

Narcopolis Study Guide

Narcopolis by Jeet Thayil

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Plot Summary

NOTE: The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Thayil, Jeet. *Narcopolis*. Penguin Paperbacks, 2012.

Narcopolis is a novel of drugs and crime that follows a cast of characters over the course of 30-some years in their Bombay slum. The novel itself is told in both first and third-person, in a kind of stream-of-consciousness that is often suddenly interrupted by new events and new narrators. Beginning in the 1970s, the characters themselves all tend to revolve around Rashid's, a combination opium den and brothel. Rashid himself is both an addict and a family man, brutal with his son, Jamal, and adheres to his Muslim faith only when convenient. Rashid spends his days counting his money and getting high.

One of the most popular workers at Rashid's is a transgendered girl named Dimple. As a young boy, Dimple was forcibly surgically altered following the death of his mother. Now with very limited options, Dimple becomes an opium pipe tender for customers, where she becomes addicted to opium over time. Dimple also serves as a prostitute, looking for a better way of life but never finding the right chance or the right option.

Two of Dimple's customers provide a contrast with how she is treated. Dom comes to see her to smoke opium, for her company, and to read books to her, for he recognizes that Dimple loves to read. Rumi, on the other hand, is a customer who has a decent job with his wife's company, but relishes in what he considers adventures in the slums – such as having violent sex with Dimple.

Dimple comes to reflect on how she came to work at Rashid's by way of Mr. Lee, a Chinese refugee who began his own opium den and who sheltered Dimple until his death. It was using Lee's ancient opium pipes as leverage that Dimple secured her job at Rashid's.

The years pass in a haze for the characters. The 1980s come on, and Rashid is approached by Khalid about transforming his opium den and brothel into a place for cocaine. Rashid refuses, and his place is shut down by corrupt government officials and corrupt police. Rashid then has Khalid's son kidnapped, and returned safely once his den is reopened. As cocaine comes onto the scene in force, opium suppliers, like Salim, begin lacing the opium with strychnine to give it a more potent kick and to beat out opium.

As the 1980s wear on, and the 1990s come on, drugs of every imaginable kind become available. But the hard-partying lifestyle of those in the slums finally begin to catch up to them. Dom decides he will leave Bombay to begin a new life. Dimple realizes she will die if she stays in the city, so she begs Dom to take her with him. Instead, Dom checks Dimple into a rehab place called Safer. Safer is also attended by Rumi who has since divorced his wife and lost everything. Rehab does not stick with Rumi, however. Rashid's son takes over the business, transforming the den into a serious call center



and hub of operations for drug sales. Rashid, fat and old, regrets only not having gone with cocaine at the den when he had the chance. In 2004, Rashid receives a visit from Dom, who asks how everyone is doing. Rashid explains everyone is now dead except for them.

Dom asks to bring home some old things from the den as souvenirs, including an opium pipe. He intends to turn them into a museum exhibit, or so he tells Rashid. Rashid says the exhibit should display their shame for the way their lives have been lived. At his apartment, Dom smokes the opium pipe, and it is revealed the entire book has been only one of his opium dreams.



Prologue – Book 2, Chapter 2

Summary

Prologue – The narrator, a Coptic Christian, directly addresses the reader, saying the city of Bombay is the hero or “heroine” of the story, and that the reader does not know who the narrator is. The narrator is high from opium ingested at Rashid’s. The narrator has been sent back to Bombay after getting into trouble in New York, though the narrator cannot remember what the trouble was. The narrator thinks about someone named Dimple, and how it is said that you should only introduce your worst enemy to opium. The narrator now remembers the trouble in New York, being arrested and deported for drugs.

Book 1: The City Of O

Book 1, Chapter 1, Dimple – The narrator prefers smoking at Dimple’s station each time he comes to Rashid’s. The narrator notes that she disappears to the hijra’s brothel each night. Dimple reveals that to live selfishly in the world, one must not be aware of things like love. Love forces someone to live for someone else. Dimple believes genuine unions between men and women are possible, while the narrator says the best they can hope for is cohabitation. Dimple is learning English, and always asks the narrator to read to her. The narrator reads to Dimple about everything from Christianity to art. Dimple believes Jesus Christ should have been born in India with all the good He did. The narrator has an opium-fueled dream in which he speaks to his inner self, represented by Dimple, telling him he must dip his hand beneath the surface of the water to hear them.

