

## Trivialization of India's metropolitan: An orientalist reading of Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*

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### ABSTRACT

*South Asian authors of the twenty-first century have gained impetus from the creative works of Rushdie, Mistry, Adiga, Vikram Chandra, and Suketu Mehta, among others. These writers have discovered the palimpsest histories of Indian metropolises like Bombay, Kolkata, Delhi, etc. One of India's most prominent writers, Jeet Thayil, portrays Indian culture in "hard focuses" in his debut novel Narcopolis (2012), which further trivializes Bombay, a global city with its postcolonial quandaries. Thayil claims that opium khanas, brothels, and slums are where you may find the true India instead of the "mangoes and monsoons". The intentional celebration of exoticism in the book and the propagation of colonial stereotypes are linked to the idea of Orientalism, which postulates how the image of the East grew inferior to the West throughout time. Using the idea of Orientalism as a framework, the research looks at how Bombay in the novel, portrayed as the city of "Opium", differs significantly from Bombay in reality, which is renowned as the city of dreams. Additionally, despite highlighting India's urbanity, the research paper draws attention to how Bombay's portrayals in English literature concurrently disparage India's stature.*

**Keywords:** Orientalism, Opium City, City Space, Literary market, Orientalist discourses, etc.

### INTRODUCTION

The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space... we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another. (Foucault 25)

Cities have become the ubiquitous configuration in contemporary Indian writings as a result of the expansion of metropolitan space in India at the turn of the twentieth century. (Çıraklı xii)

Notable critical theories that integrate the time-space discourse are Literary Geography, Literary Cartography, and Geo-criticism. Though the author's locales and locations in literary works are not visible to the naked eye, the body may undoubtedly experience them through imagination. Literary writings can conjure up mental images of the areas and places they describe, resulting in their literary cartography, however they do not always produce maps as vivid as those seen in cartography. According to Ricardo Padron's "Mapping Imaginary World" (2007), the stories that are set in the locations that are described in literary texts give those locations life and significance, making them seem more genuine, approachable, and real than any other cartographic representation. (Padron 265) Also, the representation of "City" in literary writings has been employed to describe both living and non-living entities. The position and purpose of the city in literature were in a flux prior to the seventeenth century. According to Arthur J. Weitzman who cites

a number of writers like Dr. Johnson, Cowper, Pope, Blake, Wordsworth, etc. to substantiate his point how many writers conceived a profound love for the classically idealized city however, they also detested the clamour of the metropolis. Consequently, as Weitzman states, “they could not reconcile the two images” (Weitzman 479). By the twentieth century, the city had evolved from a location to a living environment that shaped the protagonist's place and his existence in the city. This new “spatial turn”, which Henry Lefebvre articulated in *The Production of the Space* (1991), emphasizes how space is continuously formed and recreated, enabling us to see it from the viewpoints of the mental, social, and physical components of psychology. Additionally, it clarified the basis for Saul Bellow's claim that “[C]ity is the expression of the human experience it embodies” (Bellow 124) in his 1987 novel *More Die of Heartbreak*. On account of this expression, Katherine Mullin correctly points out, “[N]umerous novels and poems reflect the ways in which cities generate states of shock, exhilaration, alienation, anonymity, confusion, or thrill” (Mullin). The city took on a personality of its own due to these idiosyncrasies and it happened after the publication of *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* in 1922. Although, before 1922, a number of authors including Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and James Joyce, etc. had made several efforts to depict the city as a character. “The change from the City as a setting to City as a character”, exclaims Gemma Scammell “is done in one of two ways. The first is to take a post-humanistic approach, which gives a kind of artificial life to a city through a combination of technology and machines. The second is a more organic method, which portrayed the city as a life form able to feel, breath—and like all organic life, able to die” (Scammell). In the twenty-first century, authors used both approaches to define the city in their writing. They portrayed the city as either a living or non-living object. The importance of the city in literary works increased with time; it was no longer just the focal point of the poem or novel, but it also became a pivotal decider of the fates of both the protagonist and novel's plot.

