

# Social Marginalisation and Retreatist Subculture: A Study of Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*

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### Abstract

*In the current scenario, our society is degenerating into the clutches of various crimes such as drug culture, cruel sexual assaults, and debauchery. Substantially, people from the lower economic strata, especially the marginalised and the socially discriminated sects of our society, are both causative agents and victims of ruthless crimes. Cultural hegemony, being the root cause of social discrimination and marginalisation, has curtailed the aspirations and progress of the lower strata of society. People who feel rejected and marginalised by biased and inhuman societal norms are the ones who involve themselves in the retreatist subculture and later become the mediators of delinquency. The retreatist subculture denotes the formation of a distinct subculture centred on drug and alcohol use by the people who feel both rejected by the mainstream society and other subcultures. In order to finance their drug use, retreatists may turn to petty theft, shoplifting, prostitution and conning. Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*, the microcosm of T.S Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922), examines the deterioration of Bombay under the siege of narcotics. Thayil's personal experience as a drug addict has aided him in presenting the authentic portrayal of people victimised by drugs and their ill effects. Various narrative voices from *Narcopolis* are marginalised individuals who have faced enormous social pressures that ultimately lead to moral degradation enwrapped in drug addiction. This research paper aims to explore the impact of social discrimination and marginalisation in Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* in propagating the retreatist subculture.*

**Keywords:** Retreatist Subculture, Marginalisation, Drug Culture, Opium World, Social Discrimination, Substance Abuse.

### Introduction

Social discrimination and marginalisation have been the root causes of the majority of the impediments and traumas faced by the people of our society. From time immemorial, human beings have been discriminated against by their fellow beings on the basis of race, gender, age, sexual orientation, class, creed, and disability. Marginalised groups in any society feel alienated, and they invariably have a quest for identity. The quest for identity and self-actualisation soon gets converted into aversion, which ultimately leads to escapism and rejection of mainstream values. The predominant subjugation

of mainstream society leads to the formation of a retreatist subculture that disintegrates the marginalised communities.

Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* presents the lives of people acquainted with polyglot cultures and illustrates how marginalisation and social discrimination, triggered by the cultural hegemony and the values of mainstream society, can be the root cause of socially disorganized subcultures that exist under worse conditions. Jeet Thayil, an Indian poet, novelist, musician, and journalist, through his debut novel, *Narcopolis*, which was shortlisted for the 2012 Man Booker Prize, and the winner of DSC Prize for South Asian Literature, paints a picture of the underground drug world on Shuklaji Street in Mumbai. The title of the novel *Narcopolis*, refers to the city of Bombay during the late 20th century, around which the entire plot is constructed. In *Narcopolis*, Rashid's opium den serves as a clubhouse for people who cannot escape delinquency. The *Narcopolis* traces the life of miscellaneous pimps, murderers, and drug addicts on Shuklaji Street. The concept of retreatist subculture weaves through the plot of *Narcopolis*. The subculture that ignores regular society rules and regulations constitutes the major characters from *Narcopolis*.

The major characters like Dimple, an eunuch working both in the opium den and brothel; Rashid, who unfortunately becomes the opium den owner, but is destined to be the servant of God; and Jamal, Rashid's son, who at a very young age falls prey to the drug use and later becomes the greatest drug dealer, are prominent examples from *Narcopolis* who, at some point in their lives are socially discriminated against and marginalised. They are later affected by the norms of mainstream society and ultimately get trapped in retreatist subcultures. The analysis of the lives and personal traumas and impediments faced by these characters explores the formation and impact of retreatist subculture, which is formed as a by-product of the quest for identity and self-actualisation.

### **Social Discrimination and Marginalisation as a Root Cause of Retreatist Subculture in Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis***

Sociologists Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin developed the concept of retreatist subculture in their book *Delinquency and Opportunity* (1960), which presents the theory of delinquent subcultures. Cloward and Ohlin distinguished between three categories of subcultures that emerge when mainstream societal objectives are not met. The three types of subcultures are criminal, conflict, and retreatist. A criminal subculture is formed when youths consider adult criminals as their role models and involve in utilitarian crimes. Conflict subcultures emerge as a result of gang formation by younger people who do not commit serious crimes but try to mimic the life of adult criminals. The term retreatist subculture refers primarily to those who have tried and failed in both legal and illicit endeavours, frequently abusing drugs and engaging in other self-destructive behaviours as a form of escape. The retreatist subculture signifies a denial of popular ideals and objectives. Retreatists establish their own standards that place an emphasis on instant gratification over long-term progress rather than aiming for success. Substance misuse becomes a coping strategy to get away from their insecurities and the reality of their existence. According to Cloward and Ohlin:

The drug-user, in other words, must be understood not only in terms of his personality and the social structure, which create a readiness to engage in drug use, but also in terms of the new patterns of associations and values to which he is exposed as he seeks access to drugs. The more the individual is caught in this web of associations, the more likely that he will persist in drug use, for he has become incorporated in a subculture that exerts control over his behaviour. (179)

