

BOMBAY: THE CITY OF O: IMAGE MAKING OF THE CITY IN *NARCOPOLIS**Aysha Thasni K., Research Scholar, St Joseph's Colege, Devagiri, Calicut, KERALA***Abstract:**

*This research paper tries to read Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* as a city literature and separate the lettered city's tight packed layers of its linguistic representation viz; symbolic, metaphoric and metonymic. *Narcopolis* is Jeet Thayil's debut work in fiction and it has bagged many titles including DSC Prize for South Asian Literature. As the name suggests it is about narcotics in a metropolis. The paper explores how the city of Bombay has been depicted in *Narcopolis*. City is not just a physical entity. It is conceived as certain forms of images and Joachim von der Thüsen suggests this image making processes involves some basic linguistic procedures namely symbolic, metaphoric and metonymic(1). The narrator's as well as reader's Image making of the city of Bombay in *Narcopolis* is being investigated here.*

Keywords: *Narcopolis, Lettered Bombay, Symbolic mode of image making, Metaphoric.*

1. Introduction

The city as an entity has been a central motif in writings dating back to classical times. Plato, in his Republic, talks about city and propounds a city-soul analogy that human soul is analogous to the ideal city. Generally, the city has been understood as a geographical space, a world of buildings, a cultural collaboration, a symbol of fast paced life and rationalized beliefs. City is not just a place where people crowd or life gets busy and brisk. City absorbs our lives and we too absorb city in our own ways. City is more like a vector, a concept in physics, with both magnitude and direction. Cities; densely populated with man, dreams, and desires are the hubs of problems and difficulties to the people who live there. But the cities are still the centres of attraction to the people who prefer to live there despite facing all sorts of problems.

Richard Lehan in his book *The city in Literature: An intellectual and cultural history* observes that City and its literature share textuality that the ways of reading literary texts are analogous to the ways urban historians read the city. From Defoe to Pynchon, reading the text has been a form of reading the city (8). Literature, the reflection of life, showcases the city life too and it encaptivates the lives of people as well as the space they live.

The research paper intents to explore how the city of Bombay has been depicted in Jeet Thayil's novel *Narcopolis*. City is not just a physical entity. It is conceived as certain forms of images and Joachim von der Thüsen says this image making processes involves basic linguistic procedures namely symbolic, metaphoric and metonymic(1). The narrator's as well as reader's Image making of the city of Bombay in *Narcopolis* is being investigated here.

Narcopolis is the acclaimed poet Jeet Thayil's debut work in fiction and it has bagged many titles including DSC Prize for South Asian Literature. As the name suggests it is about narcotics in metropolis and this tale is of opium dens and heroin addiction in Bombay. As historian Amar Farooqui has shown in his book *Opium City: The Making of Early Victorian Bombay*, Bombay's prosperity owed much to opium trade. Thayil himself was an opium addict for around two decades and this novel contains many of his personal experiences, and we may be reminded of Thomas de Quincey's confessions of an English opium Eater.

Thayil writes in a radical way and with his writing with no concern for any established norms of

literature, he creates this great novel and he seems hardly concerned about any controversy that may occur. With the scenes of roads “mined with garbage, with human and animal debris, and the poor” (Thayil,2), slums, poverty and deprivations, this novel points its index finger at the celebrated popular understanding of colourful India. The story is set in the 1970s, at an opium den run by Rasheed in Shuklajee Street. It tells the stories of several characters that are already a part of this opium den. Pipe making Dimple- a eunuch and other regular clients perfectly draw the city with all its dreams and ills. The lowest of the low are the central characters and the novel casts pimps, prostitutes, poets, gangsters and eunuchs in it. The story revolves around like a hallucinatory dream or vision as if the story itself has got opiated. Thayil made the city to shrink in to an opium den. In the opium den time moves very slowly. No wonder, *Narcopolis*, by thayil, primarily a poet is a more lyrical one and surrealistic in narration.

Narcopolis doesn't intend to cater the western world's interests for exotic images of a colourful India. There is no glory or celebration of the so called Indian-ness. With its setting on Bombay's Shuklaji street of Kamathipura, a major red light district from 1970s to 1990s and with the opium dens and brothels; businesses behind the closed doors; Inner turmoils of the characters who are generally lowest of the low such as drug addicts, prostitutes, and pipe makers; the novel showcases the stories of down trodden marginalised lives. This novel represents the drugged Bombay and it stand aloof from any contemporary novels. That is why this novel has got international acclaim and got shortlisted for The Man Booker prize in 2012.