Edward Soja in *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (2000) adduces that there was a “sea change” in the 1970s when new theories from various disciplines emerged to understand the architecture of diverse communities, multiple flows, fragmented spatiality, and dynamic spatial networks, and the dominant patterns of earlier urbanization phases subsided. Around the world, cities have been affected by the most recent urbanization processes to varying degrees. Soja points out, “[C]ities like Singapore, Lagos, Sao Paulo, and Bombay provide as revealing a viewpoint from which to grasp the post-metropolis such as Manchester, Chicago, Los Angeles, or Paris” (Soja 153). Postcolonial studies have brought attention to the effects of such strict spatial organization. The two foundational books by Edward Said—*Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1990)—identify the role geography plays in imperial dominance processes and highlight the enduring relationship between geographic epistemology and cultural inventions. The new strategy, meanwhile, has also given rise to some negative opinions about the city. Preston and Simson also advanced this unfavourable portrayal of the metropolis in literary works and citing Raymond Williams' *The Country and the Metropolis* (1975) state, “[I]n a wide variety of texts from the classical period to the present day, the urban and the rural have been placed in diametric opposition, to the advantage of the latter” (Preston & Simson 2). To further their argument, they claim, “guile, corruption, intrigue, and false values against the positive, natural, straightforward values of the countryside are seen to

be present in the city” (ibid). The city, with all of its vices, social turmoil, and unfavorable portrayal by the authors, now becomes the enemy or the rivals that “grow, mature, sicken, and die” (Scammell).

Mumbai, referring to Scammell's account of the city, has been described as “mature”, “sickened”, and dead in many literary works written by Indian English writers. Gargi Gupta, in this regard, also states that Indian novelists “focus on the dark underbelly of the ‘city of dreams’, on a city of extremes where fantastic wealth lies cheek by jowl with grinding poverty, where high-rises punctuate a sea of slums, a city bursting at the seams with people from all manner of countries, communities and religions...” (Gupta). That is why Bombay, (now known as Mumbai), the “second largest city in the British Empire, after London” (Kosambi 15), a bustling metropolitan for tourists, an economic hub for entrepreneurs; the city of possibility, the city of stardom, the city of impressive architectures, is represented by Jeet Thayil in his ‘blistering debut’, ‘searing’, semi-autobiographical novel *Narcopolis* (2012) as the city of drug and opium, city of sex, city of violence, city of Hindu-Muslim riots, in which ‘squalor lived’, ‘cobbled alley’s lived with cots’, roads mined with garbage with human and animal debris’ and so on (Thayil 135-136). In this way, the novel exposes the dark side of Bombay and India while positioning the central idea of Orientalism, which postulate how European countries projected the Middle Eastern and South Asian Countries through a Western perspective and divided the world between the familiar (Europe, West, “us”) and the strange (the Orient, the East, “them”). (Said 43)

Using the basic ideas of Orientalism as a framework, this research work looks at how Bombay in the novel, portrayed as the city of “Opium”, differs significantly from Bombay in reality, which is renowned as the city of dreams. Additionally, despite highlighting India's urbanity, the research paper draws attention to how Bombay's portrayals in English literature concurrently disparage India's stature.

## METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on the close reading of Jeet Thayil’s novel *Narcopolis*. Since the aim of the study is to examine how Jeet Thayil orientalises India in general and Bombay in particular by depicting latter as an Opium City, and how Bombay's inadequate representation by Thayil in the global world exasperates India's favourable opinions; a critical analysis of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* is given for the theoretical formulations. Besides, various textual illustrations and appropriate quotes from monographs, edited books, articles, reviews, and interviews have been used to corroborate the views of the novelist.