Book 1, Chapter 2, Rumi on Pimps – A pimp and a tall man argue over the quality of the pimp’s prostitutes. The tall man tells the narrator that pimps are cowards, preying on the weak and hopeless. The narrator gets to talking to the tall man. The narrator reveals his name as Dom, and that he is originally from Kerala in South India. The tall man reveals himself to be Rumi, and has Dom listen to a music track of the sounds of the city of Bombay.

Book 1, Chapter 3, A Painter Visits – A Free Press Journal article carries news that artist Newton Xavier will be in the city to read poems and take questions about his new Bombay show at Jehangir Art Gallery – the first Bombay show he has had in 12 years. Xavier is well known for his love of anti-beauty, women, and drinking. Dom goes to see him read poetry and speak at the PEN Centre’s Theosophy Hall in New Marine Lines. Dom overhears two drunk men, the poet and art critic Akash Iskai, and another man, argue about Xavier, the Modern Autists Group, and inventing modern art in India. It is revealed that Xavier had a falling-out with the group over the use of color. It is also revealed the man conversing with Iskai is Xavier himself. Xavier then reads aloud to the audience a poem about a Moroccan boy who becomes ill while getting ready for school. When the boy awakens, he is living in a new house and thinks he is dead, even though



he is actually recovered. A decade passes, after which the boy becomes the leader of a group of teenage nomads, choosing not to return home to the life they knew, but to continue on being nomads. During the question-and-answer sessions, Xavier reaffirms his opposition to using color in his paintings, saying it is a crutch when a painter of India should be focused on indolence and brutality.

Dom and Xavier get to talking afterwards, then go out and party, doing all kinds of drugs thanks to Dom's working at a pharmaceutical company where he proofreads the company's newsletter. The next day, he brings Xavier to Rashid's. Dom has recently conversed with Dimple about Xavier, and says it is now a surprise he should be at Rashid's. Dimple says nothing is a surprise. The next day, Dom learns that Xavier is now missing. Dom can find Xavier nowhere, so he goes to Rashid's where he hears rumors about murderer, the Pathar Maar's latest killing. The next day, Dom finds Xavier back at Rashid's, doing opium. Only later does Dom learn that Xavier has been with Dimple at the brothel. This causes Dom to give Dimple the cold shoulder. Dimple, meanwhile, reflects on her current situation in life and feels dead inside. She also reflects on how Xavier used her roughly and cruelly, and told her to find a patron saint, such as Ulric, the Patron Saint of Happy Deaths, the least of which Xavier says he wished for Dimple.

Book 1, Chapter 4, Mr. Lee's Lessons in Living – The novel now shifts back in time. Dimple begins spending time with Mr. Lee Ka Tsay, a Chinese refugee and businessman. Lee appreciates her desire for silence. Dimple has few memories of her childhood, but does remember her mother being religious and praying at a temple. Dimple begins experiencing pain in her shoulders and back, which using opium helps her to manage, though she worries about addiction. Mr. Lee himself owns an opium den, having come to India after fighting on the wrong side in a war in China. Dimple reveals to Lee that she was originally a boy who was forcibly castrated as a child and turned into a girl by having a slit cut between her legs in place of a vagina. Lee teaches Dimple how to properly brew tea, cook rice, and make opium pipes. He also begins teaching Dimple how to curse in Cantonese so that she can swear as much as she wants, and no one will know.

Book 2: The Story of the Pipe

Book 2, Chapter 1, In Spain with Mr. Lee – Mr. Lee, age 55, begins disappearing for stretches at a time. Dimple thinks this is because he is preparing her to live without him. On the way to his house, a funeral procession delays her. She considers this to be symbolic of fate. At his house, she discovers Lee has had a stroke and is left with little mental capacity.

Book 2, Chapter 2, White Lotus, White Clouds – Lee remembers his mother as an ardent Communist while his father was not an enthusiastic Communist, but who constantly smoked cigarettes. He remembers his mother as wanting to be at the forefront of a New China, valuing the State over family, wanting to go back to university, and attempting suicide in both nervousness and frustration at upcoming tests. Dimple overhears Lee's past as Lee speaks to himself and to people who are not there.



