Another One Bites the Dark: Reading Jeet Thayil’s Narcopolis as a Continuum of Aravind Adiga’s Dark India Exploration

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Jeet Thayil’s first novel, Narcopolis is set mostly in Bombay in the 70s and 80s, and sets out to tell the city’s secret history, when opium gave way to new cheap heroin. Thayil has said, he wrote the novel, “to create a kind of memorial, to inscribe certain names in stone”. As one of the characters (in Narcopolis) says, “it is only by repeating the names of the dead that we honor them. I wanted to honor the people I knew in the opium dens, the marginalized, the addicted and deranged, people who are routinely called the lowest of the low; and I wanted to make some record of a world that no longer exists, except within the pages of a book.” he told the Indian newspaper, The Hindu, that he had been an alcoholic (like many of the Bombay poets) and an addict for almost two decades: "I spent most of that time sitting in bars, getting very drunk, talking about writers and writing, and never writing. It was a colossal waste. I feel very fortunate that I got a second chance."

Thayil has been writing poetry since his adolescence, paying careful attention to form. In his prose, as in his poetry, he has introduced new areas of feelings and emotions to Indian literature, and has often concerned himself with the pleasures and pains of drugs and alcohol, sex and death that are not traditionally connected with the firmament of Indian literature. About Narcopolis, Thayil said, “I've always been suspicious of the novel that paints India in soft focus, a place of loved children and loving elders, of monsoons and mangoes and spices. 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.”

Narcopolis, was a serious contender to win the Booker prize. Narcopolis is a one-of-a-kind 'Joycean' novel to emerge from India in the last several decades. It is the most powerful and hard-hitting narrative of its time. For once, you have a book whose writer has moved beyond the desire to show off that he can flawlessly write in English, be overly descriptive and appeal to vanilla-skinned audiences with dollops of purple prose on semi-autobiographical sentimentality,
concerns of economic growth and displacement anxiety of immigration. Here is a story that is
not out to prove ephemeral beauty, Indianness, or some eager feral subaltern/suburban fantasy. It
is a howl of anguished pain and frustrations of a poet, a hallucinatory ride, a rush of blood to the
head, to flip you over to the dark, twisted fairytale set in the side lanes of a mushrooming
metropolis, dealing with the blows of heroin addiction, savage lust and moral ambiguity. The
story is mostly set in Bombay, in the hoary 70s-80s, at a time when Hindu-Muslim tensions are
about to flare up, the pavement stone killer is making headlines for smashing homeless people's
sleeping skulls, and the nights are full of promise, perversions and endless nasha. It all takes
place on Shuklaji Street, the dilapidated hub of sin in a cosmopolitan city where dreams hang
upside down on sale, where behind closed doors hide opium dens, and its gutters overflow with
poverty and sodomy, and on its gully walk pimps, prostitutes, beggars and thieves all gambling
fate for a living. Out here all characters stumble to lurk and vanquish like flies to excrete looking
for a hit, nightmare and fix; ready to trade in good health, life and family for smoke, talk and
futility.

_Narcopolis_ speaks of a deranged, starved and epileptical wisdom that's crawled to the
surface from the bottomless pit circling our rudderless culture to reveal its true face. Jeet Thayil
uses a language that is filled with graphic sexual imagery and violence to portray a side of life
that exists on the footpath, merging with dust, sharing needles, and crumbling beneath the starry
dynamo, which doesn't shield or hide when you roll up the tinted glasses of your air-conditioned
car, in a bad part of town. The sentiment and apathy of his motley characters is infectious,
poisonous, drug-induced, stained by semen, and diseased by junk. "This chooth country, cunt
country, how the fuck are you supposed live here without drugs?" goes one particular rant about
how the entire nation is run by conniving, cheating and murderous communities out to outdo
each other, all apart from Bombay, which is why it is the _Narcopolis_, the capital of Opium, and
the hero or heroin of this story. It also gives you a glimpse of a man, a former addict, whose own
experiences crawls and slip under the mask of his characters like smoke, who survived and
suffered a long time ago from being burnt or consumed by dancing too close to the flame.

