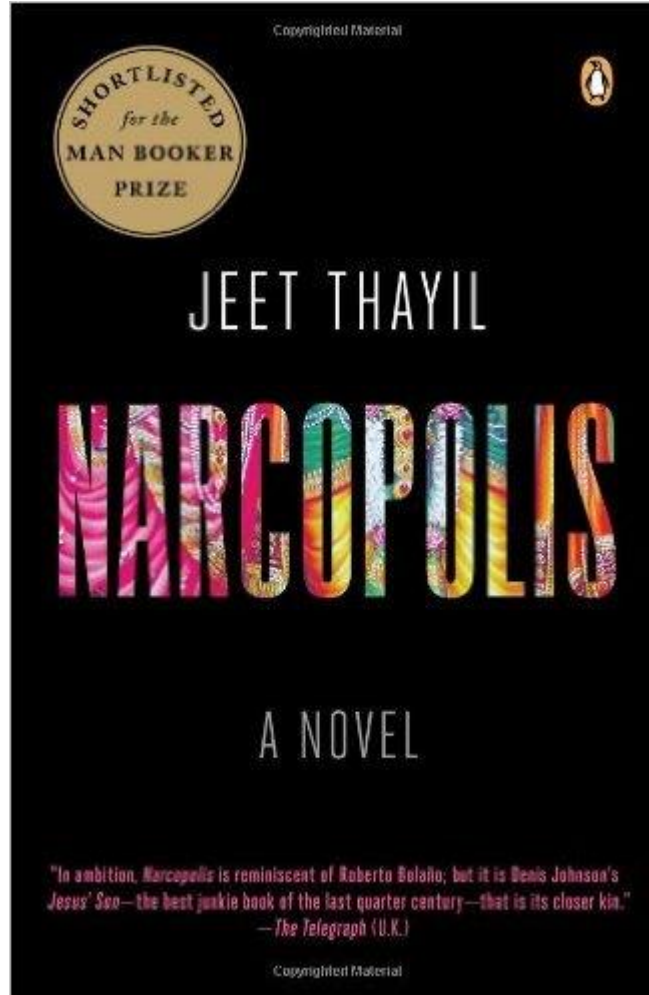


## *Narcopolis: A Reflection of Mumbai of 1970s*

Dr. Anjali Verma, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

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### **Abstract**

Literature is shaped by the material conditions of society. We have to relocate literature in the context of caste, region and gender - issues of every day struggles. Thayil in *Narcopolis* constructs a form which captures those nuances of feeling and brings an inclusive sympathy to the possibilities of human and social behaviour. Drug literature became popular after the 1970s and 80s. Opium has been symbolically represented as an idea for religion, films, freedom,

memory and dream. A similar idea is taken by Thayil in this novel. The narrative is true to its subject matter - opiated, hazy, viewed through foggy smoke, dream like sequences, and stream of consciousness at another level.

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, deprivation, and destitution. *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 an 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. This paper takes a serious look at the city portrayed in the novel as a narcotics capital.

**Keywords:** Bombay of the 1970s, slums, poverty, drug peddler, deprivation, destitution

### **Jeet Thayil and *Narcopolis***

*Narcopolis* tells the stories of, as Thayil puts it, “the degraded, the crushed, whose voices were unheard or forgotten, but whose lives were as deserving of honor as anyone else’s.”



Courtesy: <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/arts/books/fiction/article3565283.ece>

Thayil, an addict for 20 years, undoubtedly writes from close personal experience about that sordid world of pimps and prostitutes, drug addiction and sexual deviance, heinous crime and punishment. *Narcopolis* also tells a story about choices - those who have them and those

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who don't. It takes place in India in the 1970s, when Mumbai was still called Bombay, and political and social turbulence reigned supreme. Thayer's story can happen in any metropolis of India where poverty, illiteracy and deep-set economic inequality dictate people's lives.