**Orientalism: A Theoretical Framework-** Edward Said in his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) exemplify the tactic of colonial discourse by illustrating how Western nations portrayed Middle Eastern countries commensurate with their ideology and framework. As Prasad Pannian states, “Orient and Oriental have always been historically produced, and that the discourse of Orientalism identifies both the Orient and the Oriental as objects that can be scrutinized and comprehended...” (Pannian 15). Said aimed to depict the evolution of the idea of the Western imagination of the East and the manner in which it has evolved throughout time according to academics. Additionally, he aimed to demonstrate the strong connection between these concepts and the global expansion of European colonial power. According to Said, Orientalist studies evolved into a vehicle for the expansion of political, military, and economic power as well as a

statement of intellectual and technological domination. Orientalism evolved into a concept rather than an actuality, a symbol of supremacy and an instrument of control. Thus, Orientalist writings started to appear in the Eastern portion of the world. Said claims that the Orient became “a European invention” (Said 1) whose history was misrepresented, culture was denigrated, society was accused of being backward, men were made to appear uncivilized, lazy, women were promiscuous, and so on. The book is useful because it not only reveals the European’s leitmotifs but also demonstrates how outdated and unfavourable notions about Eastern nations persist in the contemporary time. Said concludes that Orientalism is a Western fantasy, or in other word, “hegemony” intended to impose the superiority of Europeans over the Orient. However, by adopting an Orientalist stance and depicting the Orient in their literary works in the same way, some Western intellectuals from the Global South persisted in presenting their people and place as penniless, uncivilized, and impoverished long after the Empire fell. Lisa Lau claims, “Postcolonial studies continue to track and comment upon the contemporary paradigms of power at play, which are still the result of colonial legacies” (Lau 2). Accordingly, Thayil's depiction of Bombay deviates significantly from the Bombay we are familiar with. In the present novel Thayil uses multiple Western templates and refurbish colonial formulaic images. For example, Bombay city is on fire due to a rumour that a Muslim family killed a Hindu family of six by burning them alive. People are dying themselves in this city, and Thayil's use of the term "fuckers" for the people inspires them to act appropriately at this point. The ladies in this novel are impoverished, dirty, and—most importantly—only worth five rupees. They live as captives. “Indians were too mild...and it was Gandhi's fault” (Thayil 129).

## DISCUSSION

Such projections of Bombay signify “the colonial semblance in the post-colonial era” (Tiwari & Chaubey 159). That is why Hari Kunzru declares, “[T]he novel will change the way one imagines Bombay” (qtd in Tellis). Ashley Tellis also corroborates Kunzru's assertions on the novel's plot, which is “a seamless and invariant narrative of squalor, violence and abuse, with Hindu-Muslim riots of a piece with the daily violence of the backstreets” (Tellis). Thus, through Orientalist discourses, Thayil enters the literary world to market the margins and like his literary ancestors—Rushdie and Naipaul—transforms the novel's content into what Huggan articulates, “a valuable intellectual commodity” (Huggan viii).

The grotesque depiction of Bombay and “Jeet Thayil’s beautified rendering of the vanishing landscape of the brothels and opium dens of Shukla Street” is described by Kalpish Ratna as “the Orientalist’s wet dream [because] Sleaze sells India like nothing else can” (Ratna). Thayil's obsession with the unwelcoming atmosphere of India led him to paint an unflattering picture of the nation. Thayil declares, “Bengalis are...chooths of highest order...the Oriyas...are more in the league of chooth wannabes. But...Sindhis...are the world’s most sophisticated chooths...And the UPites and APites, they’re criminals to a man, born criminals, you can’t trust them with a pencil. Then there are the chooths in waiting and chooths by association, such as the Parsis and the tribals (Thayil 214).

Based on such observations, Thayil, in an interview with Bhumika Anand, says, “I was always suspicious of the novel that paints India in soft focuses, a place of addled nostalgia and loving elders, or

monsoons and mangoes...that India has little to no ties to the nation I am familiar with” (Thayil 2013). With his construal of 1960s India, Thayil has created what Said refers to as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 3). Thayil interprets some of these Orientalistic patterns to resist the forces of poverty, malignity, and intergroup violence because “the third world produces texts for the first world academics consumption” (Chakldar 186). It should come as no surprise that the book was well reviewed, adored in the West, and even made it to the shortlist for the highly acclaimed Booker Prize. As a result, he was “hailed as the leading light of a new generation of Indian novelists, who are willing to take on the less salubrious realities of life in the world’s largest democracy” (Samantara). Thayil’s use of maverick connotation leads him to make his 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, deprivations, depravations, and destitutions (Pius 177). Mapping Thayil's distortion of reality and his oriental practices—in which police officers are dishonest, Indians are lethargic, and “the city belongs to the politician and the crooks and some of the politicians are more crooked than the most crooked of the crooks” (Thayil 199)—will therefore be pertinent.