The retreatist subculture is based on the transient use of drugs by individuals who are caught in a web of associations to overcome the injustices stimulated by mainstream or highbrow society. Thayil's *Narcopolis* presents marginalised characters who navigate addiction and exploitation; later,

they become involved in the formation of retreatist subculture. Jeet Thayil, being an iconoclastic novelist, musician, and blogger hailing from Kerala, has challenged conventional norms of writing. His writings represent the inner emotions and preoccupied memories of an individual, embodying blended narrative techniques and distinguished concoctions. He was an alcoholic and drug addict for nearly two decades and found his antidote in writing with his debut novel, *Narcopolis*. In an interview, Thayil 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, 35). His 20 years of life in Bombay allowed him to present an evocative outlook on drug commercialisation.

Jeet Thayil’s *Narcopolis* presents a loose structure built around the experiences of a variety of characters from diverse backgrounds that inhabit the underbelly of Mumbai. The novel, which opens distinctly with the protagonist deciding to use opium, initially presents lives that are curtailed by addiction. *Narcopolis*, set on Bombay’s Shuklaji Street in the 1970s and 1980s, depicts a non-shining India with opium dens, brothels, drug addicts, and criminals. This portrayal may be more accurate than the popular image of India as exotic and lavish. Dimple (Zeenat), a transgender; Rashid, opium den owner; Lee, father-like figure of Dimple; Dom, the narrator; Rumi, a violent and confrontational figure, and Newton Xavier, a famous painter are the major characters of the novel. These characters in *Narcopolis* are predicated on transgressions from the norm, drawing together those who have been sidelined and rejected by mainstream society, showcasing a microcosm of society’s unwanted people. In the life of Mumbai, drugs and sex are often mistaken for signs of an alternative liberal lifestyle. In this respect, it could be suggested that the novel offers a more nuanced and unromantic depiction of the city. The retreatist subculture is prominent throughout the novel. The turmoil and struggles faced in the form of discrimination and marginalisation have been the root cause of the formation of retreatist subculture.

Dimple’s journey into drug addiction is shaped by her traumatic past and the socio-economic environment of Bombay. After the death of her mother, she is sold into prostitution and raised in a brothel, which limits her options for survival. This traumatic upbringing sets the stage for her later addiction to opium as a means of coping with her pain and identity crisis. Mr. Lee, a Chinese exile who owns an opium den, is Dimple’s first source of drug exposure. He gives her opium to help with the physical discomfort she is experiencing from the hormonal shifts brought on by being gelded. Through their relationship, Dimple not only learns about opium but also gains a surrogate father figure in Mr. Lee, who instructs her in the art of opium preparation and service. Dimple receives Mr. Lee’s opium pipes upon his passing, which she uses as bargaining power to land a job at Rashid’s opium den, which later becomes her home. Dimple says of herself: “woman and man are words other people use, not me. I’m not sure what I’m. Some days I’m neither, or I’m nothing. On other days I feel I’m both.”(11). Dimple faces an identity crisis, and at some point, she feels doubly marginalised and she falls prey to the retreatist subculture.

Generally speaking, it has been found that most drug addicts have a history of delinquent activity prior to becoming addicted. In Kobrin’s research, conducted in Chicago, it is stated, “Persons who become heroin users were found to have engaged in delinquency in a group-supported and habitual form either prior to their use of drugs or simultaneously with their developing interest in drugs. (Cloward and Ohlin 182)

Before becoming a drug addict, Dimple was involved in illicit acts due to alienation and social discrimination. The first person to discriminate against Dimple was her mother; after that, everyone she met denied her and failed to give her an identity. Early trauma led her into a life where she was both a sex worker and an opium pipe tender at Rashid’s opium den, where she engaged in

illicit activities to survive. She became involved in making premium opium pipes, which are necessary for smoking opium and support the local drug culture. Dimple frequently exhibited an exploitative dynamic in her relationships with her clients. Some people treated her violently and degradingly, while others, like Dom, treated her with respect and wanted to be with her. This dichotomy demonstrates how criminality affects her life as a victim of the drug trade as well as a perpetrator. The widespread drug culture and social indifference impede her quest for comfort or a path out. Her life ultimately ends tragically when she gives in to her addiction, mirroring the brutal reality experienced by many individuals in *Narcopolis* who are enmeshed in such cycles of crime and hopelessness.

Rashid is portrayed as the proprietor of an opium den, which doubles as a haven and a jail for those who occupy it. Although his job puts him in a fragile social hierarchy, it also helps him navigate the drug culture. He fosters user camaraderie and momentary comfort while also maintaining the exploitative aspect of addiction. Being both a dealer and an addict, he is stuck in a cycle of dependency that reflects larger societal difficulties, which emphasises his isolation. Rashid's character sketch serves as a poignant illustration of how marginalisation operates on multiple levels in *Narcopolis*. He embodies the struggles of those living on society's fringes, caught between addiction, exploitation, and the relentless changes of urban life. Through his relationships and experiences, Thayil paints a complex portrait of life in Bombay's drug culture, where marginalisation is both a personal and collective experience.

