

Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*: A Testimony to Life in the Margins

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Abstract

Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* focuses an expository spotlight on the marginalized voices that proliferate in large metropolises and that have been, to a large extent, imperceptible to mainstream academe. Thayil depicts the history of a section of Bombay's underbelly that was an important nerve center in the drug business before the city's name change to Mumbai. Although the great variety of drugs described in the novel helps set the overall tone, its diagnostic focus is on the people and on the motives behind their particular life choices. Thayil presents the haunting reality of the life of marginalized and oppressed individuals through the use of raw, grotesque imagery. Given Thayil's approach to his subject, this paper aims to analyze *Narcopolis*' composition and characters with the objective of locating Bakhtinian tropes of carnivalesque and grotesque realism. Another point of inquiry is Thayil's use of an experimental language that mixes words from diverse vernaculars spoken in Bombay, a practice that adds a charge of authenticity to the narrative's realist complexion. With Thayil's debut novel becoming a voice for the voiceless, this paper explores his rendition of how people survive in the margins, largely concealed from critical scrutiny.

Keywords: carnivalesque, experimental Grotesque Realism, History, language, marginalization

India is a developing nation and its metropolitan areas, like in many other countries, have been points of convergence for the economic forces that power the nation's growth. Bombay (now known as Mumbai) has been one of the epicenters of India's ascent onto the global stage. Moreover, Bombay has been a melting pot for the diverse cultures of India for many decades. Multitudes migrate into this city of dreams full of hope and with a negligible amount money. The constant influx embeds different cultures and languages into a city that is increasingly overcrowded, adding many beneficial new traits to the prevailing culture, but also affecting it in ways that are not favorable.

The advancements in infrastructure and technology generally serve the needs of the privileged class that, because of its economic advantages, enjoys the exposure that allows it to become the face of the metropolis. But there exists an underclass that lives in the shadows, anonymous and increasingly pushed to the margins. Jeet Thayil brings the life of the marginalized to the forefront in his debut novel, *Narcopolis* (2012).

Thayil is very familiar with Bombay, and he uses his experiences there to paint a realistic picture of the city. He was deported from New York at the age of sixteen due to his problems with drugs, only to encounter the same environment in the streets of Bombay. In an interview, he mentions that "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" (Jaiman, 2012, p. 35). Thayil, who lost two decades of his life to drug addiction, utilizes his acquaintance with the world of drugs in a way that allows his characters to enact a rarely discussed history of Bombay, delivered in a graphic mode that gives a strong impression of authenticity.

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. (Pius, 2014, p. 54)

The timeline of the novel begins in Bombay in the 1970s and reaches the Mumbai of the 2000s. The story begins in Rashid's opium den, in Bombay's Shuklaji Street, where all the major characters converge. While the city can be said to be the protagonist, the cast of supporting characters includes Dimple the *hijra* (eunuch, intersex, asexual or transgender person), who worked as a prostitute before joining as a pipe maker in Rashid's *khana*, Dom Ullis, the narrator, Rumi, the failed businessman, Salim, the happy-go-lucky pickpocket and drug mule, Xavier Newton, the visiting artist, and Mr. Lee, the Chinese refugee. There are several other characters; all are elements of a novel whose general ambiance has the characteristics of an opium dream.

The novel revolves around the life of society's underclass and the diverse types of drugs that were available to its members even though the city faced food scarcity. It also involves the communal riots that took place in Bombay in 1992, thus offering a wide view of Bombay's transformation to Mumbai from the perspective of this ignored segment of the population.

Theoretical Framework

Thayil's *Narcopolis* is a testimony to the life of the marginalized, with Bombay and its mottled history as the background. As Thayil points out, "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” (Bose, 2012, p. 42). This points to the prominent Russian literary critic and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin and his concept of the carnival. The present study aims to conduct a close reading of the novel from a Bakhtinian perspective by drawing on the concepts of carnivalesque and grotesque realism. Pearce notes 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” (2006, p. 433). Carnavalesque is the main trope in Bakhtin’s scholarly work entitled, *Rabelais and His World* (1965). Danow (1995) defines carnival and carnivalesque:

The first refers to an established period in time when certain cultures engage in a spirited celebration of a world in travesty, where the commonly held values of a given cultural milieu are reversed, where new “heads of state” are elected to “govern” the ungovernable, and where 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. (p. 3)

