



From Roots to Ruins: Tracing the Journey of Identity in Thayil's *Narcopolis*

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Abstract: Identity crisis and dislocation of roots have been one of the prominent themes of post modern literature. In the same vein themes of alienation and rootlessness have been deftly employed in Jeet Thayil's post modern novel *Narcopolis*. The paper aims to trace the heterogeneous identity of characters and of the metropolis Mumbai. All the characters including the city as well are traumatized by the dislocation of their identity or agonised by their multiple identity where they are not able to get stability of their real self. Almost every character in the novel is designating fluid identity and in this course tossing from one end to the other.

Key words: Narcopolis, Dimple, Mumbai, addiction, heroin, cocaine, eunuch, drugs, religion, crime, identity, Rashid, sexual corruption, pimps, purgation, supply.

Every human being oscillates between similarity and difference. The binary opposition of congruency and incongruency determines his identity. This identity is defined and changed in terms of time and space. With due course of time or with varying time identity changes thus human beings bear the fluid identity which gives forth to the dislocation of identity eventually leading to identity crisis. The concepts of fluid identity and identity crisis have been intricately interwoven in the novel *Narcopolis*. *Narcopolis*, set in the midst of social and political trauma of Bombay, develops in the riots of 90's and the complicated mystery of 'patthar-mar'. It is not only the story of people suffering and collapsing in addiction but also the story of city Bombay itself which has flickering identity due to the advent of urban sociology. The city gets its name changed and with it, changes the social and political structure of the city. The title of the novel itself replicates that this is the story of the addicted metropolis which is termed as 'narcopolis' which combines two words 'narco' means numb due to drugs or addiction and 'polis' means city, together it means a city in the state of stupor or numbness. *Narcopolis* is the chronology of dreams,

hallucination, addiction, dislocation of identity of the city through its characters which is told by an opium pipe to Mr. Dom Ullis. As Thayil points out at last in the novel "This is the story the pipe told me. All I did was write it down, one word after the other, beginning and ending with the same one, Bombay." (P.292)

The central character of the novel, Dimple is a eunuch who makes opium pipes at Rashid khana and also works for hijra's brothel. When she was seven or eight year old boy her mother gave her to a priest and the priest sold her to a Tai of a hijra brothel at 007 in Shuklaji Street, where she was gelded and her identity had been castrated with this she was neither woman nor man. She says, "I'm not sure what I am. Some days I'm neither, or I'm nothing. On the other days I feel I'm both." (p.11) She doesn't remember much from those painful memories and she feels it is "best to forget" (p.67) when all your memories are wrong. Dimple scarcely remembers anything about her family and mother, she tries to get the sketch of her mother who used to pray in Hindi and English both the languages. She used to pray in temple in traditional red sari but she had made a secret church in home. Her Hindi prayers were louder enough to be heard but her English prayer was done secretly. Dimple, real name is nowhere mentioned in the text. She has been given this name Dimple on the name of a famous bollywood actress Dimple Kapadiya, who worked in film *Bobby*. Later she was again renamed by Rashid as Zeenat on the name of another famous heroine Zeenat Aman who worked in the film *Hare Krishna Hare Ram*. This movie was closed to the heart of Rashid and Dimple, where Zeenat Aman was playing the character of Jancie, who was lost from her family and later prone to drug addiction. Dimple resembles herself with Jansie. "She wished Rashid had named her Jancie instead of Zeenat, Jancie, who didn't remember her mother or father, who was strumming a guitar." (p.167) Like Jancie, Dimple had been away from her family so she closely understands the suffering of Jancie. Dimple has neither any trace of her family origin nor even of her



name and after gelding she has lost her gender identity as well. Rashid gave her Burkha to wear instead of sari. Rashid wanted her to look like the women of his community and brothel made her wear sari but she was more comfortable in trousers. She also continued wearing saris and “she varied her costume depending on who she wanted to be, Dimple or Zeenat, Hindu or Muslim.”(p.158) Her fate has thrown into the flux of identities and with the change of time her identity varies or rather gets more complicated. She could not define her identity in between man or woman as she is a eunuch, she can't defined sari or burkha because she feels comfortable with trousers, she doesn't get any difference in resembling Hindu or Muslim, she also prays in church because she has not any fix religious background. Thus combating with these many layers of identity she finally finds better shelter in opium to “obliterate time”.(p.40) She has a longing for reading, she reads any piece of writing randomly as if reading was another medium of solace to her which makes her happy. She had variety of dreams which were stretched in different directions at a time and most of her dreams resembles with her identity crisis and loneliness she wanted to feel “she was loved, no, beloved: she was beloved and not alone.”(p.60) In most of her literary interest she used to talk about pain, suffering and loneliness. Dimple was later admitted to rehab centre by the narrator Dom Ullis and in the final section of the novel we come to know that she comes back to Rashid's khana and dies due to severe illness in the same room where she used to live.