Narcopolis can be called a city novel and it depicts Mumbai, or as the writer still calls it by its old name - 'Bombay'. The novel itself is the city. A reciprocal relationship is evident that city made the novel's story or the story made a lettered city. Through the portrayal of gutters and underworld, novel hints the transformation of Bombay to Mumbai. Seductive sensations and burning exhilarations of opium are omnipotent throughout the novel. The novel has a prologue and four books which have many chapters. The book one is “The City of O” and book two tells “The Story of the Pipe”; “The Intoxicated” and “Some Uses of Reincarnation” are the subsequent chapters respectively. The *Independent* praises this novel “The ingenuity of Thayil's novel lies in how he has squeezed this entire universe into an opium pipe”. (March 2012). Thayil himself was an addict of opium and lived in Bombay for almost 20 years. Bombay is the first and last word of this novel and BBC praises it as an urban history written by a former drug addict through the changing composition of opiates and the changing character of their users.”(BBC, 11 October 2012)

The early Victorian Bombay was built on the opium enterprises with china and the city is indebted to opium and its trade for her urban developments and growth. The Title 'Narcopolis' refer to Polis (city) of narcotics (drugs): that is the Bombay. The book is a kind of testimony about Bombay's intoxicating life during the late 70s, 80s, and 90s. Narcotis refers more than just opium; it means all other seductive power of the city: drugs, Liqueur, sex, money, Power, beauty and so on. In an article in The Guardian, Thayil says his reason for such an interesting amalgamated title: “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 a Cemetery Road and it seemed to me I was living in a city of dead and because this title suggested another, a hidden title, Necropolis.”(15 october,2012). Many characters flit in and out; disappear or die; in the story. Dimple, the beautiful eunuch who is a prominent character in the story too dies and there are her dreamlike ghost appearances. The novel's time setting is when the popularity of opium was waning and cheap prized hazardous drugs overtakes the market. On the peripheral level this is a story about how opium gave way to heroin during the 70s to 90s. In addition, it tells how the change of Bombay from 'Bombay of everyone who loved her' to the politically polarized Right winged Mumbai taking place. This story is a memoir of the changing city and Thayil tries to tell the story of the city with its microcosm- the Shuklaji street and its opium dens.

The novel's prologue is a very long sentence and it covers 7 pages. It is a slow paced, not-to-hurry read. Opium is a slow process and with that slow calm spirit the speaker says “there is time enough not to

hurry” (1). Jeet Thayil in a book talk with Anuja Jaiman says about this slow technique “...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”(11 October, 2012). Unlike the brisk and fast paced mainstream city life, the world of opium takes everything in a slow pace and cold temperament. Quick and fast sentences cannot absorb the hallucinatory dreamlike feelings they create. His way of writing in slow paced, open ended broken words: with ambiguous narrators who cannot be distinguished from who is talking to whom, who are present or gone in the midst of the conversation; and with a unique language holding the magical power of stream of consciousness is perfectly enough for making the reader feel the sombre emotions, sexual imageries, wild violence, and shabby atmosphere and above all, the beauty sustaining around the den.

The story begins with Dom's arrival in Bombay in the late 1970s. He gets indulged with the world of drugs, prostitutes and opium dens. He meets Rashid, the owner of an opium khana in Shuklaji street. It is around this Rashid's den the plot moves. So many lives are related to this den. The characters he encounter include the beautiful hijra Dimple who works in the den preparing bowls of opium; Bengali who keeps the accounts of the shop; The Chinese man Mr.Lee, a refugee fled from china who is Dimple's friend and fatherly figure who gifts her the original Chinese pipe as a token of love which Dimple later barter for a job in Rashid's khana; Rumi a violence loving business man; Newton Xavior, a celebrated painter ; and a range of underground criminals and prostitutes. Years later Dom returns again and finds many of them are dead. *Narcopolis* is like Thayil's personal elegy for the bygone opium dens of the city.

2. City as Symbol, Metaphor and Metonymic

The city, apart from its real, concrete existence, is imagined. Dissecting the city is tough because city is a multi-layered and cross woven entity and for this, one will have to isolate the fundamental factors which constitute whatever is understood as a city. Joachim von der Thüsen observes that Literary images of the city cannot really be seen in isolation from other forms of image making of the city. Inhabitants bond themselves to cities by specific forms of image making. Image making process follows procedures which are basically linguistic operations. The three main linguistic operations that govern images of the city are the symbolic, the metaphoric, and metonymic. The city, on the symbolic level, works as the expression of culture or of a phase of civilization. City becomes the symbol of modern life itself. On the metaphorical level, image making is of an ideological quality, city is expressed in terms of relatively concrete constructs and processes that often have no overt connection to urban life and city is seen as a body, monster, jungle and etcetera. In the metonymic level of image making, image of city is made upon customs, structures, buildings.(Thüsen1-11).