Analysis

India in transition is a strange and heartbreaking place - this much is clear in Jeet Thayil's novel *Narcopolis*. Bombay is something of a New York in India, a sociocultural crossroads where Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Chinese refugees, and every conceivable class of Indians can be found. Thayil's novel comes to focus primarily on a slum in Bombay, where the lowest of the low live despite opportunity and potential in the age of post-British rule. These lowlives are considered low by culture, by their circumstances, and in most cases, by their own choosing. These people all participate in what will later come to be called the "intoxicated life," meaning a life spent on drugs, alcohol, and immoral behavior. The reader is rapidly exposed to this seedy underside of Bombay, beginning with Rashid's opium den.

The reader should note that Rashid's opium den is the place around which the vast majority of the novel's characters spend their lives, just as their individual lives revolve around drugs. In the case of men like Rashid, it is not only using drugs, but providing them as a business. For people like Dom, it is consuming drugs on a daily basis. For others, like Lee, dealing in drugs is at first a matter of survival, then a matter of business, and now a matter of inescapable addiction. The reader should also pay attention to Xavier's story, about a boy falling ill and reawakening many hours later – doing all he can to avoid society that he believes he has left. The boy is reflective of the drug user, who believes he has some unusual or unique elitist insight into the world, when in reality, he does not.

Drugs, Thayil begins to lay out in detail, are not a victimless crime. This is made readily apparent through Dimple. Dimple was forcibly castrated and turned into a girl at a young age. In this book, drugs and prostitution go hand-in-hand. A male prostitute in India is worth far less than a female prostitute, so having Dimple turned into a girl was a far more lucrative position for those dealing with her following the death of her mother. Dimple is already a victim of the drug world. Thayil uses not only the example of Dimple, but Lee to lay out evidence that the drug world is not a glorious place. Drug use is often romanticized and made appealing, when in reality, it is not. Lee is slowly dying, not only of age, but of his addiction which is literally eating away at his body. One message from the author is clear: there is nothing glorious or romantic about death through addiction.

The reader will also note early on in the novel that the writing of the novel itself is laid out in a confusing stream-of-consciousness way, in that narrators shift and the plot suddenly changes. Often, there are references to "he" and "she" without clear indication of who they actually are until either later on or until enough clues can be garnered from the story itself. The hazy and confused writing is, therefore, reflective of a drug user's mental and emotional state when high. In some places of the novel, there will be moments of sober clarity; and in other places, almost absolute confusion. The readers should prepare themselves for this, for many sections of the novel can indeed be challenging to wade through.



Discussion Question 1

Why does Dimple seem to work at Rashid's – specifically, in reference to her past? Despite her working at Rashid's, what seems to set Dimple apart from fellow drug users and prostitutes? Why do you believe this is?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you believe that so little is actually known about Dom? Why does Dom frequent Rashid's? Why does Dom seem to participate in an intoxicated lifestyle at all?

Discussion Question 3

What is Rashid's place of business like? What kinds of customers does he attract? Why does this seem to be the case? Why does Rashid himself use the drugs he sells?

Vocabulary

velocity, pyali, incomprehensible, eponymous, consummate, laboriously, involuntary, inimitable, dictum, efficacy, indolence, brutality, berating, subterranean, minutiae, economical, ideological



Book 2, Chapters 3 – 8

Summary

Book 2, Chapter 3, “Opium-Smoking Bandit” – Lee remembers how Chairman Mao summoned those in the creative arts to a conference in which he said the creative arts could be pursued, but not for fame or individualism - only for the State. Lee remembers how some, like his father’s friend, the writer Ling Ling, opposed being forced to write for the State, but was sent to prison and had the right way of thinking beaten into her. Lee remembers how his father, a writer, was reeducated at a camp due to his friendship with Ling Ling. However, Lee recalls his father continuing to write things that drew the ire of the Communists and the Leftists, leading to his father being labeled an opium-smoking bandit with a diseased mind. Lee remembers how, before his father could be imprisoned, his father fell ill.