### **Dimple, the Eunuch**

Dimple, the eunuch, is the main character of *Narcopolis*. Abject poverty drives Dimple's mother into selling her eight-year-old child. That exchange leads to the crudest form of castration, the pain of which will torture Dimple in later life. 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. 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; and an assortment of other characters. 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. Dimple naturally wonders why people with choices in life, who seemingly have it all - education, jobs, families, and prospects for the future - become addicts? The narrator "I" simply vanishes, and 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. It is through the mouth (in both senses) of an ancient opium pipe that we hear the stories.

### **Dimple's Perspective – The Story of the Pipe**

The pipe leads us to consider Dimple's perspective. We witness her encounters with Xavier (who seems to her like the devil, but speaks to her of saints), and follow her into her dreams. The narration swoops back in time 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 and winds up as her surrogate father.

### **Mr. Lee**

Book Two, “The Story of the Pipe,” centers on Mr. Lee: the life story he tells Dimple as he grows closer to death. 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. When Lee dies, he leaves Dimple his family’s magnificent old opium pipes, which she barter for a position at Rashid’s khana, where she will make pyalis all day in exchange for opium of her own to smoke.

### **The Intoxicated**

Book Three, “The Intoxicated,” chronicles the tumultuous crumble of the mostly mellow opium dens into the brutally effacing world of chemical heroin. 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 has been determined throughout to leave the brothel, 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.

The characters descend further and more inescapably into ruin as *garad* heroin becomes increasingly available and pervasive. By now, we have come to the early 90s and the horrific Bombay riots that leave the city burning and the population inflamed. Heroin is easier to get than fruit. Our “I” narrator, Dom, returns to us. He is making arrangements to leave Bombay. He has developed a heroin habit since we last saw him ten or so years ago. Before leaving Bombay, he deposits Dimple in rehab: a last-ditch effort to save her. His “I” leaves us again for the rest of Book Three, and the rehab center, appropriately called “Safer,” which comes to house both Dimple and, later, Rumi, are the locus of the rest of the section.

### **Some Uses of Reincarnation**

Book Four, “Some Uses of Reincarnation,” returns narrator Dom to Bombay. It is 2004 (the year also of Thayil’s return). After running into an old acquaintance, Dom decides to visit Rashid’s. 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

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khana is now an office, run by his son Jamal. Dom speaks with the aged Rashid to find out what had 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 are the new flavor of the hour, and Jamal follows in his father's footsteps, as a cocaine salesman. Shiny surfaces abound - in the club and, in the city—but what's below them is doubtless no less raw, no less depraved. It will always go on; the story does not end (“Dance or we die,” says Farheen to Jamal).

### **Legacy Left Behind - Opium Pipe**

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 have now made together, a meta-textual call out signaling the circularity: “All I did was write it down, one word after the other, beginning and ending with the same one, Bombay.” As the ouroboric final line suggests, the way the story is told is as important as the story itself—indeed it is a key to understanding the story. Language is a clear focus throughout, and the book is filled with lines that beg to be read aloud: Xavier “outdid the Romantics' antics,” is permanently drunk on booze, “broads and beauty,” and is “mad, bad, and slanderous to know.” The place Dimple develops her taste for opium is called by its patrons “Mistah Lee's or Mister Ree's.”

### **Bombay as Narcopolis**

The significance of the text extends beyond code switching and ear candy. There are clear similarities between the way the book is told and both Bombay and the drug state themselves. 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.

### **A Story within Our Story**

The intertextual elements of the narrative are so ubiquitous it feels as if we are reading or hearing a story within our story just as much as we are 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

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Newton Pinter Xavier, “a postmodern subversive who rejected the label ‘postmodern’ ; 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 that becomes separated from his family and homeland. As a teenager, he and his band of outsiders one day come to a spot he knows is the place he is from. He recognizes much of the city but can not spot his own home. As he starts his trek toward the city, he gets it: he has not spotted his house because it is no longer there - it has been transformed into “a mansion with a pool and garden.” He turns back and decides not to visit after all:

“It wasn’t that I wanted to go home,  
Who knew home? I only knew alone.  
What I wanted was to be elsewhere,  
Somewhere, anywhere but there.”