"Rashid had been a believer for most of his life, meticulously observing the five prayer times followed by the dietary strictures. Yet his habits had never been stagnantly constant; rather, they were quite negatively dynamic, exchanging one habit for another: "he had given up God and accepted O" (Thayil 142). Rashid had been yearning to achieve something in his life, but unfortunately, he was caught in a web of drug culture and his whole life has collapsed. Though he is the owner of the opium den, it never helped him to gain inner satisfaction or happiness. He had been a believer for most of his life, praying five times a day. The changes in his surroundings were the main cause of transition in his life. The change not only threatened Rashid's livelihood but also reflected his diminishing influence within the drug culture, marking a transition from a relatively stable environment to one characterized by chaos and despair. Chaos and despair are converted into double failures, making Rashid as a criminal involved in a retreatist subculture.

Kids easily learn from their parents or those they grow up with, and they try to incorporate these lessons as soon as possible. Therefore, it is important to behave or act in a moralistic manner in front of children. Kids absorb both positive and negative aspects from their surroundings and act accordingly. Especially, kids who grow up in areas with a criminal background or drug circulation become involved in criminal activities, and later they become the products of the retreatist subculture. Jamal, the son of Rashid is one of the major characters from *Narcopolis* who becomes involved in substance abuse at a very young age and faces discomfort. Like Rashid, Jamal is also marginalised and discriminated against based on his background and he becomes a tool that propagates retreatist subculture.

Jamal is presented as the opium den owner Rashid's son. He is exposed to narcotics at a very young age while growing up in this setting, which affects his identity and decision-making. He is referred to as a "businessman" even as a young child, suggesting that he was involved in the drug trade at an early age. Jamal's drug use changes during the course of the story as it moves through the decades. The book shows how the more aggressive usage of cocaine and heroin replaces the opium culture of bygone eras. When Jamal takes over his father's business, he is actively involved in the cocaine trade rather than just being a passive participant. The transition from opium to heroin and cocaine signifies a noteworthy evolution in Bombay's drug scenario. Using Jamal's

persona as a vehicle, Thayil illustrates this transition by showing how socioeconomic shifts have impacted drug availability and addiction trends in the neighbourhood. At the age of six, Jamal, Rashid's oldest son, was already a successful businessman. In order to acquire some money from Rashid, "the boy had a way of appearing without making a sound, materializing from nowhere with his eyes wide and his hand extended" (Thayil 135). After seeing his kid smoking, Rashid yelled, "Six years old and you are on the street, fucking and smoking" (Thayil 143). Jamal continued his father's business of selling new flavours and narcotics, such as cocaine, MDMA, and ecstasy. As he aged, Jamal and his fiancée, Farheen, give us a glimpse of the younger generation because they frequent clubs and enjoy new forms of drugs. By the book's conclusion, Jamal and his father are discovered. Rashid and Jamal both get trapped in the drug culture and finally they couldn't escape it, even if they wanted to do so, society labels them as substance abusers and makes them perish.

The narrator, Dom, is deported from New York due to drug-related offenses, and he later returns to Bombay. His infatuation with opium, which he learns about upon his return, is a defining feature of his path into the retreatist subculture. Dom gets to know Dimple well, appreciating her passion for books and offering her support through their mutual addiction. His persona serves as an example of how people from many backgrounds may come together to share their struggles with drug use.

### Conclusion

The *Narcopolis* ends with a thought-provoking reflection on the long-lasting effects of addiction on people and society. The intertwined fates of the characters offer a wider commentary on identity crises, urban deterioration, and the unrelenting search for solace through drug use in a changing world. Together, the protagonists of *Narcopolis* depict a retreatist subculture characterized by trauma, addiction, and a quest for identity in the face of societal neglect. Against a backdrop of urban ruin and personal sorrow, each character's drug use acts as a coping strategy and a mirror of their hardships.

Like Dimple in *Narcopolis*, the majority of the marginalised victims are those who suffer from poverty and lack proper education, sometimes even being thrown out of their homes due to gender issues. These marginalised victims yearn for sympathy, but while very few might receive it, the other victims become frustrated and get caught in the maze created by their own victimised thoughts, engaging in delinquency and other criminal activities. A person from the marginalised sector, condemned and neglected by the mainstream society, never wishes to be a criminal or a drug dealer. At first, they struggle to escape the clutches of marginalisation, but their unsuccessful attempts in a non-empathising and humanity-dead society make them the driving force behind a retreatist subculture. The humanity and empathetic nature of an individual can sabotage social discrimination and marginalisation, potentially preventing the formation of a retreatist subculture.

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