**Bombay and its Spatial Underbellies:** Narrative structure of the novel grasps the entire malignancy of the city by presenting the experiment of “the planned socialist state of India” (Thayil 2), in which the patharmars are shown to eradicate the poverty of “invisible entities without names, papers, or families,” in addition to understanding Bombay's opium industry in a covert manner in which the city is completely engrossed (ibid). The ‘cultural structures’ projected in the novels also allude to the theory of Orientalism because “Orientalism is a cultural and political fact” (Said 21). Furthermore, because of the extremist Hindu political organization, the Hindu-Muslim clashes, and the disregard of marginalized people, particularly third-gender individuals like Dimple, Bombay is perceived as an inconsiderable city. The present novel validates Stuti Khanna’s claims that cities typically “contain an entire spectrum of ethnic, racial, and class identities, making for a highly volatile mix that frequently erupts in the form of riots” (Khanna 3). Each character—even the one who escapes to the city to relieve oneself of worldliness, recognition, agony, misery, and nostalgia—embodies a negative outlook on life to exoticise the socio-cultural aspect of India. In this way, Thayil “brings a hand-gained knowledge of urban India... [And] transmits the violence, sexual depravity, and grotesqueness that have been, up to this point, largely absent from the contemporary Indian writings” (Connor 11) by depicting the imageries of drugs.

Thayil describes the state of old Bombay as one of complete dismay, using it as a metaphor to illustrate how India is diminishing. The descriptions of brothels, opium, homosexuality, and violence paint a picture of a hideous India. Thayil follows the trend of Orientalist discourse by providing an exotic image that not only captures the country's deteriorating image but also embraces its gloom. Melinda Harvey's statement, “Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* joins Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* and Rohinton Mistry's *The Family Matter* to use the dynamism and disparity of India’s biggest city to power a fiction and to find its way on to Booker Prize shortlist” (Harvey), is not out of context in this regard.. Thus, like Indian diasporic writers, Thayil’s novel is also limited to “racism, casteism, corruption, exploitation, exoticism, or cultural

dilapidation in India that could occupy a place in the transnational literary scenario” (Tiwari & Chaubey 131).

The primary driving force in the story is unquestionably Bombay and its hidden opium past. By “paying too much attention to the wrong things” (Thayil 4), Bombay itself tells its history in the book. Sujata Patel, speaking about the growth of Bombay, once stated, “Bombay is considered to be the first Indian town to experience the economic, technological and social changes associated with the growth of capitalism in India” (Patel1). But Thayil’s projection of Bombay does not purport to justify Patel’s view. Rather, Thayil reinforces the view of Amar Farooqi who, in his well-known book *Opium City: The Making of Early Victorian Bombay* (2008), claimed, “[It] was primarily opium that linked Bombay to the international capitalist economy” (Farooqi xiii). It should come as no surprise that the mode of operation and widespread usage of opium in the city have commiseration with the economics of the state.

Consumption and distribution of Opium in the city foreshadow Bombay’s transformation into Mumbai. However, the physical transformation of the city is less noticeable than the way Opium was transformed into drugs and then subsequently replaced by more dangerous chemicals. . It is evident from book three of the novel that “depicts the tumultuous crumble of the mostly mellow opium dens into the brutally effacing world of chemical heroin” (Thendral & Parvathy 256). Through the story of the fragile and disorganized lives of its characters—Rashid, Dimple, Rumi, and Jamal—Thayil delves into the darker side of Bombay, primarily around Shuklaji Street, and illustrates how the Opium den has enthralled the entire city as if the Opium and the City were one and the same. : “[I] found Bombay and Opium, the drug and the city of opium and the drug Bombay," declares the first Narrator "I," who is none other than Dom Morase (Thayil 7).

