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BALANCING LIMINALITY AND ONTOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTIVISM IN THE SPACE OF JEET THAYIL'S *NARCOPOLIS* : A CLOSER LOOK AT THE HALLUCINOGENIC ALLEGORY THAT THE NOVEL ENTAILS

IVAN SANJIV LAZAR

Christ (Deemed to be University), Bangalore

ivansanjeev619@gmail.com



IVAN SANJIV LAZAR

ABSTRACT

This paper briefly looks at the structure of imbalance in hallucinogenic narratives, mainly *Narcopolis* by Jeet Thayil. Skirting an aspect of thematic analysis in terms of the characters and the setting, the paper seeks to open the question for a *linearity in logic* for stories and its necessary implication to the reader. By employing a closer gaze at the allegory of the hyperreal in *Narcopolis*, the construction of identity for both the characters and the novel itself, becomes the central focus for this paper, in its addressing of notions such as addiction and intoxication.

Key terms: Construction of the self; inchoate narrative devices; hyperreal allegories; hallucinogenic narratives; structural imbalance.

To the mind of a reader expecting a nostalgic, evocative portrait of the legendary city of Bombay, Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* offers a different kind of redemption. Instead of the glorified showbiz glamour of Bollywood and the various ways through which the city reared in its upheaval of radical politics and subtle changes in daily existence, Thayil chooses an altogether different trajectory, setting him therefore in comparison with writers who followed the similar path of low-life narratives such as Burroughs, Ballard, Bolano and also the interestingly evolving genre of hallucinogenic narratives or drug literature.

Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* is the perfect example for the latter and *Narcopolis* attains an almost Irvine Welsh-esque status, mainly in its inculcation of a dialectic English, the Bombay tongue, throughout its narratives, thereby rendering a contemporary touch. Even though the story is set in the distant past, the type of English spoken in *Narcopolis* is still spoken like a vernacular.

The story is told through a multitude of voices. Ranging from a writer who is deported to

Bombay after getting into a fight with a New York cop in a hallucinogenic stupor, ironically send to Bombay to get straight and to come clean, his life is enmeshed in the ever famous opium den of Shuklaji Street wherein other voices emerge into the narrative. There is the transexual prostitute who tends to the making of the pipe and also who works at the brothel next door, Dimple by name, an avid reader of whatever books that she could lay hold of and compassionate listener to everyone's grief. A parallel narrative emerges through her story through which the reader is whisked away into the war torn Nation of Communist China where we encounter Mr. Lee, a Chinese immigrant soldier who fled to India and opened one of the first opium dens of Bombay. He uses opium as an aphrodisiac to bring down pain, thereby achieving in public the status of a doctor, the main reason why Dimple goes to him. Later in the story, Dimple is gifted the very pipes that was employed by Mr. Lee and these pipes become inchoate narrative devices as well. It is important to acknowledge this factor that the opium pipe becomes a character in *Narcopolis*, for it is as

the main narrator emphasizes, the story of the pipe leading inadvertently to the story of Bombay.

Initially, there was opium and heroin, drugs that alleviated the pain of reality and were used as an experience of transcendence, which was later replaced as profit cuts and industrialization and the mass capitalist ventures of globalization emerged, with *garad* heroin and cocaine, thereby leading to both the change in landscape and mindscapes of the Bombay psyche. As parts of Bombay were divided into political turfs and old buildings demolished to pave way for tenements, this aspect of modernisation became a turn for a deeper level signification, one that brought forth the term addiction in a new light. An addiction of power which gives the same high as *garad* opium, a cheap thrill, than the actual aphrodisiac effect of undiluted pure opium from Rashid's *khana*, an escape from reality; it is this sentiment that *Narcopolis* testifies to. It should also be seen that within the framework of Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*, the word "intoxicated" becomes associated with political rebellion just as much as the rebellion of the self against its immediate reality.

There are other characters like Rashid, the owner of the opium den in Shuklaji Street, his son Jamal who later takes over the business in another timeline, Bengali, an old clerk who is well versed in all the academic schools of thought who is named after where he is from, and Rumi, a regular man from a middle class family who has more to his persona than what is described in the initial stages of the novel. These characters and some minor yet important characters too emerge, like the painter Xavier, and the leader of the rehabilitation center and lets not forget the presence of the stone killer who was notoriously popular in the then time period of Bombay history, the *patthar maar*.

With this revelation, *Narcopolis* becomes more than just a novel that traces the untold history of the evolution of Bombay but transforms into an ontological allegory that heralds the awakening of the psychonautical self; the quest of man to reach the level of total freedom, a state akin to divinity. Could the means to such a path imply an outlook of murder and mayhem, sex and drugs?

In other words, the machinations of the minds of the characters are nothing more than reflections of the external worlds that they are a part of. This could be a statement that rings true of all major literary works or any stories for that matter, in the setting of *Narcopolis*, the inner reality and the outer reality of characters are on a path heading to a collision. This collision is the awakening to the harsh political climate of reality and realizing that one's place of belonging is capsized; the total realization that hallucinogenic redemption too cannot redeem one's life from its imminent tragic end. Is this the dilemma, asks *Narcopolis*, of every junkie, user, addict or even a dreamer which could be a common man?