Jeet Thayil tantalizes and heralds a new era of fiction writing from India that has finally
learned to grow up, and isn't afraid of what its mummy-papa, uncle-aunty ought to feel and think,
or facing the wrath of God or death, to tell its story. Thayil will set dangerous and dexterous
precedents for Indian writers to also consider obliterating self-censorship that knifes through them, and rid them of the ghosts of colonial past, and help them finally write from the heart, soul and pain. The beauty of *Narcopolis* is that it's cleverly crafted, and it's poetical, gritty, historical, perverse and novel in form. This is the story from the other side of midnight, which needs to be heard, and more often. It is authentic, beautiful and offensive as smoke, which needs to be pulled and sucked harder till the senses are numbed and the hum of the motor in our heads is gently running. *Narcopolis* explores the seamy underside of Mumbai peopled by drug hawkers, pimps, prostitutes, renegades, out-of-job criminals, small-time showmen and narco-dens that often become of the breeding ground of gripping underworld soaps. By choosing to tell an opiated socio-political history, Thayil looks at a city over three decades and track its unraveling, from the open-minded cosmopolitan Bombay of the 1960s, 70s and 80s to the divided right-wing McMumbai of today. The period coincided with a change in the drugs that roiled the city's underclasses. The slow poetic world of opium was replaced by the quick brutal degradation of heroin.

In India, the literary novel is greeted with derision or silence by book reviewers, expected to produce 800 words and given a day to do it. I suppose they must be excused for the shoddy, the half-baked and the uncomprehending. We see the Indian scene flooded with best-selling bad writing, better books often ignored. What does this indicate about literary culture here in India?

Because of court patronage which is insidious and widespread, the lack of a critical tradition and a market economy that controls the book trade, Indian writers are not encouraged to take risks or be experimental. They are encouraged to stay with the tried and tested, the commercial and cliched. Excellent novelists and poets toil in obscurity.

Jeet Thayil's first novel *Narcopolis*, described as a compelling tale of Mumbai's hazy world of opium addiction, has made it to the six-author short list for the Man Booker Prize 2012. Four years after Aravind Adiga's famous “Guildhall triumph”, another Indian writer competed for the £50,000 Man Booker Prize. Jeet Thayil’s *Narcopolis* has been shortlisted for this year’s award for his debut novel, Narcopolis, a dark tale about the opium and heroin dens of Mumbai thought to be based on his own experiences of what one critic described as the city’s “seedy underbelly”. The novel has been hailed as a “blistering debut” with *The Guardian* comparing it
to the likes of William Burroughs’s *Junky* and Thomas de Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*.

Thayil described *Narcopolis* in an interview as “Bombay’s secret history” as distinct from its “official” history of “money and glamour.” “You can sanitise...as much as you like, but...can’t get rid of the grime,” Indian writers or those of Indian origin have traditionally fared well at the Booker. The last Indian to win the coveted prize was Aravind Adiga for *White Tiger* in 2008. Before him, Kiran Desai won it for *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). In his first fiction title *Narcopolis*, poet Jeet Thayil revisits the metropolis of his childhood to uncover the secret history of Mumbai, where drugs and sex counter the sanitised versions of the stories we narrate about it. Jeet Thayil is a performer and a poet. But when he chose to write about Bombay (not Mumbai), he went long form. *Narcopolis*, which was released recently, deals with what Thayil calls "the secret history" of the city, the bedrock its past and present are based on. The tightly woven narrative never loses its grip on its readers, even as it weaves its way through the opium dens on Shuklaji Road, the *kothis* in Kamathipura, and for a brief interlude, Communist China.

Though much of *Narcopolis* is set in Bombay in the 70s and 80s, it ends with a picture of the city as it is today and it points towards a possible future. The book begins and ends with the same word, 'Bombay', and in some ways the city is the central character. As for nostalgia, I think it's a useful device for a writer. But I've always been suspicious of the novel that paints India in soft focus, a place of loved children and loving elders, of monsoons and mangoes and spices. 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. This is something most history books omit. Not to mention the fact that the East India Company became the biggest drug dealer in the world. The Company worked with a group of Parsi ship owners to send thousands of chests of excellent product to China every year. They became inconceivably wealthy and inconceivably brutal. Like all drug dealers, the Company knew it had stumbled on the ultimate product, a product that created its own inexhaustible demand, a perfect market. And they milked it for all it was worth. This is the background to the opium story in *Narcopolis*. Sex and drugs were Bombay's secret history, hidden between the lines of its official
history, which concerns money and glamour. In *Narcopolis*, the city of intoxication, the secret history is paramount.

By making a hijra one of the central characters Thayil looks at gender, at sexuality, at the connections and divides between men and women in a way an author couldn't otherwise. He repressingly questions - Why should it shock readers who see hijras on the streets of Bombay every day? The story based on author own experience certainly narrates in pragmatic way with real incidents would might impress to the selectors to choose but it depends on the criteria which they fixed to choose. Now India writers are making sounds across the world and had chances of winning to join the elite group of Indians those who already achieved that.

