



# From Opium to Heroin: Alienation in the Intoxicated Alleys of Bombay through Jeet Thayil's Narcopolis

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## Abstract

This research paper studies the alienation caused by the culture of narcotics in the metropolitans of India, specifically Mumbai, through textual analysis and close reading of Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*. My research establishes a direct link between drug use and alienation. Alienation of man is also a result of repeated drug consumption as well as an alienated being consuming narcotics in the first place to understand life. The ready availability in metros as well as the culture of drugs also promoted consumption. *Opium City* by Amar Farooqui traces the history of Bombay through colonial times via opium trade. Thus, Bombay was built on narcotics trade and it is very natural for it to become a heavy consumer of the same.

Thomas de Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* started the culture of Addiction Literature in English. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, pioneer of the Romanticism in English Literature regularly used Opium as a prescription medicine but developed a regular need which influenced his finest works due to the dreams induced by the drug. Elizabeth Barrett Browning used laudanum for relieving pain but was hooked to it. Stephen King was addicted to alcohol and narcotics. The Beat Generation romanticized drug use for intellectual interest and enhancement of creativity. William S. Burroughs, primary figure of Beat Generation, wrote most of his work under the influence or from his experience as a heroin addict.

Narcotics are used for helping spark creativity and exploring the untouched corners and crevices of the brain. They have always been a part of the world of writing either as a prescription or recreation.

Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* gives a vivid account of opium plantations in India and the massive money it generated in world trade for the East India Company as well as traders across the world. The focus of this project is the influence of narcotics culture in the Indian setting primarily through *Narcopolis* by Jeet Thayil set in Bombay of the 70s and 80s and tripping on heroin. How Bombay became a hub for intoxication starting

with the trade in opium from the times of the British and its present availability on every *khokha* in India for mere 1 rupee.

## Keywords

Addiction Literature, Alienation, Metropolis, Indian Drug Culture, Bombay, Opium Trade

## Introduction

Bombay is the first city of India. It is said that it became an industrial city due to textile but Farooqui shows that it was the profitable trade of opium with China that developed Bombay to its glory. Farooqui observes that the uniqueness of the city is largely due to the heterogeneous nature of its capitalist class, in terms of regional and religious composition. The communities comprising this class included, Parsi, Marwari, Gujarati, Bania, Bohra, Armenian and Indo- Portuguese among others. He explains that this gave a cosmopolitan character to the city that has lasted till the present. Bombay as a great commercial and industrial center was born of its becoming an accomplice in the drugging of countless Chinese with opium. Bombay became the centre of opium trade in the early 19th century. The cities like Bombay, Madras and Calcutta were not built up from pre-colonial urban cities. In this sense they were purely the result of colonialism. The three essays deal with the origins of Mumbai and the rise of capitalism. The author has done meticulous research and this is easily one of the best researched books on the economic history of the city. It will also be useful for those interested in studying contemporary Mumbai as there are many similarities with the past. When cotton trade couldn't generate enough revenue, opium became the option. This trade made Bombay the hub for trade. Marwaris started establishing contacts with Bombay opium firms. Malwa Opium had captured forty percent of the Chinese market. When the British seized control of the trade, the opium from Malwa was smuggled into China. Marwaris were among the earliest settlers in Bombay.

Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* explores the drug scene of the Bombay underworld in the 70s and 80s. It expands across three decades and witnesses Bombay's transition to Mumbai with focus on the pimps, prostitutes, murderers, drug dealers in the opium soaked alleys of Bombay. Western depictions portray India as the hub for enlightenment. Many depictions from India give a romanticized view of the land. *Narcopolis* is an account which is absolutely true and raw in portrayal. It explores the drug scene in Bombay of the 70s and 80s. It gives deep insight into the minds of characters and hopelessness of their addictions which lead to destruction. *Narcopolis* is a difficult novel because it structurally covers thirty years of the Bombay drug scene. Seeing it transition from Bombay to Mumbai, from opium to drugs of today like Cocaine, MDMA and Ecstasy. India seems mystical from the outside but if we look closely it exploits and leaves everyone for the dead.

Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* is a take on the metropolitans of India and the drug culture which is prevalent there. The drug usage is cyclical in nature and this is the story of pipe. As Amar Farooqui in his *Opium City*, has said that Bombay was made on the trade of opium and made for opium. This narco culture has seeped into the present times and was prevalent during the 70s and 80s. This was the time when Bombay was transitioning

into Mumbai and the choice of opium as a drug was being replaced by heroin and later cocaine will take over. The drugs then were limited to Kamatipura and Shuklaji Street but then slowly they were sold in the clubs and traditional opium dens were out of business. In the characters in Thayil's novel one can see a certain sense of alienation. These characters have withdrawn from society not just because of their drug use but also due to this inner alienation felt in a metropolitan. Everyone is drowning maybe not in smoke but in their lives, from the present, in the past and future which is bleak. The opium pipe gives a moment of pleasure. Yet the conflict is unresolved. The drug culture of metros is a result of the heavy trade and how these cities have laid their foundations on its trade and use. The sense of alienation can be felt from the cover itself where the cover is in smoke or in clouds where nothing makes sense to the smoker. There is no sense of belongingness among addicts and whatever relations they form are through the substance, which too might blow away in smoke. The cover of the novel shows people savoring the pipe, this further clarifies the belief how narcotics are really attractive and present an interesting front for the research.