Grotesque realism is an integral part of the carnivalesque. Bakhtin (1984) claims in *Rabelais and His World* that “The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation” (p. 19), but this degradation is not necessarily negative. Simon Dentith (1995) describes the grotesque body in *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader* as:

The grotesque body celebrated by Bakhtin, which appears in artistic forms and periods way beyond Rabelais and the sixteenth century, is a body in which becoming rather than completion is evident, a body whose openness to the world and the future is emphatically symbolized by the consuming maws, pregnant stomachs, evident phalluses and gargantuan evacuations that make it up. (p. 66)

The concept of grotesque realism is essentially a part of the carnival world; hence it is expedient to explore them together. A probe into the language and setting of the text is also fitting in order to confirm its authentic depiction of this social reality. Thayil has used a variety of words from different languages spoken in and around Bombay, thus capturing the diverse nature of the city in his text. In his essay “From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse,” Bakhtin (1981) denotes this as polyglossia, as when multiple languages are used in one area at the same time. The experimental language used by Thayil is an essential parameter that helps the narrative stay true to the portrayal of the characters.

Carnavalesque and Grotesque Realism in *Narcopolis*

Dimple is unmistakably the central character of the novel. The story of Dimple would make even a stone-hearted person quiver as the reader is introduced to her life of unending misery. Made a eunuch at birth, she is turned into a woman at the tender age of eight or nine after she is left by her mother in the hands of a priest who eventually sells her to a brothel. The account of the castration is disturbing, yet the casual tone of Dimple while narrating the ordeal is even more disquieting. The grotesque imagery of the castration presented as an ordinary occurrence, involving whisky and opium as anesthetics and hot oil as antiseptic, highlights the fact that the

recurring pain in the life of the marginalized has made them numb towards their tragic past. “Characters like Dimple appropriate the state of marginalization by accepting the reality in unique ways. The act of being subject to amputation at a very early age is taken positively by Dimple” (Jose, 2019, p. 235). However, this near-death experience was also Dimple’s rebirth as a *hijra* woman.

Grotesque realism mainly focuses on the concept of degradation, but as Bakhtin explains, this degradation does not only refer to the negative but also presents the possibility for regeneration or rejuvenation. In *Rabelais and His Works*, he points out 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.” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 21) Dimple’s frigid attitude towards this horrific incident elucidates the idea that she has accepted her status of being outside the social constraints of gender. Moreover, she shows resilience in her attempts at uplifting herself by trying to educate herself with the help of the books she could find. This reflects her yearning for growth in life.

Another incident in the novel which has a similar undertone is Salim’s act of rebellion. Salim, a pickpocket, also worked as a drug mule for Lala. Apart from working for the old criminal Lala, he also falls prey to constant sexual abuse at the hands of his employer. Salim endures everything silently until the city is engulfed in the flames of the communal riots of 1992. Dimple describes this time fraught with riots as the end of the world, and this iteration of the situation rids him of all his fears. After his conversation with Dimple, Salim goes on to meet Lala. However, when Lala rapes Salim, he uses his knife to cut off Lala’s penis and bludgeons him to death. Again, it is the calm and collected description of the incident which further enhances the impact of its grotesque realism. With the dissolution of fear, Salim overcomes his erstwhile inner nature as his retaliation leads him to a transformation from victim to robust character who stands against his oppressor. “Death is seen as the indispensable link in the process of the people’s growth and renewal” (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 93). In the carnival there are always two sides working like binaries. The concept of death is connected to birth, the end of one will be the beginning of another. In Bakhtin’s (1984) view, “death is not a negation of life ... in the system of grotesque imagery death and renewal are inseparable in life as a whole” (p. 50).