**The Dark India**

The present paper studies the ‘staging of India’ as a new-fangled object of exoticist discourses. It begins by considering Indian Booker Prize Winners as an ironic uncovering of the subsumption of a Dark India into the global literary marketplace at the time of a perceived shift in re-Orientalist representational practices and their Western reception. After decades of cashing in on the fascination with a mystical eternal India, the idea of an ostensible dark India has been acquiring of late a significant exotic cachet in the cultural industries. The representation of a dark and exotic India is admittedly not new – it can be traced back to Mulk Raj Anand’s ground breaking novel *Untouchable* (1936).

Nonetheless the Booker winner’s works turn out to be the ideal rough guide to dark India. Somak Ghosal, an Indian critic contends, “The best bet for all those closeted novelists lurking in this country of a billion, is to write about the filth, the shabbiness, the rural hinterland that lies stashed far away from the dazzling India of the big cities”. Is it this or are these writers through the use of extremely effective self-reflexive representational strategies – of selling a refurbished exotic idea of the subcontinent to Western readers promoting such representations. In this respect, a critical approach to the impact of the Booker prize in the Western literary marketplace might well be induced by a question, say for instance in Adiga’s case Christina Mendes asks: “To whom is Adiga addressing this unleavened story, in his faultless prose?”. The answer is seemingly quite obvious for the authors, considering that any Indian who reads the newspaper knows that India isn’t shining.”
Against this backdrop the broad purpose of this paper is to examine these writers staging of a dark India as a new fangled object of exoticist discourses. In *The Post-Colonial Exotic* (2001), one of the main points Graham Huggan makes is that India as exotic spectacle has progressively become available for global consumption. Through his formulation of the postcolonial exotic, Huggan critiques the global commodification of cultural differences as a general mechanics of exoticist representation and consumption within an increasingly globalized culture industry. Within this alterity industry (cultural commodification, transmission and consumption), one of the agents involved in the mediation of the aesthetic value of cultural differences is the literary marketplace. It can thus be estimated that may it be Salman Rushdie, Kiran Dasai, Arundhati Roy or Aravind Adiga, these novels contribute to sustain this alterity industry. The marketing potential of these works lies in the ‘exotic’ and the ‘dark India’ – which are reciprocating each other, are associated with cultural differences. Many critics have perceived them as class ventriloquism in a construction of re-orientalized characterizations.

*The White Tiger* and *Narcopolis* has generated tremendous response both from the literary and academic circle. Critics have equally been lavish in praising the books as they have been in condemning it. Hailed as extraordinary and brilliant, thrilling and insightful, witty and unpretentious, the novels are considered as some of the most powerful books published in decades by some. Critics have also opined that the novels are tedious and unfanny, disappointing and absurd, patronizing and officious, reading more like the thriller magazines without any moral purpose or justification.

Pratibha Nagpal reviews *The White Tiger* as a novel of Black Comedy (the same can be said about *Narcopolis*) and a novel that focuses on the binary nature of a nation marching towards its tryst with destiny. As a genre, Black Comedy is marked by an invincible sense of disillusionment and cynicism, with little or no hope of escape or change available to the protagonists. A sense of fatalism pervades the text, in which the protagonists choose sardonic humor as a means of expressing themselves because they cannot do anything about their fate or circumstances. Pratibha viewing *The White Tiger* in light of the above statement of Black Comedy, she reads that Adiga has indeed used this genre to challenge the fascinating journey of the nation towards developed and to punch a hole in the collective euphoria of India’s middle
class and its policy makers. Step by step, Adiga bares the startling reality of a nation where unplanned, haphazard urbanization and colonization is suffocating the already overburdened infrastructure, where the social fabric is being stretched to a breaking point, where poverty, corruption, disease, moral degradation still rule the day where every known tradition is being put to test.

As if agreeing with what John Truby has said of Black Comedy, throughout the novel Adiga maintains a sardonic tone and the reader does not get any insight into why things happen as they do, or if there is any way out of the gory situation in which the protagonist finds himself. Balram’s cockiness at times appears shocking to the reader especially in parts where he mocks at the number of Gods he can pray to and where he confesses to the murder and boasts of his achievements as an entrepreneur. It is equally difficult to understand the disrespect that he shows to Mahatma Gandhi and the scornful and sardonic tone of the narrator sets the novel as black comedy but lessens any sympathy one could have for the protagonist who is indeed right in narrating the world around him in a fairly true tone. Adiga uses the image of the Rooster Coop to describe the Indian scenario. Balram, deliberating over the fact that in India millions of people are involved in various jobs ranging from delivering furniture and carrying back cash payment in thousands for the master; driving cars and seeing or handling a lot of money, sometimes in millions, for their masters. And the people engaged in these jobs as servants never think of running away with the money or the merchandise, which may be worth their year or two years of salary or perhaps a steal which could last them throughout their miserable lives. The reason why this is so because 99.9% of people are caught in a Rooster Coop situation:

