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## Mapping the margins: Socio-political commentary in Jeet Thayil's Narcopolis

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### Abstract

The present paper explores Thayil's narrative techniques and recurring themes, analysing how he portrays the socio-political margins of modern society. Thayil's novels, particularly *Narcopolis*, offer a profound exploration of socio-political landscapes through the lens of marginalized urban life. Through a detailed analysis of his characterizations, settings, and stylistic choices, this study highlights Thayil's critique of social inequities, drug culture, and the complex interplay between individual identity and broader societal forces. Thayil's contribution to modern literature is characterised by his ability to provide insightful commentary on socio-political themes. Thayil's expressive narrative and discerning perspective offer readers a profound insight into the intricate forces that influence city life and the nature of humanity. His works serve as a testament to the potency of literature in mirroring, scrutinising, and finally, shaping societal transformation.

**Keywords:** Post-colonial discourse, culture, marginalization, existential struggles

### Introduction

Thayil's work is distinguished by its vivid portrayal of Bombay's underbelly, where the convergence of diverse cultures, economic disparities, and existential struggles reflect the city's—and by extension, the nation's—fractured reality. His narratives are imbued with a lyrical quality that bridges poetry and prose, creating a unique literary tapestry that captures the chaotic yet captivating essence of urban life. This paper argues that Thayil's socio-political commentary extends beyond mere depiction, offering a nuanced critique of the systemic issues that perpetuate marginalization and social decay. Thayil's novels within the broader context of Indian literature and postcolonial discourse, this research uncovers the ways in which his works engage with historical and contemporary issues. Themes of addiction, loss, and redemption are examined not only as personal struggles but also as metaphors for the socio-political challenges facing modern India. Thayil's nuanced portrayal of marginalized voices serves to question dominant narratives and highlight the resilience of those living on the peripheries of society.

Thayil's *Narcopolis* illuminates the underrepresented perspectives prevalent in large cities, yet largely overlooked by mainstream academia. After Bombay changed its name to Mumbai, Thayil tells the story of a part of the city's underground that was a major hub for the drug trade. Even though the book covers many drugs, what matters is people and why they make their life choices. Thayil employs raw, disgusting images to portray the stark reality of the lives of those marginalized and abused by society. Considering Thayil's approach to his subject, this paper will examine the structure and characters of *Narcopolis*, searching for Bakhtinian carnivalesque and grotesque realism tropes. Another area of interest is Thayil's creative language, which combines words from different Bombay dialects. It gives the story a more realistic feel. This paper looks at Thayil's portrayal of how people live on the edges, mostly hidden from critical scrutiny, since his first book has become a voice for the silent. Thayil possesses a diverse array of experiences in Bombay, which he skilfully amalgamates to craft a vivid and authentic portrayal of the city. At the age of sixteen, his drug battles led to his banishment from New York, and upon his arrival in Mumbai, he encountered a similar environment. Throughout the interview John Jaiman Interview with Jeet Thayil makes reference to a specific fact.

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 to Bombay in 1979 and joined Wilson College. In all, I've lived in Bombay for almost 20 years.

Thayil, who battled addiction for twenty years, draws on his knowledge of the drug trade to have his characters act out Bombay's underappreciated past in a visual style that convincingly portrays the city's real history. Pius, John Pius in his book *Exploring Dark India* explain:

Narcopolis 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.

In *Narcopolis*, a witness to the lives of the marginalised, Bombay and its tumultuous past serve as the backdrop. Bose, Priya Bose in her book *Bombay* mentions, "To equal Bombay as a subject you would have to go much further than the merely nostalgic will allow. The grotesque may be a more accurate means of carrying out such an enterprise" (42). This alludes to Mikhail Bakhtin in her book *Rabelais and His World* the ideas of "carnavalesque and grotesque realism" (67), the current research attempts to do a careful reading of the book from a Bakhtinian viewpoint. Pearce observes in "Carnival and the Grotesque: A Bakhtinian Approach" that "'carnival' is a term that has been extensively plundered by contemporary literary and cultural theorists to help explain texts and events in which the world is temporarily turned upside down". The main theme of Bakhtin's educational book, *Rabelais and His World* (1965), is carnivalesque. David Danow in his book *The Spirit of Carnival* says this about funfair and carnivalesque:

the generally accepted rules of polite behavior are overruled in favor of the temporarily reigning spirit of Carnival. When a similar spirit pervades a work of literature, it partakes of or promotes the carnivalesque: That is, it supports the unsupportable, assails the unassailable, at times regards the supernatural as natural, takes fiction as truth, and makes the extraordinary or "magical" as viable as a possibility as the ordinary "real", so that no true distinction is perceived or acknowledged between the two<sup>[3]</sup>.

Dimple is unequivocally the protagonist of the novel. The narrative of Dimple evokes strong emotions, even in the most unfeeling individuals, as the reader is introduced to her existence filled with perpetual suffering. Deprived of her reproductive organs from birth, she undergoes a gender transformation at the vulnerable age of eight or nine, when her mother abandons her to the care of a priest who ultimately sells her to a brothel. The description of the castration is unsettling, but what is even more unsettling is the nonchalant manner in which Dimple recounts the experience. Nevertheless, this brush with death served as a transformative moment for Dimple, leading to her emergence as a hijra woman. The depiction of castration as a commonplace event, with the use of alcohol and opium as painkillers and hot oil as a disinfectant, emphasises the desensitisation of marginalised individuals to their painful history.