Mr. Lee, “was a foreigner, a refugee from mainland China”(p.54) who comforted Dimple like her father. Dimple met Mr. Lee when Dimple was in pain and tai's business was getting down. Mr Lee gave her afeem to soothe her out of her pain. Dimple liked to hear Mr. Lee as he talked to her about his whereabouts and also taught her Chinese. Mr. Lee, before his death tells her how his father who wrote a book exhibiting the reality of contemporary world by which Maoist government sent him to labour camp. He also talks about his military life and his love and how he got exiled from his country and for shelter came to Bombay, a place which he never liked. The only thing which he likes of Bombay was sea as she is the connecting medium of other distant land or his country. After his exile he was drove to Asia, for him “Burma was primitive and India was chaos, nobody asked for papers or explanations.”(p.118) Unintentionally he stopped in Bombay and stayed because of sea. He wanted to go back to his country at the last stage of his life, for him it was a humiliation to die in foreign country.

He wanted Dimple to rebury him in his country. He has the longing for his roots which has now turned into ruins due to social and political emergency in his country. He becomes xenophobic when he often criticises Indian cultures and cuisine. He taught Dimple Chinese way of cooking tending it to be sophisticated. He says about Indians, “Nothing, only firecracker for their festival. Indian are crazy.”(p.71) Dimple receives his only Chinese opium pipe left with him as the last memory of her surrogate father, the pipe which was later given to Rashid by Dimple. This opium pipe is the omniscient narrator of the story which is in scripted by Dom Ullis.

Rashid, who runs a chandu khana in Shuklaji Street, is quite successful in his business. Dimple makes opium pipe for Rashid and his customers. In his initial days he “was a tapori selling charas near Grant Road Station.”(p.145) When his business was at its peak in Shuklaji Street, he got an offer from Khalid to switch over garad business but Rashid denies it by saying, “Garad separates the strong from the weak; it brings out the worst in a man and the best”(p.151) Rashid has the traditional business approach and a non-conformist attitude for his drug business. He occasionally uses garad for himself but doesn't want to go for the garad business. He feels like, he uses it carefully but if it is available for common people it will create devastating effect. He says, “a chandauli can smoke for years and be healthy; garadaulis are impatient, they want to die quickly”(p.154) As Rashid rejected the offer given by Khalid, later Rashid khana was closed by Customs and Excise department due to Khalid's influence. After some days again it gets reopened. This shift from charas to cocaine was parallel to the shift of Bombay to Mumbai, from slow intoxicant to highly intense garad and from traditional Bombay to elite class Mumbai. Dom Ullis says “garad had a way of putting things in perspective and socio-theology went to the bottom of the pile”(p.216) Rashid was a Muslim but unlike his modern son Jamal he was not nourishing any grudge on the basis of religion. For him all his customers are alike he tells Rumi not to differentiate on the basis of Hindu Muslim identity. He also criticizes “Muslims fighting each other over a few rupees, it goes against the grain of the Prophet's word.” (p.137) His health was deteriorating due to the incessant consumption of intense intoxicants. He looks sickly, “blue veins swollen at the temple, skin the colour of clotted milk, a sickly sap of green stubble on the jaw.”(p.140) Eventually Rashid's business was subsided by garadaulis even his own son Jamal takes up the business of cocaine. Rashid's chandu khana was taken up by an office building. In



the closing years of Rashid's life Dom Ullis meets Rashid and finds him in pacification. He rarely talks to anyone and prays six to eight times in a day. As he had become ungodly in the prime time of his life for his business now he prays not to acclaim god's existence but for his own regret. He repents at the unsuccessful ending of his own life and he also repents for not using his life and time for betterment. He told Dom that garad has taken over his business and his business partner Dimple died at his place suffering from serious ailment. Rashid rarely talks to his son in his olden days and there is stark contrast in between their ways of living life and running business. Rashid's son Jamal has set up his so called sophisticated business of cocaine. He represents modern Mumbai where people only prefer newness where businessman like Jamal "were unmoved by tradition"(p.280) His wife Farheen asked him whether he feels guilty or not for supplying drugs to the people who don't have power to say no to drugs for this Jamal gave a very rational reply of his own kind that they all are his customers and none of them is Muslim and there is nothing unethical selling drugs to non-Muslims. This shows the sheer contrast between the traditional business approach of Rashid and profit oriented and religion centric business of Jamal. Although Jamal doesn't represent the traditional look of a Muslim, from inside he has far way community centric stubbornness than his father. While dancing in a club with Jamal, Farheen says "dance or we die"(p.284) designating as if this is only survival and leading tactics of a modern Mumbaikar.