Go to Delhi, Behind Jama Masjid, and look at the way they keep chicken there in the market. Hundreds of pale hens and brightly colored roosters, stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages, packed as tightly as worms in a belly, pecking each other and shitting on each other, jostling just for breathing space; the whole cage giving off a horrible stench – the stench of terrified, feathered flesh. On the wooden desk above this coop sits a grinning young butcher, showing off the flesh and organs of a recently chopped-up chicken, still oleaginous with a coating of dark blood. The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They know they’re next. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop.
The very same thing is done with human beings in this country. (173-74)

*The White Tiger* abounds in instances of pessimistic gloomy and derisory humor which negates the lives of people like Balram and there appears to be no meaning in their existence except that they live in The Great Indian Rooster Coop. Thus *The White Tiger*, brilliant and factual as it is in its depiction of some of the grim realities of the present day scenario and the malaise that affects the social, political and economic fabric of India, remains at best a breezy, racy reading. Like the ‘Murder Weekly’ the drivers read in the novel for sensational stories, *The White Tiger* too at times comes close to such type of reading. What saves the novel from falling to a pedestrian level is what appears to be, the honesty of purpose of the author and his desire to shake the reader out of his apathy and warn him that such a revolutionary change might one day come in those who are ignored by the process of historical change. If the multitude of India’s population is “half-baked” (10), then its progress also appear to be half-baked – carelessly planned and thoughtlessly executed and the reader fails to understand how the future of the world could lie with the “brown man” (5). Of course if the reader were to separate the persona of the author from that of the main character and read everything as the perception and categorization of Balram then the book might have a different appeal, but it would reduce the import of what Adiga wishes to convey to the perceptive reader. Therefore whatever be the manner in which the protagonist speaks to us, and whether or not he offends the reader’s sensibility, the book has to be viewed as the author’s intent to focus on that which always been relegated to the background or ignored in the past.

The question of constructing the cultural object as literary, or the awarding of literary value, becomes an important part of the market. This has a special valence in the context of colonial constructions of other literatures which was the core of many Orientalist projects: for instance, Gauri Viswanathan examines the ideological fabric of such Orientalist constructions in *Masks of Conquest*, while Vinay Dharwadkar explores the European legacies behind the cataloging of Indian literatures - Sanskrit literature which has a strong philological base, was characterized as a part of ancient and classical India, in opposition to other modern vernacular literatures (168).
It is an easy move from including popular discourses on particular postcolonial texts to the subsequent introduction of epistemological debates. Theoretical discourses that are self-reflexive about their own cultural and epistemological dependencies are integral complements of publishing industry. For example, if one's subject is the global cultural economy, one can fold in George Yúdice's critique (1992) of the Western appropriations of Latin American cultural forms as examples of postmodernism. Yúdice advocates a better understanding of postmodernisms operating in postcolonial contexts: he finds the occurrence of the experiences and aesthetics in Latin America that Western critics group under the term postmodern long before the visibility of the Euro-American varieties, arguing that the heterogenous character of Latin American social and cultural formations made it possible for these discontinuous, alternative, and hybrid forms to emerge with ease. Kumkum Sangari makes a similar argument, articulating the danger of reading context-specific postcolonial cultural forms as variants of Western postmodernism: for instance, she proposes that, in the hybrid syncretic of Latin American life, magic realism must be understood as a strategy for living and not a formal literary reflex; non-mimetic or marvelous ways of seeing have a social relevance, and this non-mimetism is not the same as the anti-mimetism of Western postmodernism (164).

In fact, the acknowledged failures of critical theory can be cautionary tales for students learning to map a global cultural economy. Since the mid-eighties, postcolonial theorists have been coming to terms with the postcolonial as a rubric; many seem unified in their commitment to rescuing the category ‘postcolonial’ from becoming a historical abstraction that overlooks contemporary power axes. Certainly, the postcolonial skews temporality by reducing everything that came before the colonial period into the blandly utopian pre-colonial; only artifacts that contain whiffs of colonial contamination are subject to avid scrutiny.