Thayil primarily centres his attention on the notion of degradation, which, as Bakhtin elucidates, encompasses not just negative aspects but also offers the potential for regeneration or renewal. Bakhtin in his book *Rabelais and*

*His World*, throughout his work, highlights that "Degradation here means coming down to earth, the contact with the earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better". Dimple's cold demeanour towards this dreadful tragedy supports the notion that she has embraced her position as an outsider to the societal norms of gender. Furthermore, she demonstrates persistence in her endeavours to improve herself by diligently seeking education through the available publications. This indicates her strong desire for personal development and progress in life.

The spatial dimension of *Narcopolis* is implied from the outset of the narrative. The narrative of *Narcopolis* is characterised as, "not fiction or dead history but a place you lived in once and cannot return to..."<sup>[2]</sup>, and the novel starts with defining itself as a story about "Bombay, which obliterated its own history by changing its name and surgically altering its face..."<sup>[1]</sup>. The novel's spatial politics are emphasised from the very beginning by highlighting the dynamic character of its overlapping layers. The story aims to depict the dynamic relationship between places and the passage of time. The story immediately portrays the city of Bombay as a site of transformation. This transformation is regarded as occurring both in its philosophy and in its physical geography. The naming process is shown to be a symbol of geographical and cultural transformations.

The dynamic quality of locations is matched by their diversity. The assumed stability of the physical locations inside the city is contrasted with the ever-changing and varied experiences of the people who inhabit it. Every location within the city is actively engaged in the continuous processes of cultural inscription. The description of Shuklaji Street elucidates the physical layout of the city in comparison to its cultural areas. The street is distinguished by both its geographical location and its cultural significance, "But it stretched roughly from Grant Road to Bombay Central and to walk along it was to tour the city's fleshiest parts, the long rooms of sex and nasha. In the midst of it, Rashid's opium room..." (*Narcopolis* 135-136). The depiction of streets in cartographic city representations is juxtaposed with the constantly evolving physical environments experienced by individuals. Places derive significance from the actions and cultural events that take place there.

The city experience is greatly influenced by mental perceptions and spatial imaginations. The past and present are intricately intertwined in a complex network of ties. Perceptions of spatial and temporal experiences are non-linear: "I dreamed it was twenty years earlier, in 1984, and I was in Colaba" (*Narcopolis* 266). Elizabeth Grosz in his book *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* introduces the idea of concepts rather than physical locations, 'place-times'. The narrative occasionally presents the movement between several temporal lines, "Where had he been for twenty years?... This is the past, he said, not the present" (*Narcopolis* 266). The perceptions of urban environments often diverge significantly from their true depictions. The body's sense of the city renders past and present as relative states.

Cultural conflicts imprint their distinct marks on the physical landscape of the city. The city exhibits remnants shortly following the disturbances. Therefore, Dimple

observes the remnants of a charred taxi, as well as vehicles engulfed in flames, such as smouldering taxicabs and burning lorries, during periods of civil unrest. The lingering odour of burnt flesh is a cultural residue that remains after riots. Additionally, there are depictions of deceased individuals left unattended on the streets during periods of civil unrest. The statement indicates the artificial character of urban settings: “the street belongs to whoever takes it” (Narcopolis 154). Locations are influenced by the cultural expression of political influences. It is tailored to suit the preferences of people in positions of authority. The fate of the city is determined by the numerous social interactions and actions of the individuals who inhabit it: “the city was a pen for unchaperoned children, wild boys and girls who were bringing themselves upon their own, begging, stealing, selling, stoning...” (Narcopolis 281). Therefore, bodies are depicted as determining the essence of the metropolis. The cultural development of a city relies on the individuals inside it. Urban areas are influenced by the emerging economic dynamics of the globalised globe. The dominant capitalist factors that determine the characteristics of contemporary geographies are clearly articulated in this context. The urban landscapes are moulded by the market dynamics and profit-oriented objectives of Multinational Companies in the globalised globe.

### Conclusion

Thayil's *Narcopolis* provides a thorough examination that reveals the novelist's main intention of presenting a compelling portrayal of Bombay's seedy underbelly. In order to achieve his goal, the novelist employs carnivalesque and grotesque realism. Furthermore, the diverse range of characters grappling with themes of identity and addiction, coupled with the depiction of Bombay ravaged by communal riots and the grim state of its alleys and slums, presents a vivid and authentic portrayal of the city. The lives of the characters, their life choices, and their environment reflect a similar context to the carnivalesque themes explored by Bakhtin in his analysis of Rabelais. The incorporation of Bakhtinian concepts of carnivalesque and grotesque realism plays a crucial role in drawing attention to the historical experiences of marginalised individuals in India's largest city. In addition, the novel is imbued with a powerful sense of authenticity through its use of autobiographical elements, genuine language, and realistic setting. The carnivalesque and grotesque elements serve as more than just stylistic components; they embody the Bakhtinian vision of regeneration after degeneration. Thayil does not take a stance on the use of drugs in the novel, but rather uses the characters as a means to portray observed reality. The reader is given the freedom to make their own decision on that matter.

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