Bengali, the accountant and manager of Rashid's khana, had been working from many years. Before Shuklaji Street, he used work in a government office as clerk in Calcutta. He has natural interest about historical tradition of the myth of apocalypse and other important social and cultural phenomenon. He had a different regional affliction about Bengalis. He was of the notion that Bengalis have great interest for art and tradition. They are born artisan and skilled people. This sense of regionalism is the sense of belonging but some of his thoughts were quite radical and different from traditional Bengalis.

Just like Dimple, the metropolis Bombay which is termed as 'Narcopolis' is also tossing in between its fluid identity. The city got its name changed now struggling to relocate its history in its stupor or addiction as Thayil remarks, "Bombay, which obliterated its own history by changing its name and surgically altering its face, is the hero or heroin of this story....."(p.1) *Narcopolis* is actually

the story of the city itself, the city which is struggling and stumbling in its numbness. In the very prologue of the novel Thayil mentions about the "patthar mar"(p.2) who is on a target to remove poverty exemplifies the clear image of the city. Ongoing strife and riots has piled up ruins of memory and history in the lap of city. The uncontrolled mob is clashing and fighting unknowingly for rumours. On the other hand political parties are ensuring the business of cocaine to soothe the common masses out of their senses. In the city "it was difficult to buy fruits and vegetables, but garad was available in plenty."(p.184) The traditional method of addiction has shifted to the cocaine, the high quality modern intoxicant. Gradually all were becoming addictive to cocaine. Dimple feels that swiftly she has switched to cocaine and "Suddenly it seemed as if everybody had switched to powder, the customers, the pipemen, even Rashid who hated it but smoked all the same".(p.182) It means in the storm of urbanity and newness everybody was unwittingly swept away. As Rashid thinks at the advent of cocaine that it is transported from Pakistan from one Muslim brother to the other in India, is it ethical? He wonders to this "It meant that politics or economics, overrode every other thing in the world."(p.142)

Dom Ullis, the narrator of the tale of pipe appears in the beginning and frequently visits to Rashid's khana where he finds the business of charas and people who are engaged in it. People like Rashid, Dimple, Bengali, Newton Xavier, Rumi almost all are struggling and collapsing in their hollow life of intoxication and rootlessness. Dom Ullis while leaving the city after the disintegration of chandaulis discovers the city "as the true image of my cancelled self: an objection of dereliction, deserving only of pity, closed, in all ways, to the world."(p.209) He himself feels that he would never be free from the chaotic but indelible imprint of Bombay. He was feeling quite intact with typical ruthless Bombay pattern but at his return in the year 2004, he "caught a quick savour of change"(p.271) he found a new Mumbai, trying to open its eyes in the dazzling effect of modernity where the drug dens and brothels have been replaced by new blocks and few of the service centres. Yet this new Mumbai is not exhibiting any glimmer of positivity. Through Rashid's eyes narrator feels that Bombay has become a centre of harbouring noises poverty obscurity, "the city was pen for unchaperoned children, wild boys and girls who were bringing themselves up on their own, begging, stealing, selling, stoning and that his son was among them....."(p.280) and this was exactly typical



Bombay pattern. In the course of narration we have too many references of different authors and their writing which explains the flux of identity crisis of the characters of the novel. Dimple's favourite book was, a book of prophecies by a nun in Konkani. Her name was Sister Remedios and in her slim prophecy book she wrote about the catastrophic situation of the world where everything is collapsing and crumbling and turning heaps of ruins. Her depiction of dooms and catastrophe was so vivid as it was just the end of humanity and she is only survivor left to narrate this story. Dimple translated the same book in English as she was able to experience the same tinge in her life and surrounding. The painter and poet Newton Xavier he recites few lines exhibiting homelessness and loneliness. He says, "It wasn't that I wanted to go home, Who knew home? I only knew alone."(p.32)

Wrapping up everything together we get to know that the metropolis Mumbai along with all the characters and their life situation pertains to delusion and disintegration because some or the other way they are snipped out of their origin and roots and this dislocation is eventually leads to intoxication, sexual corruption, mental delusion, ill-health and poverty. And it could be best concluded in Rashid's expression where he feels the fleeting time and with it "a way of life vanishing, the pipes, the oil lamps layered with years of black residue,..... all the rituals that he revered and obeyed, all of it disappearing."(p.148)

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