Book 2, Chapter 4, His Father the Insect – Lee remembers how his father’s opium addiction led to his insect-like appearance and the selling of almost everything in the house to support his addiction until it killed him with fever. Lee recalls reading one of his father’s books, the one Lee considered to be his true life’s work, about a Cherokee Indian and prophecy, Chinese explorers who discovered America before Columbus, and a young Muslim whose grandson sets off to find his final resting place.

Book 2, Chapter 5 – Lee tells Dimple that his life changed when he was 38 and he met a young woman at a Peking banquet whom did not want to be a kept woman, but whom Lee romantically pursued anyways. Lee explains the young woman was also being pursued by military officers, had to maintain her virginity, and so when she gave into him, only allowed him to have anal sex with her. Lee explains that after an earthquake shook the city following their first sexual encounter, he considered the woman to be his savior.

Book 2, Chapter 6, To Wuhan – Lee recounts traveling to Wuhan with a group of Red Guards to deal with an uncontrollable General Lo-Tsai. Lee recalls revealing he was in Wuhan to make a report of things going on, such as the growing power of a new worker’s party. Lee recounts being told that those in Wuhan are prepared to fight rather than disband.

Book 2, Chapter 7, Twice Abducted – Lee remembers being attacked and captured before he could make his report, and then being thrown into a prison cell before being sent back to Peking. Lee remembers widespread purges beginning at that point, in which people were arrested, tortured, and killed for things such as accusations of homosexuality. Lee remembers learning that reality means anything can happen at any time.

Book 2, Chapter 8, To Bombay – Lee recalls using his limited power to requisition a jeep, which he then used to drive to India. In the present, Lee wants only to smoke



himself to death with opium, and asks that Dimple bury the ashes of his cremated body back in China. Instead, Dimple has Lee buried in a Chinese cemetery.

Analysis

Drugs are not a victimless crime, Thayil continues to maintain as he explores the character of Lee. Lee himself is a victim of his drug use, ravaging his body and decreasing his lifespan dramatically. At the same time, Lee's selling of drugs in an opium den of his own creates the conditions for drug violence, growing, selling, and addiction to others. Lee is harming countless other people not only through his own addiction as a result, but through his encouraging addiction among others. As the reader will later come to learn through a book Dimple reads, everyone is responsible for their own lives. Lee has chosen to live his life irresponsibly, and to feed the addictions of others for his own profit.

Likewise, just as drug use is not a victimless crime, there is nothing romantic or glorious about the use of drugs at all. Lee's inability to die in peace without an opium pipe, let alone his illness at all, is demonstrative evidence that drug use is crippling, dehumanizing, and reckless. Turning to drug selling initially to survive, Lee's drug use becomes the key to his own demise. Lee has in drugs a false savior. There are many different reasons how people become involved in the "intoxicated life," as Thayil continues to explain – but no reason is ever a good reason. This much is clear with Lee.

What is clear with Lee is the idea that anything can happen at any time. India in transformation is a strange and heartbreaking place that is constantly in such flux, and as such, there are many different reasons how people can become involved in the "intoxicated life." Regardless, each person is still responsible for his or her own life. Consider for example that, while Rashid may do drugs, many of his wives do not. His wives live under many of the same circumstances as their husband in the slums of India, but they do not do drugs. Lee is not the only Chinese refugee in India, but not all of them have taken to drugs.

Discussion Question 1

How does Lee first get involved in the selling of drugs? Why does this ultimately become ironic for him?

Discussion Question 2

Why do Lee and Dimple get along so well? Why does Lee essentially take Dimple in? Why does the arrangement between them not last?



Discussion Question 3

What important lessons does Thayil hope to communicate to readers with the story of Lee's life and death? How does Thayil seemingly accomplish this?

Vocabulary

insidious, individualism, cataclysm, contentious, requisition



Book 2, Chapter 9 – Book 3, Chapter 5

Summary

Book 2, Chapter 9, The Pipe Comes to Rashid's – Dimple takes Lee's pipes to Rashid's in order to gain work there. Over time, Dimple is accused as being a drug-addict and an unproductive worker. Sometime later, on Christmas Day, Dimple leaves everything behind.