Bakhtin defines carnival as a space where everyone is accepted without any bias based on social status or hierarchy. Rashid’s *khana* offered a similar sense of hospitality to anyone who came there to smoke opium. All the major characters in the novel found their way to the opium den in the dark alleys of Shuklaji street. Although divergent like the colors of the rainbow they were all brought together in their common affinity for pain and in their branding as misfits or outcasts. This further prompted them to the realms of unconsciousness and hallucinations offered by addiction. In other words, opium and other drugs provided a similar escape to the characters of the novel as the one which was sought in the carnivals during the age of Rabelais. While the carnival came with the possibility of letting go of the societal roles and being whomever one wished to be, the addiction offered something more for people like Dimple. When Dimple is asked why she took drugs she responds:

Oh, who knows, there are so many good reasons and nobody mentions them and the main thing nobody mentions is the comfort of it, how good it is to be a slave to something, the regularity, and habit of addiction, the fact that it’s an antidote to

loneliness, and the way it becomes your family, gives you mother love and protection and keeps you safe. (Thayil, 2012, p. 230)

The smoke of ecstasy opened a doorway to a world where they found themselves free to be whatever they imagined to be, free from being judged and ridiculed for not fitting into the social strata of the successful. In that moment of unconsciousness, they felt their dreams to be their reality. As the barrier between the real and the imaginary vanished, they transcended into a world of freedom and a world without pain.

Although carnivals also symbolized freedom and celebration, the difference is that they were sanctioned by the Church and the state. “Carnivals were, in fact, closely connected with the feasts of the Church, as carnival marked the last days before Lent” (Morris, 2003, p. 198). This means that no matter how revolutionary it may have seemed, the carnival was monitored by the same powers that it mocked. The regular payment by the opium den of fifty thousand rupees to the Custom and Excise officers, even as the city was facing food scarcity during the communal riots, serves to reinforce the idea that the drug business is a top priority for the authorities. Terry Eagleton (1981) has rightly termed carnival as “a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art. As Shakespeare’s Olivia remarks, there is no slander in an allowed fool” (p. 148).

The communal riots which took place in Bombay in 1992 also find a space in Thayil’s depiction of the metropolis. The streets were left in a post-apocalyptic state filled with rubble and strewn with burnt vehicles alongside unattended dead bodies. The dogs and the police were the first to vanish from the streets, and the great city was in the grasp of utter chaos. The disruption of the established order in society is the elementary nature of the carnival spirit. Even though the riot has a darker connotation than the carnival, it still turns the state of affairs “inside out.” Stallybrass and White (1986) also share the opinion that it “makes little sense to fight out the issue of whether or not carnivals are intrinsically radical or conservative, for to do so automatically involves the false essentializing of carnivalesque transgression” (p. 14).

Religion

Alongside the people, God and religion are also important in Thayil’s work. He has subtly planted references to Jesus Christ throughout the novel. The masterpieces of the artist Xavier Newton include his infamous Christ paintings which also form a reference point in Thayil’s second novel *The Book of Chocolate Saints*. One of the paintings included in the *Time* magazine portrays a puny figure of Christ covered with thorns the size of railroad ties against a blood spatter. Another reference to Christ is made in the book by S.T. Pande where the Messiah is made to look like a performer and apothecary. But it is during Dimple’s close examination of the sculpture of the crucified Christ on the cross that Thayil takes away any sort of divinity or power ascribed to the God of Christians. “his lips were pink and blue, . . . hair was unwashed and his eyes were tired . . . no hint of a smile on his face, no suggestion that his life was anything more than a titanic struggle” (Thayil, 2012, p. 201). She even sees some words leave his mouth which she deciphers as “Love me because I’m alone and poor like you. (Thayil, 2012, p. 201). Bakhtin (1984) in his work on Rabelais mentions that:

The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity. Thus “Cyprian’s supper” and many other

Latin parodies of the Middle Ages are nothing but a selection of all the degrading, earthy details taken from the Bible, the Gospels, and other sacred texts. (pp. 19–20)

Thayil downgrades the image of the Almighty to that of a mere mortal. The ironic image of a helpless god is further proof of the deplorable condition of the marginalized in the society, exemplified in their god. This resonates with Salim's remark when he says "we're only happy when our heads are touching the floor and we're praying to the god of garad" (Thayil, 2012, p. 199).

Thayil even puts forth the idea of Christianity as a form of escape for the ones trying to find a haven while facing an existential crisis. Developing the Christian faith is among one of Dimple's ways out of her dreadful existence. This miraculously saves her life when she is stopped by a group of men in the streets during the communal riots. Her assumed identity that of a Christian owing to her dress and her approval when asked if she was a Christian, provides her free passage to the safety of Shuklaji street. Further evidence of this fact was when Jamaal, Rashid's son is stopped by the same group of men because of his kurta. It was only after Dimple screamed and Jamal addressed her as his mother, they let him go. Thayil depicts the horrific reality of the Bombay riots of 1992 here. He uses the carnivalesque to represent the plight of Dimple and Jamal who escape from being persecuted by masking their real identities.

