pipe and I was sick all day, hearing whispers in my stone sleep about the Pathar Maar, the stone killer, who worked the city at night, whispers that leaked upward from the poor, how he patrolled the working-class suburbs of Sion and Koliwada and killed them while they slept, approached those who slept alone, crept up to them in the night and killed them, but no one noticed because his victims were more than poor, they were invisible entities without names or papers or families, and he killed them carefully, a half-dozen murdered men and women, pavement people of the north-central suburbs, where the streets are bordered by effluents and sludge and oily green shimmer, and all that year he was an underworld whisper, unknown to the city's upper classes... (Thayil 2).

In a spectrum of a single sentence, Thayil wove political, religious and personal thread without entangling the loop. Thayil portrayed the events which led Dom to leave New York city, pondered over the failed Planned Socialist State of India, reflected on the caste-ridden society of India, nature of dreams and the narration etc.

I mean the particular way Christianity caught on in Kerala and how Kerala's Hindus, instead of adjusting themselves to Christianity, adjusted Christianity to themselves, to the old caste divisions, and, this is my question, would Jesus have approved of caste-conscious Christianity when his entire project was the removal of it, a man who fraternized with the poor, with fishermen, lepers and prostitutes, the sick and dying, women, his pathology and compulsion to espouse the lowest of the low, his message being God's unconditional love, whatever one's social standing? (Thayil 4)

The author makes a pun on the word 'I' personal pronoun and 'eye' the organ of human body. Another peculiarity about the prologue is the play of word heroine and heroin. Heroin is a strong drug which has taken over opium in Bombay. The word heroin does not fit the sentence but it clearly has meaning considering the context of the novel. Bombay, which obliterated its own history by changing its name and surgically altering its face, is the hero or heroin of this story, and since I'm the one who's telling it and you don't know who I am, let me say that we'll get to the who of it but not right now. The first sentence hints at the Dimple, the only explored female character in the novel. The phrase surgically obliterated its history refers to her tragic fate when she was castrated. Her identity is a contentious issue in the novel.

Interestingly the writer was a drug addict himself for a long period of his life. This is certainly not the first book, which was written about the drugs. Neither Thayil is the first writer who took drugs. In the history of English literature, a good number of classical authors who took drugs and their works either influenced by the drugs or somehow related to the drugs. The Beat Generation is notorious for that. The prominent name is S. T. Coleridge a romantic poet who wrote many famous poems and prose works under the influence of drugs. The other such poet is Thomas de Quincey who wrote *The Confession of the Opium Eaters* a work, which is also a detailed study of drugs from a different angle.

The novel contains elements of magical realism. The term, magic realism, in itself is self-contradictory because magic and reality cannot go together. Magical realism, magic realism, or marvelous realism is a genre of narrative fiction and, more broadly, art (literature, painting, film, theatre, etc.) that, while encompassing a range of subtly different concepts, expresses a primarily realistic view of the real world while also adding or revealing magical elements. While the term magical realism first appeared in English in 1955, the term *Magischer Realismus*, translated as magic realism, was first used by German art critic Franz Roh in 1925.

They do, thought Rashid, sitting on the floor of Dimple's living room, as the crows went

quiet and the street turned red from the glow of a timber warehouse that was burning nearby. Dreams leak from head to head; they travel between those who face in the same direction, that is to say, lovers, and those who share the bonds of intoxication and death. That's why the old Chini's head is in mine. I'm dreaming Dimple's dream and I want to stop but I don't know how. The beggar woman is dead and Dimple too is dead and I deserve to die for fucking the dead. He smelled the smoke from the burning warehouse as the sweat broke on his face and the room turned red. I deserve to be here in hell, he thought, as he reached down and squeezed his dick with his hand, squeezed as hard as he could, squeezed until he was shouting and he saw a vision of himself in the future, sitting in a room while the evening gathered, still dreaming her dream, except the dream was not of Mr. Lee but of himself, 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, 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 (Thayil 184).

The character can have their dreams transferred to one another's head. The dream leak appears so real that it does not seem odd even for a fragment of a minute. The character can envision their future. The supposed time traveling appears very much genuine.

The other writers who wrote in the same genre were Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Salman Rushdie, Gunter Grass. Magical realism is considered to be an element of postmodernism. It works on the basic tenet of postmodern that is the mixing of real and fantasy. In this mode of narration, the author presents something bizarre in such way that it appears natural to us. In the novel, there are many instances. The character under the influence of the drugs talk to each other they seem to discuss understand each other's dreams. This is the mastery of writer that he presents odd events in such a way that it seems plausible. The character of Mr. Lee after his death visits and haunts Dimple in such way that it appears almost true. Dimple indulges with him in real life conversion. Although she is frightened by him she accepts her shortcoming in delivering his ashes to his homeland. The presentation is done with absolute dexterity.

There are many diversions in the text. This is also a hallmark of postmodernism. The difference between modernism and postmodernism is that the former thrives on asceticism. The practitioners believed in the notion of less is more but the proponents of postmodernism believed in exactly opposite. They revel in the excess, digression, diversion from the main line of thought. In the novel, the writer presents a series of vignettes along the storyline. If those events have to be removed then it will not change the overall meaning of the text. There is a long description of various kinds of saints who is the patron saint of whom, who protects whom. The overly erudite information can be safely left over without affecting the meaning. On the other hand, it will move the action fast. Nevertheless, the same feature makes it stand in the line of other novels of this genre. Then there is another diversion in which book by a nun has described the story does not glue or move the plot but it is just an addition to the story.