Anne McClintock, in cataloguing the issues elided in contemporary formulations of the term, writes: If the theory promises a decentring of history in hybridity, syncreticism, multi-dimensional time, and so forth, the singularity of the term effects a re-centering of global history around the single rubric of European time (86). Arif Dirlik, citing McClintock, argues in the same vein: that postcolonial study has generated a universalizing historicism that projects globally what are but local experiences. I categorize these critical narratives as useful cautionary tales because they all draw attention to the easy commodification of the postcolonial or the non-western, often neatly packaged into anthologies that stretch liberal arms toward a post-statist
consciousness. The sphere of postcolonial studies should be a place where the implications of market operations on knowledge’s’ and skills acquired can be argued, contested, and understood on different terms by people belonging to varying imagined communities. What are some of these implications that can be addressed in the present times is the transnational capital, as it transcends states and permeates local corners, generates a perceived intellectual transnationalism that need to be comprehended to cognitively manage the plenitude of a global culture's politics and history. Cultural artifacts become commodities that facilitate such comprehension. University programs such as Ethnic Studies, Cultural Studies, English and Comparative Literature departments with multicultural, world, and Commonwealth Literature courses struggle to contain and represent the other within and the other outside of the United States.

Gauri Vishwanathan sees the criterion of West prizing the Third-World writings and the reward as the general approach in which the “ideology” as a form of masking and the speculative analysis is the search for actual intentions. She sees the imperial language and the acquainted hegemony of the West as a confrontation for a sense of urgency to voluntary cultural assimilation; and hence interprets; the East must be either kept down by a sense of their power, and the East must willingly submit from a conviction that the West is more wise, more just, more humane and more anxious to improve the prevailing conditions in the East. The agenda of West is a sort of curriculum conceived not in the perinnealist sense of an objective, essentialized entity but rather as discourse, activity, process – as one of the mechanisms through which knowledge validation is socially distributed and culturally confirmed. Gauri intents that there is a little doubt in that a great deal of strategic maneuvering went into the creation of a blue print for intellectual control in the guise of a humanistic program of enlightenment. But merely acknowledging this fact is not enough, for there is yet a further need to distinguish between strategy as unmediated assertion of authority and strategy as mediated response to situational imperatives. That is to say, it is important to determine whether British “prizing” measures were elaborated from an uncontested position of superiority and strength and as such are to be read as without any expressions of ethnocentric sentiment or whether that position itself was a fragile one that it was the role of Booker awarding to fortify, given the challenge posed by historical contingency and confrontation.
The argument of this research paper leans toward the second proposition, specifically, that the British prizing represents the embattled response to historical and political pressures: the tensions between the East and the Eastern English literati, between exoticization and global assimilation strategies. Benita Parry\textsuperscript{15}, (as quoted in Gauri Vishwanathan’s *Masks of Conquest* (12:1989) says that neither the critical positions against universalizing narratives nor the “self-righteous rhetoric of resistance” that is limited to devices circumventing and interrogating colonial authority sufficiently recognizes the colonized as possessor of another knowledge of history and as producer of alternative histories. The view represented in this argument is that Booker-ian colonialism knowingly put the tools of enlightenment into the hands of the subjects at the risk of endangering its own position. From it further springs the general historical judgment that the Western commitment to the ideals of liberal thought was so unqualified that it took complete precedence over whatever political apprehensions were bound to prevail.

But at the same time valuing is a selective process that selects what is useful or meaningful and rejects everything else. As a selective process it detaches the portion that is valued from the totality of which it is part. i.e. one piece of work selected (the Booker winner) from the entire canon of Indian writing in English, By valuing, thus Booker performs a similar operation of disengagement from the whole, objectifying a subjective state that is exclusive to and inseparable from the whole group of writings. It thus brings us that the Rushdie being awarded the Booker was the pioneering turn at refurbishing the East as a sellable commodity. In this accomplishment the imagination of a writer, his play with history, and his inauthentic voice, mingled with the element of autobiography and mixing genres and narrative strategies are the ones that are frenziedly in demand for consumption. Spoofing history, breaching chronology with a filmy terminology and staging a grand mnemonic enterprise are the selling formulas of the day. Illustrative hybrid art and self-exoticization with a quintessential desire for postcoloniality are the trysts that the colonial Booker awards them for. And *The White Tiger* and *Narcopolis* just fit into the frame as fine examples of Western operative modes of cultural contrivance that are prized and sold. And this possibly would possibly hint us to that what is was/is just a part of India; as Rushdie has said, “it was one of the visions of India” and not the THE India or THE history of India. But what is to be acknowledged is the inevitable feed to the Alterity Industry that Western book market is fishing in.
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