Identities in Crisis

Most of the characters in the novel are beset by a sense of identity crisis. Dimple, confused between gender roles, lives as a *hijra* woman who wears trousers so that she can feel like a man. Her attire is relevant to her changing identity. When Rashid brings her home, names her Zeenat and gifts her a burkha, she turns into a Muslim woman. While going to church she wears a dress and is transformed into Dimple. She switches between identities like she switches clothes. This recurrent change is her attempt at achieving a sense of belonging in the social structure. She even dreams of being a small girl who has a family and lives in a posh area like Malabar Hills. Dimple's attempt at being someone else resembles the people in the carnival desperate to free themselves from their normal selves and manifest their dreams into reality. "At carnival time, the unique sense of time and space causes the individual to feel he is a part of the collectivity, at which point he ceases to be himself. It is at this point through costume and mask, an individual exchanges bodies and is renewed" (Clark & Holquist, 1984, p. 302).

Bakhtin, in *Rabelais and His World*, describes carnival as "the people's second life" (1984, p. 8). This highlights the quality of the carnival as an event where people can disengage from their regular roles in society and become anyone else without any societal constraints. The turning of the "world inside out" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 11) results in people donning the character of someone they are not in their real life. In a way, the carnival provides an opportunity for people to explore an identity that might be censured in a "normal" scenario. Thayil uses carnivalesque elements to explain Dimple's condition as a *hijra* woman and her urge to switch between her roles in her search for a sense of belonging.

Another character who suffers from a dual identity is Rashid, who as the owner of an opium den is bedeviled by guilt triggered by his condition as a pious Muslim. He is fettered between his god of pleasure and his god of faith and unable to be faithful to either one. A stable identity is a requirement for belonging to the social group, and the carnival offers freedom from this burden. Robert Stam (1989) resonates a similar notion when he points out "Behind Bakhtin and Nietzsche is a collective rite whose folk origins antedate Christianity, a rite in which mask-

wearing revelers become “possessed” and transform themselves (whether through costume, attitude, or musical frenzy) into blissful alterity” (p. 89).

The Grotesque

Thayil’s employment of the grotesque rests upon the creation of images intended to disturb the reader. Mr. Lee’s father, for example, is a writer whose existence in his own house is gradually confined to his side of the bed and his opium pipe. His transformation from the author who wrote against the communist government of China to an insect sucking on an opium pipe like a deadly succubus is shocking. A similar transformation is seen in Dimple and Salim after they get addicted to Chemical. The drug turns them weak and bony, making them look like rats. This is rather ironic, because the main ingredient that was used to give Chemical an extra kick was rat poison. In his thesis, Ariel Fuenzalida (2009) examines the works of Bakhtin and William Burroughs in order to establish a relation between their concepts. He notes that “Junk produces the insectoid body of the junkie somewhere in the space beyond the pleasure principle” (p. 45). “If all pleasure is relief from tension, junk affords relief from the whole life process” (Burroughs, 2001, p. 30). Here junk is used in reference to drugs.

Mike Featherstone (2007) describes the carnival tradition:

The popular tradition of carnivals, fairs and festivals provided symbolic inversions and transgressions of the official ‘civilized’ culture and favored excitement, uncontrolled emotions and the direct and vulgar grotesque bodily pleasures of fattening food, intoxicating drink, and sexual promiscuity. (p. 22)

In *Narcopolis*, Rashid resembles a glutton in the way he devours food, gulps down alcohol and smokes opium or any other available drug. While his *chandu khana* acts as a center for selling opium, his house is described from the angle of the kitchen. The smell of mutton or any other delicacy cooked by his wives is the main attraction. Moreover, the large meal he eats when Khalid comes to meet him is startling. Along with the fish from Delhi Darbar, food from his house consisted of *tandoori rotis*, *mutton biriyani*, *bheja fry* and *lassi* topped with a slab of hard cream. “He ate no biriyani but mutton, bought the meat himself three times a week. Because he could afford it, he ate meat every day, sometimes twice a day, sometimes mutton and chicken” (Thayil, 2012, p. 149). “Carnival images abound in the human body grossly exaggerated, performing feats that range from the gluttonous to the gross. There are many examples of the corruptible flesh being despoiled and debased, usually through association with grossly abundant food.” (Haynes, 2009, p. 16). The image of Rashid gulping down food matches the spirit of gluttony which prevails in the carnival atmosphere.