Book 3: The Intoxicated

Book 3, Chapter 1, A Walk on Shuklaji Street – Rashid, a Muslim, reflects on once being a skinny criminal, and now being a wealthy opium den owner, opium addict, and having a family. Rashid is also a heavy user of cocaine and drinks whiskey frequently. He gets his whiskey and cocaine from a dealer named Salim. He can see the effect his addictions are having on him when he snorts cocaine from a mirror. On his way home from Salim's, he catches his six-year-old son, Jamal, buying cigarettes. He is enraged and shoves his son home. Rashid then beats up his son.

Book 3, Chapter 2, Bengali – Bengali is the aged cashier at Rashid's, having once been a government clerk. Bengali is very intelligent, and is speaking about the end times when Rashid arrives at work. Bengali is also a drug-addict who must get his fix by inhaling fumes from making opium and smoking leftovers. Rashid immediately goes to an opium pipe to smoke.

Book 3, Chapter 3, Business Practices Among the Criminal Class: An Offer – Khalid meets with Rashid. Khalid explains he has been approached by Sam Biryani about a garad pipeline from Tardeo to Nagpada. Rashid is interested, but concerned. They observe a beggar woman urinating in the middle of the street. Khalid continues to meet with Rashid over diversifying the kinds of drugs Rashid provides. Rashid sends tea and Marie biscuits to the beggar woman. It causes her to smile and drink the tea with a pinky out.

Book 3, Chapter 4, The Sari and the Burka – Rashid takes the beggar woman in, naming her Zeenat, and requiring her to work both the opium den and the brothel. She dresses seductively to attract more customers, with one of them being Rumi. Zeenat does her best to stay away from drugs, but eventually becomes high from secondhand smoke.

Book 3, Chapter 5, "Dum Maro Dum" – Rashid and Dimple go out for the day to enjoy the beach, different shops, and places to eat. Rashid spends the whole time at the beach smoking a pipe. Rashid brings Dimple to a beauty parlor to have her hair straightened to look like a movie star named Zeenie. The first time Dimple experienced air conditioning, she remembers, was when Rashid took her to see a Zeenie film in which Zeenie plays a character with memory loss struggling to remember who she was



with help from her brother. Dimple remembers Zeenat's character talking about running away from home, and felt as if Zeenat's character was speaking directly to her.

Analysis

The reader learns, in this section, that Dimple came to Rashid's only to survive, much the way that Lee originally came to India to survive a Communist civil war and purge. Just as Lee takes to drugs to survive, so too does Dimple. Dimple learns by example by way of Lee. Dimple has limited options, but chooses the only one of which she is familiar – and so her coming drug addiction, and her feeding the addiction of others, exacerbates a cycle of crime and immoral behavior that wrecks countless more lives. It is not for decades that Dimple will come to leave everything behind on Christmas Day to try to get her life on track. The reader should note that the reference to leaving on Christmas Day in Book 2, Chapter 9, is indeed still decades away – but cements the confusing, chaotic, and hazy drug-like state of the prose in which time is confused.

India in transformation is a strange and heartbreaking place, as Thayil continues to explain through his revelation of how Rashid got into the opium business – originally as a business venture, easily available to him given his circumstances as a Muslim living in the slums. Though Rashid pretends to be holy as a Muslim, his use and selling of drugs demonstrate he is a hypocrite (let alone beating up his son for buying cigarettes and following his father's example). Rashid's getting into drugs – both using and selling – likewise demonstrates that there are many different reasons how people become involved in the “intoxicated life.” Everyone, however, is responsible for their own lives, including Rashid. Rashid did not have to go into selling and doing drugs, but he chose to do so. It was not forced on him, but seemed a lucrative opportunity given the world of addicts around him. Strangely, Rashid refuses to venture into cocaine when offered the chance by Khalid – but the future of the drug trade is clear. It will be cocaine.