The novelist presents the act of pyaali making in such a way that hints at author's own delight in discussing such a thing. Dimple is adept at pipe making. This quality sheds light on the author's lived experience of taking drugs. The fact that the author is also a poet is evident from the reading of the book. There is the use of wordplay and puns. Apart from having poetic qualities the language is quite rough the use of cuss words and expletives are very often. This is done to a large extent to render the touch of authenticity and realism. In the corresponding real world, the language of the gangsters is certainly full of cuss words. In using this type of language Thayil has portrayed the true picture of the underworld. The frustration of characters is well capsulated with that type of language.

The work is full of allusions. First, the narration reminds us of the similar narrator of *Heart of Darkness*, which also has two narrators. It has two narrators: Dom and the 'pipe'. The pipe tells the story, in the words of the narrator himself, to him and 'he merely wrote it down word after word beginning and ending with the same letter Bombay'. There is a reference to classic hero James Bond. The novel ends with the chapter titled 'The Enfolding' which is also the title of a story written by Dimple. It confirms novel's lineages to postmodern fiction. The name of the brothel, where Dimple had been sold and now working, is known as 007. Bond is a fictional character created by Ian Fleming who is an intelligence officer in the Secret Intelligence Service, commonly known as MI6. Bond is known by his code number, 007. The character Newton Xavier, who is a postmodern subvert, constantly denies the label of postmodernism is similar to writers of the Beat Generation in his way of living.

The character of Lee is the only foreign character he is alien he does not speak Hindi properly. Although there is another one named Xavier, he makes a guest appearance and goes away. In case of Lee, his life is narrated in full details spanning the three generations of his family. Starting from his grandparents to his parents and girlfriend and army career to his death. He is the only character whose life is well documented along with the history of his nation. Lee a handsome fellow in his youth fell out of favor with the leader of his country had to leave his country.

The book contains a beautiful epigraph from the holy book of Quran. An epigraph is a phrase, quotation, or poem that is set at the beginning of a document or component. The epigraph may serve as a preface, as a summary, as a counter-example, or to link the work to a wider literary canon, either to invite comparison or to enlist a conventional context

We made the whole earth a couch for you,
And the mountains tent stakes.
We created you of two sexes,
And ordained your sleep for rest.

The question of the differences between sexes is discussed at length in the novel. Evidently, Dimple takes perhaps greatest pleasure in talking about the difference between man and woman. She certainly has a disdain for men as it is evident from the dialogues and images she uses to describe men. Dimple particularly reflects on the difference between man and woman. A conversation between Dimple and the narrator reveals that Dimple prefers a woman to hold a conversation. But for sex, it is better to be a man. She believes women to be more evolved biologically and emotionally. She related man to the dogs. Of course, Dimple is a character which is best for the making a commentary on man and woman at the same time. She has been a boy whose penis was amputated in a brutal way.

In the beginning, it is about the identity of the city which has obliterated its history. Then the identity of narrator which was challenged as someone Syrian Christian. Dimple whose identity has taken away from her as she was born as a boy whose penis was cut in the childhood in the most heinous way. The identity she carries in the word is none of her rather it has been thrust on her. She is neither woman nor man rather she is a *hizra*. Her name Zeenat or Dimple seems to signify many things especially in the context of a country where religion wield a great deal of power and considered an integral part of one's identity.

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're thinking? Well, I'm both and I've learned some things, to my cost, the kind of thing you're better off not knowing if you mean to live in the world (Thayil 11).

The identity of Mr. Lee is also problematic as a soldier he perhaps takes his country as main part of his identity. In a way, his identity is also taken away from him forcefully. Rashid's son is saved by Dimple when she calls him her own son. The identity of Rashid as one of the greatest drug dealer to one of the most obscure person is also an interesting phenomenon. His obscurity represents the obscurity of all the

old things.

Towards the end of the book, the city has changed with the passage of time. In the new city, there is an emergence of new blocks, short glass and steel buildings. Brothels and drug dens are gone and are replaced with McDonalds, mini-malls, supermarkets glass elevators. Rashid's khana has turned into an office space.

But what remained the same was the noise frenzy and slums, traffic jams, fleeing by *rikshawalas*. The change is not only the physical world but the fabric of communication also has changed. The technology has brought a change in communication. It is evident from the words like gr8, rotflmfao, ftds, etc. The drugs like opium and garad have been taken over by new drugs like MDMA, Cocaine, Ecstasy. The old khana has been taken over by clubs where druggies can get their drugs. There is an overall drastic change in the city. In a way, the old has given way to the new. Rashid's son, a self-righteous man, has started selling cocaine replacing his father's business of opium.

He didn't like to dance: it made him feel foolish. Come on, soldier, Farheen said, I'll show you how. If he refused, she would have danced alone. So he let her lead him to the floor. The dance was crazy and beautiful, people of all races and classes, all moving to one beat. Some swayed as if they were too high to stand, others hardly moved, or they moved only their hips (Thayil 279).

Works Citation

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