### **Hypothesis**

Extensive drug use and drug culture of the metropolitans has aggravated alienation and in turn alienation is causing the detachment from the world around and leading to more consumption of narcotics.

### **Review of Literature**

Hans Derek's History of the Opium Problem: The Assault on the East is the first scholarly study in which the production, trade and political effects of opium and its derivatives are shown over many centuries, and in many countries (China, India, Indonesia, Japan, all Southeast Asian countries and some in Europe and the Americas). Starting in the 16th century, slavery and opium became the two means with which the bodies and souls of men and women in the tropics were exploited in western imperialism and colonialism. The first waned with the abolition movement in the 19th century, but opium production and trade continued to spread, with the associated serious social and political effects. Around 1670 the Dutch introduced opium as a cash crop for mass production and distribution in India and Indonesia. China became the main target in the 19th century, and only succeeded in getting rid of the opium problem around 1950. Then it had already been transformed from an Eastern into a Western problem. In Opium City by Amar Farooqui we can see how opium linked Bombay to the international capitalist economy and the western India hinterland in the 19th century. The essays in this book explore the linkages between the opium enterprise of western India and the creation of early Victorian Bombay. This book dwells on features of urban development which reflect the relationship between the capitalists of the city and the British colonial rule. This book explores historically how opium has been a crucial factor in the emergence of Bombay as a metropolis.

Opium was the main source of revenue for British colonists and their main source of income across the globe. Its high demand made the colonizers rich and powerful. Even their own country wasn't immune from the effect of opium as we can see it in Thomas de Quincey's Confessions of an English Opium Eater. Thus, it was natural

for this escape mechanism and source of creativity and pain relief to spread to the colonies. Bombay was built on opium trade, according to Amar Farooqui's Opium City.

My research identifies the alienation which is prevalent in the metropolitans of India, specifically Mumbai. Mumbai when it was Bombay was built on opium trade slowly it expanded so did the use of narcotics. My research through close textual analysis of the novel, *Narcopolis* by Jeet Thayil establishes the alienation of people who consume narcotics in Indian metropolitans.

## Methodology

The methodology adopted for this research paper is textual analysis and close reading of Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* and applying the theory of alienation to the text. As Bombay was experiencing the wave of alienation in the 70s and 80s, the time period when this novel is set. This research aims to connect drug use and alienation through close reading and textual analysis of Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*.

## Research Question

Is drug use and drug culture of metropolitans the cause of alienation of man?

## Analysis

*Narcopolis* as a title plays on the words *Narcos* and *polis* which is the city of intoxication. Author Jeet Thayil sees the city in a cloud of smoke. Bombay as a hub of opium since it has been established has attracted different kinds of people from different walks of life. The novel views Old Bombay from slums and gutters and different stories are from the streets of Bombay which are connected through the opium pipe. They all meet and drown in the smoke in Shuklaji Street. Shuklaji street is home to brothels and opium dens.

The sentences of the novel are long and intoxicating. The Prologue titled, 'Something for the Mouth' is seven pages long single sentence inside an opium user's mind. The thoughts are drowning from everywhere yet connected and flowing like smoke from the opium pipe.

Book One of the novel, titled *The City of O*, introduces characters of the novel. How each character belongs to a different social dynamic of the society but they have opium in common. Everyone has a different reason to use but they suffer from existential crisis and alienation in each case and thus even though Xavier is a rich painter nothing makes him different than Dimple, a trans woman or Mr. Lee, a man from China searching for meaning in streets of Bombay as all are consuming opium in Shuklaji street from the same pipe. These people if they met at a place other than an opium den they would never have communicated but the drug dissolves all the barriers. They are slaves to the pipe. Dimple is the centre of the narrative. She is someone who consumes not for pleasure but to forget the pain. Castrated and separated from mother at a tender age and knowing nothing but the shabby streets of the underworld she is the character which experiences intense alienation.

She says, *'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?....'*

- Chapter 1, Dimple Book One, The City of O, Narcopolis

This sort of identity crisis which she is facing is due to the conditions she has seen around her. She is confused with her own body, her body doesn't belong to her but it belongs to the brothel and the shuklaji street. Her body has been a constant source of agony to her. This pain makes her consume opium in the first place but the relief is momentary. She is alienated from her body, this chain of thoughts is a direct result of opium consumption but also this aloofness from herself made her consume. Dimple constantly struggles for identity. She is nothing outside Shuklaji Street. She is sold there and she grows up there. She even dies in the same alleys and her story is also lost like the smoke from the pipe.