Drugs are indeed not a victimless crime, as the reader continues to see. Like Lee, Rashid's opium den creates countless more customers who crawl, steal, manipulate, lie, and commit violence against others in order to feed their addictions. With the demand for drugs high, the supply churns out more of the product to sell at places like Rashid's. First-time users become instant addicts, and the customer base is increased. Yet already, Dimple is feeling the ill-effects of drug use, the drug world, and sees the way that the drug world affects other people. She is already beginning to long for an escape, something symbolized by the Zeenie film that Rashid takes her to see. Dimple is clearly not happy with the life she has taken to to survive, but her addiction and relative helplessness mean that she has nowhere else to go.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Dimple get involved at Rashid's following the death of Lee? Who is to blame for this situation? Why?



Discussion Question 2

Despite Rashid portraying himself as a holy Muslim, his selling of drugs clearly marks him as a hypocrite. Why then does Rashid sell drugs?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you believe that Rashid refuses to go into the sale of cocaine when offered the chance? What happens as a result? Why?

Vocabulary

degraded, erratically, syzygy, sari, burka, androgynous, garad



Book 3, Chapter 6 – Book 3, Chapter 11

Summary

Book 3, Chapter 6, Stinking Asafetida – Rumi and Dimple drive toward Khar, where the two park in an alley and have violent sex with Rumi drawing blood from Dimple. Dimple tells Rumi she has a friend who could have given him much better service. At home with his wife, Rumi is happy to remember the episode with Dimple.

Book 3, Chapter 7, Business Practices Among the Criminal Class: C & E – When Rashid, Dimple, and Bengali, arrive at Rashid's, they discover it has been closed by Customs and Excise (C & E) and will be shut indefinitely. Rashid knows this is Khalid's work, for having turned Khalid down over the drug pipeline. Each time Bengali sees Dimple, he notices she is thinner and older looking, as the drugs take a toll on her body. Dimple, meanwhile, helps orchestrate a revenge move against Khalid by tying him up and leaving him on the floor while kidnapping his well-behaved nine-year-old son and driving him several hours to Pune. A week later, Rashid's shop is reopened.

Book 3, Chapter 8, A Chemical Understanding – Dimple begins using garad as well as opium. Garad is in such supply it becomes easier to find and buy than fruits and vegetables. Salim, a supplier, says that rat poison is being put into the drugs for the kick of strychnine, but that it will not kill people, only rats. Dimple ends up at a market shop where used books are being sold. She finds a book called *The Uses of Reincarnation* by T.S. Pande, Head of Theology and Symmetry at Haryana University. Dimple purchases the book. She begins hiding her face by keeping on her burka as much as possible, while word comes of yet another victim of Pathar Maar. Dimple and Rashid use the stronger drugs, being called Chemical, which dramatically affects them and heightens their addiction.

Book 3, Chapter 9, The Intoxicated Entity – It is now 1992. Dimple is now living in an apartment on the half-landing between Rashid's brothel and opium den, and his home. She has become something of a half-wife to him, providing sex and conversation to Rashid, but nothing else. Dimple feels lonely, and begins reading the book *The Uses of Reincarnation*. The book notes that things like reincarnation, which is in effect immortality, are a curse; that all living things play a part in reincarnation in some way, shape, or form; that whatever one wishes to be reborn as, one should devote themselves to living in such a way; revenge against those in previous lives is procedurally important; that spirits and ghosts are not partial reincarnation, but delayed departure; and that such things are consistent with believing in the God of Christians. This causes Dimple to realize she, too, believes, and desires to go to Church. Salim is surprised later to see Dimple, for he has not seen her in a long time. Because of all the drugs and his age, he is no longer able to have sex, but wishes he could have sex with Dimple. He asks Dimple why she has come around to his place, at which time she tells him the world is ending. She goes to a church and prays before a statue of Jesus Christ, asking Him to love her for she is poor and alone like Him. 1993 comes on.



Part 3, Chapter 10, Confessional – Dimple realizes the city is killing itself. Rumi tells Dimple he has almost killed someone. Rumi explains he has been berated by his uncle for bribing a police officer and thereby perpetuating a corrupt system, after which a thief stole Rumi's wallet, leading Rumi to chase the man down and almost kill him.