Thayil is a poet and performer but for his tale of Bombay, he chose the novel form. With its lyrical beauty, Bombay feels like a reincarnated spirit of the ultimate truth. In the novel itself it explicitly said as: “Bombay is not fiction or dead history but a place he lived once and can't return to”(Thayil,2)

2.1 Opium dens symbolises The City of O

The inhabitant's perspective of their city would never be the same for anyone who is a stranger to that city and looks it from a distance. The city dwellers have their own intrinsic relationships towards the city. Here in this novel the city of Bombay cannot be seen separate from the opium scenes. If Bombay is uttered, the word opium eventually follows and vice versa. The narrator Dom Ulises says “I found Bombay and opium, the drug and the city. The city of opium and the drug Bombay”(Thayil, 7). Even though it all happens behind the closed doors, and cannot be seen explicitly, these businesses make the city what it is. For the characters of this novel, opium dens and brothels are counters where dreams are sold out. Streets and gullies are identified in connection with the businesses out there. On a Symbolic level these gutter lives symbolises the city. Joachim von der Thüsen's view, upon a symbolic level, the city is seen as an image of something larger than the city itself”. He adds the city reveals through its form a more general truth, and thus a particular city may be seen as the expression of a culture or of a phase of civilisation (1-2)

Bombay is ill-famed for its Narcotics, sexual frets and savaging lust. The red street is infamous for the sexual business culture. Shuklaji street is an extension of kamathi pura, and in the prologue, narrator says the women are 'graded' and priced and displayed in every street and gully and house (Thayil, 3). The readers don't get to know about other dens but only Rashid's. Rashid's den caters a wide range of people and the customers include poets, painters, and business men. Sex and drug are the main commodity and it makes recreation and reincarnation. The change from Bombay to Mumbai is shown through the operation of change in symbolic image making.

The narrator who had left in the middle of the story returns in the year 2004. He arrives at the Shuklaji Street only to know that it has changed, in a very different way. The symbolic images of the street in his mind is never matched the new one he sees. Though he stands in the right place he was once used to be, he feels he is in a rather different place. He cannot find the Bombay he knew. The former red light streets have changed and they paved ways to hotels, business stores and fast food restaurants. Rashid's khana is now an office run by his son Jamal. Jamal's trade is also drugs stuffs but instead of opium, that his father used to sell, he sells cheap Heroin and cocaine, which is potentially dangerous and very quick in action unlike the slow action of opium which evokes poetic hallucinatory dreams. The club parties, dances and DJ have enrooted in newer generations. The society is more corrupted and completely sinful. Hatred out shadows minds, and narrator sees the bad omens of communal tensions that foreshadow the city. Bombay becomes Mumbai not just with years passing and structural changes, but with changes in perceiving the altering symbolic images of the city.

2.2 Metaphorical Relations of Bombay and The Eunuch

Bombay, Which obliterated its own history by changing its name and surgically altering its face, is the hero or *heroin* of this story (Thayil, 1 emphasis added). Thayil uses the word heroin instead of heroine. Here heroin is the heroine itself. Like the narcotics, Dimple, the eunuch is also the very soul of this story. Her life can be seen on a metaphoric level, parallels the city. City metaphors have a holistic tendency. On the metaphoric levels of image making the city is expressed in terms of relatively concrete constructs and processes that often have no overt connection to urban life (Thüsen, 2).