The consumers of opium delve into deeper philosophical questions of life and death. These visions are caused by the drug as well as the hunger for answers which lies deep within. These people don't fit well with society. They are only understood by the other users of opium.

*'Old friend, I said tell me the story of your death and please, you have to make an effort, it's the only way we can speak to each other.'*

- Chapter 1, Dimple, Book One, The City of O, Narcopolis

Dimple had a sad life and in death she haunts the memories of those who knew her. She understands pain and even in death she has no place to go. She is trying to create meaning of her life even after death.

*'On the other side of the mirror, our hands are resting against the glass, trying to touch your face. Only a veil separates us from you, a transparent veil as flimsy as the one that separates you from your dreams.'*

- Chapter 1, Dimple, Book One, The City of O, Narcopolis

Opium attracted people who were trying to find meaning in life or the ones who were tired with it for example the protagonist was a student who was habituated to the use of opium later heroin while Dimple and Mr. Lee was so despondent from their lives that they found their peace in smoke.

Mr. Lee is a man from China who is living in Bombay out of compulsion as he can't go back to China. He is not content. He feels that he is dying and is not equipped to deal with the pain of losing home and war. In Mr. Lee's narrative we also get a glimpse of communist China.

This consumption is a result of ready availability as well as finding meaning in life. The larger culture of a metropolitan and having no one to take care of you promotes the use. The fact that one is invisible in a city like Bombay also makes it easier to hide in the smoke of opium dens.



*'Shuklaji Street was a fever grid of rooms, boom-boom rooms, family rooms, god rooms, secret rooms that contracted in daytime and expanded at night'.*

- Chapter 1, A Walk on Shuklaji Street, Book Three, The Intoxicated, Narcopolis

The geography of Shuklaji Street also helped in consumption and hiding the smoke. As a city it is very congested. It is easier to hide as no one remembers faces.

Dimple switches her personality with her attire. She wears a sari when she wants to be a Hindu and wears a burkha when she wants to be Zeenat, a muslim. The hippie trail of the 70s also has an effect. The film, Hare Krishna Hare Ram is a pop culture movie of those days. It glorifies the hippie lifestyle. In Janice's character Dimple sees her own suffering and a reason to stick to the pipe. The wound is always there, you can never be away from it.

With varied financial and sexual backgrounds all the addicts are connected by the pipe. The novel starts in smoke and ends in smoke. This is the story of the pipe. The existence of pipe and the effect it produces is very cyclical in nature. There is no breaking of the loop. Like the pain which is there, the characters are not free from it. The characters in Narcopolis are stuck in this same kind of existential loop. Like the 'Myth of Sisyphus', the man who could never roll the stone up the hill. Similarly these characters are deeply engrossed in narcotics to get out of it even if they want to. All the addicts have a sense of alienation from their surroundings, they only connect with fellow addicts. The way out of the misery of existential life is death. The drug culture of metros is prevalent due to the availability. Even though India has been engrossed in Gandhian ideas there is a darker side which is visible in Narcopolis. The intoxicated existence of those who are forced into it and who adopt the pipe by choice.

The characters of the novel have a deep sense of detachment from their surroundings when they have the pipe in hand. The drugs progress from opium and garad to heroin and cocaine. They only connect to their lives when they are under enough intoxication. Some consume drugs to ease the physical pain while others consume them to ease the mental agony which only gets aggravated after each mouthful of opiates.

Metropolitan cities like Bombay stand on the roots of narcotics. Where the cosmopolitan crowd interacts. They are equal in the drug dens. As the drugs progress so do the places where they are sold. No one wants to visit the old rundown areas of drugs and prostitutes. They would rather visit a club to buy them now. Opium dens are a memory like the bittersweet memories in the minds of the people. In large places one feels at home in the smoke of pipe. A person connects to those who are tripping on the same substance. Dimple, the eunuch consumes opium to get rid of the pain. Different people have different reasons but the loop doesn't break. Thus, their existence is based on the drug. Opium City bases the existence of Bombay on opium so the people residing there will never be free from the intoxication. The intoxicated brain challenges the ideas of existence and thus the city itself consumed by drug use is questioning its roots which are blowing away in a pipe.

## Conclusion

Drug use and drug culture create a sense of alienation in the metropolitans. They doubt the meaning of their existence. The thoughts are strongly stimulated by the habitual use of narcotics. The concept of alienation identifies a distinct kind of psychological or social ill involving a problematic separation between a self and others that properly belong together. Metropolitans are more affected by this use because of the easy availability and history of opium trade in a city like Bombay which was feeding India's opium into China for the British. Alienation is the cause and effect of drug use. Narco culture is a result of high modernity which is often found in developed urban areas where thoughts are generally thought to be more advanced than a semi urban or rural setting. Thus, these places promote more experimentation and due to the advancement and the lifestyle, people living in metros are more attracted to the use of narcotics. Alienation is a common factor found in urban areas but it also results in many of the maladies faced by people which include experimentation with different forms of narcotics and its trade which causes further alienation from the surroundings.

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