Ultimately, the framework is power. Power structures, almost an Althusserian gaze, becomes the central scalpel through which the layers of these frantic discourses be whittled. However as deconstruction can rightly attribute to the futility of concretely arriving at a conclusion, such an approach is not what is going to be employed in this study. The closest that we can analyze through the power structure relationships between literature, politics, and the intoxicated mind of an individual is by looking at the spaces of *liminality* and its place in literature, especially in the realm of contemporary Indian writing.

The right balance is quintessential, a fine equilibrium, so as to balance two spaces, the one within and without. The characters in *Narcopolis* suffer this tribulation of *imbalance*. They exist in a liminal space, a life guided by rituals of arriving at Rashid's *khana* in the morning and departing after they have been filled to their brim with the satisfaction of opium. Almost all classes of people partake in this ritual, the interior of the *khana* becomes like a sacred space, where people converse in hushed tones, detached from a structural conversation. The point here is that the prose of *Narcopolis* follows a similar pattern, it lacks a concrete structure. There is a logic to the progression of the chapters, however in considering the story as a whole, the events that they portray almost attain the status of visual fragments that form a distant memory, an event in the past. This event is Bombay.

This is the story the pipe told me. All I did was write it down, one word after the other, beginning and ending with the same one, Bombay. (Thayil, *Narcopolis*, p. 292)

Bombay, which obliterated its own history by changing its name and surgically altering its face, is the hero or heroin of this story.. (p. 1)

Almost every work on *Narcopolis* will testify to the phenomenon of the building of this cityscape of Bombay. Dr. T. K. Pius in his essay, exploring the thematic and narrative styles employed in *Narcopolis*, says

“it 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.” (Pius, T.K., *The Thematic and Narrative Features of Jeet Thayil's Narcopolis*, p. 3)

The novel therefore induces a narrative trance upon the reader mainly through the inculcation of this violent haze of an opium addict, the glimpses of the bleakness of the mundane in a cityscape of this time period. The narrator therefore is the inchoate opium pipe just as much as Dom Ullis, the writer from New York who is basically a Syrian Christian from Kerala. The novel combines also the untold history of the arrival of opium to the Indian landscape due to a shady contract between the British and the Chinese. The city of Bombay was rumoured to be built on the foundations of this opium trade, which was supervised by a small group of Parsi ship owners. It was this secret history that mainly prompted Jeet Thayil to title this work as *Narcopolis*.

There is a cultural diversity and even elitism of the class trade in the opium dens. For example, high classed, Urdu speaking, educated individuals such as Rashid, owns and controls the opium trade by his main headquarters in Shuklaji Street in the 1980s, towards the very beginning of the novel's setting. Towards the end, we see a shift in this process of class structure. With the advent of the *garad* heroin and the boom of other drugs in the market, almost anyone gains access to the trade and

it is worth mentioning that it was the poor classes who became peddlers and gained all the more.

As the transexual prostitute Dimple later observes in the novel, the only luxury that people like her who are pushed away from the vortex of society is able to experience is the *nasha* itself, their only wealth and possession, their very own helplessness that they gird themselves with. Therefore the escapist element of hallucinogenic addiction, becomes any other existential factor that brings a life to an end with futility.

In terms of the liminality of spaces, *Narcopolis* also uses the trope of surrealism and shape shifting identities to possess characters who in turn possess the readers through a sense of narrative transference. The death of one character and his contacting the narrator in a restaurant during a time of power failure, the ability of the dead to carry on living through the signifier of water, the random sights of murder who are victims of the elusive stone killer and his shape shifting identity that it could be anyone, tropes such as these instill the readers with a feeling deeply rooted in the aspect of negative aesthetics. One almost thinks of liminality as it was initially brought forward by Arnold von Gennep in his book *Rites Of Passage*. It is through these instances that passages in *Narcopolis* become liminal, I use the word here to symbolize a detachment from the real and the political and to become, in turn, a threshold from which the unconscious blooms in all its primal splendour, uninhibited visions of violence.

It is this channeling of the unconscious, even the fever dreams experienced by the characters that portray a deeper associative psychological element to it, like Dimple's withdrawal dream wherein she encounters the girl in a hat who is then raped by faceless figures, that become signifiers with political and religiously dogmatic themes that are relevant even to this present day. Since opium is most associated with the dens run by the Chinese, even dating back to Victorian societies in 19th Century Britain, the novel takes us on a different route through the story of Mr. Lee. Through his story, Thayil portrays the aspect of addiction in terms of the fascist state to swoop down and blur the lines of the personal and the

political. It is through the power of opium that this power of the state is relinquished, that opium becomes an after effect of the State, as with the case of Mr. Lee, he flees the horror of one power to give into the other. Often times, both the opiate fever dream and the power of the State which is intoxicated by ideology and dogma, is equally violent and a maelstrom as the other.

It is through this imbalance therefore that the contemporary Indian writers choose to articulate and voice the images of their minds. An imbalance is necessary to facilitate the nostalgia of a bygone era and to be a complete rebel in articulating the aggression and channeling it also inward to construct at least a genuine fragment of an identity for the self. It is this sentiment that Jeet Thayil advocates through his novel *Narcopolis*.

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