Dimple too obliterated her own history by changing her name and surgically altering her gender and she is the hero or heroine or both. She absorbs heterogeneous culture and unifies it with her sensibility. The city represents has a holistic nature of being and it is evident in dimple's philosophy too. Dimple is neither man nor woman. She is a eunuch. Technically though man, she feels the other way. Most of the time she prefers to wear woman's clothing. She works in the opium den as a part-time pipe maker and as a prostitute in a brothel at evenings. She was given to a priest by her mother when she was just a baby and later he sold the kid to a brothel. Just like Bombay, Dimple has a never ending quest for beauty and knowledge. She inhales future and exhales her past. Her past is much painful and the memories of past even confuse her a lot. The present is nothing better but she is hopeful that a good future may come. She helps herself to learn English by reading whatever she gets to read- like a scrap of printed paper she gets accidentally or by communicating with the clients. She has a desire for progress and future. She was forced to undergo the process of gelding and castration when she was just eight. The pain endures and she finds solace in opium. Mr. Lee the Chinese man who exiled from China act as a fatherly figure for Dimple and their relationship draws a parallel to the historic connection to the opium trade between Bombay and China. Dimple has an innate ability to understand love. Dimple was named so by the tai of the brothel and she again christened after the beautiful film star Zeenath Aman by Rashid. Rasheed, the owner of the khana, has a great friendship with Dimple and she was asked to act as his sexual partner when he is in the mood. He asks her to wear a burka. The transition is not so difficult for her and she changes her identities like a Hindu when she is in a saree and a Muslim when she shroud herself in a burkha. She even turns a man when she put on men's clothing. Her view of life is very broad and there is an instance in the novel about her visit to a church and she empathetically feels connected to Jesus Christ and his pain and sufferings. She

could see him leaving words: “Love me because I'm poor and alone like you” (201).

Like the city, she knows everything. There is a subtle smile in her lips when she is close to her final days she knows the philosophy of the city, its lives and the love it holds. She is a metaphoric representation of the heterogeneous Bombay. Unlike the monster, jungle images as Joachim von der Thüsen puts examples for metaphoric image making of the city, here the eunuch represents the city for in a metaphoric way. She is everything what the city is. After her death also, she makes some ghost like appearances. She says Rashid “I'm not a ghost. I'm still here. I've been here all this time but I kept out of your way. Dead do not always become ghosts... We return, but only if you love us”(Thayil,290). Likewise, the old Bombay cannot go out of the frame of readers' eyes, even though the vision changed to a new Mumbai. Dimple holds all the spirit of the Bombay in which she lived. In *Narcopolis*, Dimple grows as big as the city itself. One who knows her can't imagine Bombay without her. That is why Thayil tells about her in his story of Bombay.

2.3 The Metonymous Pipe

The pipe tells this story and is the 'other I' of this novel. I'm not human, I am a pipe of O, telling this story over the course of a single night, and all I'm doing, the other I that is, I'm writing it down straight from the pipe's mouth(Thayil,6). The image making of the city through the mouth of opium is a metonymic way of understanding the relation they share each other. On this metonymic level, the pipe becomes the specific markers of the city. The inhabitants who are isolated individuals get united under its magnificent power. The pipe is very important and holds life and beauty in it. At the end of the novel, Thayil makes it clear that “This is the story the pipe told me. All I did was write it down, one word after other, beginning and ending with the same one, Bombay.(Thayil,292). The pipe is at least five hundred years old, made by a Chinese pipe master, much superior to local pipes because of the quality of the wood and the seasoning (Thayil,123). Mr Lee gifts it to Dimple who later barter it to get a job at Rashid's den. The pipe has a great elegance and Rashid's business multiplies with the introduction of this beautiful pipe. Its beauty and elegance has a charming effect on regulars as well as tourists. For Lee, the pipe is a treasure of his life, which he sees as a relic of his Chinese days. Dimple also values the pipe. While the den symbolically represents the narcotic Bombay, on metonymic level this pipe represents its *Nasha*- the charm of opium, the unexplainable pleasure and relief from the intoxication. It can vary from people to people. The city's blurred dreams and despairs come out as smoke through the mouth of the pipe. W.B Yeats asks in his poem “**Among School Children**” that “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” The line says a philosophical thought and the same idea works while understanding the relation between the pipe and the city. With its *Nasha*, the pipe and the city unites in to a single entity and one cannot be distinguished from other. The pipe will continue to live as long as the city remain 'the city of O'.

3. Conclusion

Narcopolis is a nostalgic story of drug Bombay and its transformation- both physically and spiritually- to a different city called Mumbai. But it is different from other Bombay novels because it doesn't feature Bombay's colonial past and its history has got no prominence in it. Thayil tells the story of the drug city and it is like a secret one only a few knew. The technique he employs for his purpose is telling the story through the mouth of an opium pipe, Dom and the other characters in it. Squeezing a city's soul into a book is very difficult and not a cake walk but Thayil, with his poetic sensibility and postmodernist dream like telling, has achieved it easily. Not only the characters, but the readers too get so familiar with the city that is being told. Through a symbolic understanding of den that represents the city in a general way; a metaphorical way of thinking of the relation of Dimple to Bombay; the way of seeing the opium pipe, that tells the story of the city and thus becomes a metonym for the city; and all the other elements are bringing together the city of O: the Bombay in *Narcopolis*.

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