### **A Place of Exile**

This story of exile, an apocalyptic future, a child running or being forced away from home and returning later, to see that it is not the same and never can be is one we see again and again. Bombay (and drug addiction—the two are often synonymous, as when Dom says, “I found Bombay and opium, the drug and the city, the city of opium and the drug Bombay” is a place of exile for many of the characters, or a second home. It is surely not a coincidence that St. Francis Xavier, the poet’s namesake, is the patron of navigators and aimless travellers.

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 labor camp, branded a revisionist, and 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

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know, for instance the things that men and women were thinking at important moments in their lives” and “at the center of it all was a character who was neither man nor woman.”

### **A Story of Specific India**

*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’s most destitute, bashing their heads in with a rock while they slept. (The killings remain unsolved in reality, but *Narcopolis* does offer a potential answer to the mystery, a stone killer who 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.

We have many different stories, many different storytellers, and many modes of seeing these stories. The layers to parse through are not just story layers, but also perspectives: the reader wonders whether it a true story, a fable, a dream, a drug-induced vision, or a memory. Near the beginning of Book One, the nod takes Dom and he dreams he is visited by the spirit of deceased Dimple. Though at first we may see it as “just a dream,” it becomes clearer as the book unfolds 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.

### **Not a Typical Indian Novel**

The book is not a typical Indian novel, as having more in common with drug and addiction literature: more Burroughs than Rushdie. But when we look at its themes - identity, language, code switching, religion, violence, change, it appears to be essentially Indian. The narrator himself is not the typical Indian; if there can be such a thing.

### **Dom and Dimple**

If there is one character that embodies the heart and soul of the book, it is not Dom, but Dimple. Neither man nor woman, technically a man but referred to throughout with female

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pronouns, Dimple says of herself: “Some days I’m neither, or I’m nothing. On other days I feel I’m both.” The neither/either/both that defines Dimple’s gender applies to so much in the book and so much of what the book is doing. The idea of syzygy, which Bengali introduces, is especially salient here: it’s a concept that can refer to both “a conjunction or opposition” and a “pair of connected or corresponding things.”

Like Bombay’s, Dimple’s name does not remain fixed. She was originally (re)named after the beautiful Dimple Kapadia, of the film Bobby. She is (re)named, again after a film star— this time Zeenat Aman—by Rashid, who takes her to a movie (Hare Rama Hare Krishna), in which “Zeenie” plays a character who has renamed herself Janice and run away from home (sound familiar?). Again, we have this undercurrent of exile and separation. In fact, the word hijra is etymologically related to the Arabic hjr, which refers to leaving one’s tribe.

Rashid gives Dimple a new name and a new identity when he asks her to begin wearing burka. For a while she enjoys slipping between her two identities. Dimple has always found some power in deciding what to wear – be it burka, saree or “trousers because it allowed her ....to act like a man when she wanted to.” She recognizes that “clothes are costumes, or disguises.” The image has nothing to do with the truth. Dimple moves between religions, genders, states of reality, time, clothes, names and roles. She learns to use new languages; teaching herself English, learning to swear in Cantonese from Mr. Lee.

Dimple is not even entirely a woman, and still she is defined by men, a victim of their violence, forced into prostitution, name changed, named twice after an object of beauty, at times required to wear a hijab.

The novel does not have strong female characters. Except Dimple, who though in many ways female, is biologically male and does not see herself as solely a woman. The only other female characters we see are wives, girlfriends, prostitutes, many of whom are literally in cages, wives who are compared to whores, whores who are secretly wives, and a few poor souls taken out by the pathaar maar. Even the few women who assert some autonomy or sense of control (Mr. Lee’s love, or Jamal’s Fahreen) are defined by their relationships to the male characters –

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are in one way or another under the thumb of men. The novel depicts a male dominated society where women (as well as eunuchs) are treated as nothing.

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