While Rashid is associated with the gluttonous side of the carnival, Xavier Newton lives a carnivalesque life in the true sense of the word. He is the rich anomaly in Thayil’s tale of the marginalized. Being a famous artist in London he can fend for himself, but his reckless lifestyle mirrors the life of the carnival. He arrives at an event to promote his new show in Bombay completely drunk with hands shivering like a leaf on a windy day. He roams Bombay’s streets in his muddy kurta stopping only for food and sex. He acts in complete ignorance of any sort of compliance with societal norms or values. He lives in a carnivalesque world of his own without a care in the world. Although he plays a fleeting role in Thayil’s first novel, he is one around whom the plot of Thayil’s second novel, *The Book of Chocolate Saints* (2017) revolves. Xavier’s tumultuous childhood plays a major role in the formation of his carnivalesque nature.

The novelist's representation of the crude and the grotesque includes various sexual encounters, from rape to acts of prostitution and a few instances of consensual sex. Prostitution was the primary source of income for Dimple before joining Rashid's *khana* full-time. Xavier treats her like a means to achieve orgasm and then does not even look at her the next day. The imagery of Dimple cleaning the bucket full of used condoms as she prepares the room for Xavier and the presence of Laxmi and Tai in the adjoining rooms with their customers is true to Bakhtin's idea of the grotesque. This encapsulates the miserable living conditions of people like Dimple in contrast to those of Xavier, who represents the high class that continues to oppress the lower classes.

Moreover, the sexual encounter between Mr. Lee and Pang Mei contains the idea of defiance that is a part of Bakhtin's carnivalesque and grotesque realism. Mr. Lee was an officer in the army and Pang Mei was the Commissar's assistant when they met each other for the first time. Even though they liked each other, it was not safe for them to meet each other in public so they secretly met in the office. However, there was still the risk of them getting caught meeting in private. As a precaution, she asks him to indulge in anal sex so that she could prove herself as a virgin in case of a medical examination. "It becomes a clever strategy for the individual bodies to choose the politically observed office place itself for expressing their denied sexuality. Pang Mei chooses alternate ways of sexual expression in order to avoid any future encounter of the state" (Jose, 2019, pp. 236–237). The precaution taken by Pang Mei underlines the idea of life after the carnival. While the carnival acts as a platform to enjoy freedom, there is still an ever-lingering unease, given that the carnival is ephemeral: it must come to an end and the world must return to its authoritarian balance.

Thayil's narration takes up the form of an exaggerated allegory in one of Dimple's dreams. She envisions the dream like a movie being projected on a screen. She sees a blonde girl who squats over an oversized hat and defecates something into it which is described as blood or human feces. The girl mouths the words "You were nameless and pagan. I gave you context. For two hundred years I gave you context and how did you reward me?" (Thayil, 2012, pp. 236). She is then surrounded by a group of ethnic ecclesiastical figures who are found wearing robes of white or saffron, some others in skullcaps and the rest in conical hats and purple Cossacks. One of the figures lifts his Cossack to reveal a brown belly and black penis. He then dips his hand into the hat and smears himself and the rest of them do the same. Then it switches to the scene of the penis penetrating the girl's anus while the words "Tradition" and "Value" flicker on the screen. In the end, the face of the priest covered with spit and sweat is revealed as he says "This is India."

Thayil uses various metaphors to present a grotesque parody of the state of postcolonial India. The girl represents the British colonialists and their two-century-long rule over the subcontinent. The blood or human waste in the hat corresponds to their role in dividing India, a decision was received without any hesitation by the heads of the religious communities of the nation. The final image of the priest glazed in spit and sweat ties up everything together to show the image of postcolonial India. Thayil's picturesque description of the abused state of India confirms the ambivalence of the carnivalesque, which uses the crowning of a clown king as a form of protest, beyond mere mockery.