**Exotic Society and Inefficient Administrative System:** By depicting India as a “chooth country” and “cunt country”, Thayil contorts the socio-political and cultural standards of the nation. This novel, despite illustrating poverty tourism in India, also exhibits bizarre images of Indian administrative system lacking in its integrity. In addition, by adopting Edward Said's exemplification of how Europeans created stereotypes of the Orient as uncivilized, dangerous, and lethargic, the novel put Indian people under the same umbrella. To the novelist, Indians are busy with “thinking of food to think of tomorrow...Here everything too fast, too loud, too crazy. Indians don't care for past, only care for now” (Thayil 65-66). Thayil's narratives show how dishonest police officers are never afraid to demand bribes. In one passage, Thayil compares Indian police to dogs, saying both “were always the first to smell trouble and disappear” (Thayil 200). His mockery of the working culture of people is presented in stark contrast to the country's idyllic image. Such claims by Thayil are rooted in the Orientalist school of thought. Gomes Shane's critique of the book highlights how an odd image of India is presented in this work: “A character describes a vision had white detoxifying from heroin; that of graphic child rape, which brings together filth, violence, and evil...Then, the narrator angrily proclaims, “This is India”” (Shane).

**Dilapidation of Living Culture:** *Narcopolis* was poorly received in India for the reason that it not only depicts the filthy image of India but also ridicule and disregard spiritual beliefs like dharma, karma, and mythology. “The Sari and the Burkha”, the fourth chapter, provides evidence for this claim. In this chapter,

Thayil depicts Dimple's (Hindu) metamorphosis into Zeenat (Muslim), which is essentially a conversion of a traditional Hindu culture (wearing Sari) into another traditional Muslim culture (wearing Burkha). Thayil claims that wearing a sari and blouse, as the majority of Hindu women in India do, is unsafe as both keep showing arms, neck, and belly. Burkha, on the other hand, is safe as it can protect the whole body parts of ladies. Dimple not only felt safe after donning a Burkha but also "wondered at the men who designed such garments [because] everything else were covered" (Thayil 157). Thus, through the story of Dimple, Thayil mulls over patriarchal society which, for him, is an inborn instinct in Indians. Dimple is the ideal individual to showcase anything Thayil wants to show the world.

**Degradation of Hindu gods:** This novel also denigrates Hindu religious ideas as it is evident that exposing India's underbellies would not be undermined without making fun of Hindu deities and religious customs. Thayil distinguishes himself from other Indian English writers in this way because he expresses his profound respect for Christianity while simultaneously derogating Hindu deities. "Satyam, Saram, Sundaram" (Truth is Shame is Beauty) is how Thayil reinterprets the mantra "Satyam Shivam, Sundaram" (Thayil 161). Dimple's character reflects Thayil's love for Christianity as well as his enmity for Hinduism. Through the disposition of Dimple's character, "Thayil even puts forth the idea of Christianity as a form of escape for the ones trying to find a heaven while facing an existential crisis. Developing the Christian faith is among one of Dimple's ways out of her dreadful existence" (Daniel & Mishra 49).

### Conclusion

Through the lanes of the opium khana in old Bombay, India appears to be a narrative of squalor, passion, and waste. The book brilliantly conveys the depth of desire in the seductive atmosphere of a region where prostitutes and opium are commonplace. Bombay's progress is ultimately catastrophic as it is "still a conglomeration of slums on which high-rises had been built," (Thayil 269). From the 1960s Bombay to 2000s New Mumbai, a journey spanning nearly four decades ends without any anticipation and optimism. Moreover, the portrayal of urban life during these forty years is both satirical and absurd. Thus, in addition to exploring the decaying state of urban spaces, comprising slums, brothels, and opium khana, Thayil's novel also delves into the disintegrating mental states of people. This allows the novel to understand shifting social spaces and society through its historical, cultural, political, psychological, and geographical elements.

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