Thayil has a special connection with the city of Bombay that is evident in the way he uses the city's name to begin and end his novel. The Bombay described by him in the novel is in complete contrast with the popular image of the business capital of India and the city of dreams. His Bombay is filled with the unknown dark alleys like that of Shuklaji street, populated by

the lowest of the low: drug addicts, prostitutes, pickpockets, and opium dens. Thayil describes the city as “cobbled alleys lined with cots on which the better-off pavement sleepers settled for the night, like the speckled water, the skeptic seething water, the grey-green kala paani, the dirty living sun-baked water lapped against the sides of the broken city” (Thayil, 2012, p. 37). Opium dens and brothels are the main business centers that never go out of business even when the city is burning. Thayil uses the elements of carnivalesque and grotesque realism as a parody to mock and, more importantly, question the rich history of the metropolis. In the words of Simon Dentith (2000):

For Bakhtin, parody is merely one of the forms that draw upon the popular energies of the carnival . . . parody indeed emerges from a particular set of social and historical circumstances; it is mobilized to debunk official seriousness, and to testify to the relativity of all languages, be they the dialects of authority or the jargons of guilds, castes or priesthoods . . . parody is both a symptom and a weapon in the battle between popular cultural energies and the forces of authority which seek to control them. (pp. 22–23)

Experimental Language and Setting

One major element that infuses Thayil’s novel with its aspect of authenticity is the experimental treatment of language. Much like Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), Thayil presents a version of English that has assonance with the vernacular language spoken in Bombay, thus staying true to his characters and setting. Thayil unapologetically uses words from Hindi, Urdu, Marathi, Punjabi, and even Cantonese without providing any clarification for the reader. He remains true to his narrative by presenting it in a language that resembles the one that his characters would speak in real-life scenarios. The use of other languages like Gujarati and Malayalam is also mentioned in the novel. He makes use of the terms *ma*, *bhai*, *pyali*, *garad*, *hijra*, *jalebi*, *biriyani*, *chandu khana*, *bheja*, *chal*, and so on, adding an Indian flavor to the novel. This use of words from different languages is what Bakhtin called polyglossia.

In *Narcopolis*, Thayil integrates Hindi, Urdu, and Marathi, both in the conversations between the characters and within the narrative discourse. This code-switching is done with no in-line translation and such a constant use of diverse linguistic codes creates a centrifugal effect within the writing. The technique captures the hybrid reality of modern India; a linguistic mix which the book’s narrator calls ‘Bambayya,’ and it is at this level that the text also transmits the violence, sexual depravity, and grotesqueness that has been, up to the present, largely absent from contemporary Indian writing. (O’Connor, 2015, p. 11)

Owing to his personal experience, Thayil incorporates a tone of legitimacy into the novel. He portrays the dark alleys and streets of Bombay in the 1970s and the slums that were surrounded by high-rise buildings in the 2000s. The ubiquity of drugs acts as an important motif: beginning with opium and culminating in cocaine at the end of the narrative, the jump to each new drug represents a descent further into the gallows of mindless addiction. The references of the movies like *Hare Krishna Hare Ram*, *Desh Premee*, *Namak Halal*, *Shakti*, and so forth, and the superstars of that time which included Dilip Kumar, Amitabh Bachchan and Zeenat Aman, help in putting a timestamp of authenticity to the setting of the novel. The communal riots of 1992, which form an important part of the novel, again add to its credibility. In short, Thayil provides a dark yet believable account of life in the dark alleys of Bombay.

Conclusion

The detailed analysis of Thayil's *Narcopolis* makes it clear that the novelist's primary purpose is to offer a convincing image of Bombay's dark underbelly. To accomplish his aim, the novelist makes use of carnivalesque and grotesque realism. As such, along with the multifaceted array of characters who deal with issues like identity and addiction, the portrayal of the city of Bombay beset by communal riots and the heinous condition of its dark alleys and slums give a grotesque and very realistic image of the city. The lives of the characters, their life choices and their environment strike a parallel with the carnivalesque context that Bakhtin addresses in his work on Rabelais. The use of Bakhtinian concepts of carnivalesque and grotesque realism is vital in attracting attention to the history of marginalized people in India's largest city. Additionally, the autobiographical elements and authentic use of language and setting give the novel a strong charge of authenticity. The carnivalesque and grotesque elements are not only components of style, but function as paragon for the Bakhtinian hope for the regeneration that follows degeneration. To add to the novel's character as repository for observed reality, Thayil neither advocates in favor of the use of drugs nor does he argue against it. He leaves it to the reader to decide on that front. *Narcopolis* is much more than a mere junkie novel and offers many opportunities for further research.

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