Part 3, Chapter 11, Flight – Dom suddenly returns as narrator. A stormfront approaches the city. The city is breaking down. Even drugs are now becoming difficult to find. Dom decides he will leave the city, and his drug habits, behind. Instead, he runs into Rumi, Dimple, and the others, and decides to get high with them. Dom is alarmed to see how hideously ugly Dimple has become after years of drug use. She barely resembles the same person anymore to Dom. Dom thinks about how for every happiness, there is an equal and opposite unhappiness. Dom becomes aware of how thin and gangly his arms are from all of his drug use. Dimple asks him to bring her with him, saying she will die if she stays in the city. Dom brings Dimple to Safer, a rehab place, while he boards a flight out of Bombay.

Analysis

India in transformation is a strange and heartbreaking place, the author continues to portray. As hinted at in the previous chapters of the novel, the drug of choice becomes cocaine. Cocaine becomes the major competitor to opium, eventually starting to push opium out. The mixing of opium and cocaine is frequent, along with other drugs. Many drugs, to retain their edge – such as opium – are laced with strychnine in order to keep people addicted to it over other drugs. The entire situation is spiraling out of control. As Dimple observes, the city is killing itself. Drugs are not a victimless crime, either against others or against the self. Violence, kidnappings, killings, overdoses, and so on, come to rule the day as drugs remain the central focus of the lives of most people in the slums of Bombay.

Too much becomes too much for some. Dimple comes to accept through the reading of Pande's book *The Uses of Reincarnation* that not only does someone not need to die to begin a new life, but that one's life is actually in one's own hands. Everyone is responsible for their own lives, Dimple interprets - and through this, she finds God in the form of Jesus Christ. She recognizes her current situation is hopeless, and seeks the mercy of Christ as well as a way out of the city. The narrator should note that finding Christ is Dimple's rebirth. Because of the acceptance that she needs help and needs to get out, she is able to finally articulate this to Dom. Dom notices how horrid Dimple has become – decades of drug use have destroyed her body and her beauty. Rather than taking Dimple away with him, Dom checks Dimple into a rehab place. There are at least three possibilities for this: First, Dom claims to readers he would not be able to take care of her. Second, it is possible that Dom recognizes Dimple needs more help than he can provide. Third, Dom never actually leaves the city despite pretending to (consider the final chapter of the novel in which it is revealed the entire novel has literally been a pipe dream).



The destruction of generations of people due to drugs is clear; drugs are not a victimless crime, and they are not to be romanticized and glorified, warns the author. Drugs ruin lives and kill not only the user, but innocent bystanders as well. The criminal lifestyle that is both fed by, and feeds, the drug world, is reflected clearly in the anger displayed toward Rumi by his uncle for perpetuating a system of bribery by paying to get out of a ticket. Rumi had a chance to change things for the better, but he refused to do so by bribing rather than facing justice. Rumi is a case study similar to Xavier from earlier in the novel: they venture into the seedy underside of Bombay by choice for the thrill of adventure and pleasure. Rumi still ends up addicted – but his addiction is a choice that could not be blamed on his circumstances.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you believe Dom brings Dimple to rehab rather than bringing her away with him? Are his actions justifiable? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Dimple seek out a church? What does her encounter with the presence of Christ compel in her life by way of change? What happens as a result?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Rumi bribe the police officer? Why does Rumi's uncle condemn this behavior? Is Rumi's uncle right to condemn Rumi's actions? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

machinations, concomitant, immortality, immutability, inadequate, enumerates



Book 3, Chapter 12 – Book 4, Chapter 3

Summary

Part 3, Chapter 12, Rehab, Relapse – Rumi visit Shakoor's instead of Rashid's because Shakoor gives out complimentary cocaine along with his cheaper, more powerful heroin. He continues to go on a multi-day binge. Meanwhile, Dimple is well into rehab. Dimple comes to realize her love of the high life was the most she could aspire to given her situation. Dimple comes to have a dream about the traditions and values of India being destroyed, symbolized by a 13-year-old girl having anal sex.

Rumi is meanwhile arrested, and sent to rehab. There, he meets a fellow Chinese Muslim drug-addict named Sopor who has an interest in difficult poetry forms. Dimple's drug-free dreams allow her to recall clear memories of the past, such as attending both church and a Hindu temple with her mother as a child. She also recalls her parents fighting and her mother attempting suicide. While on a group outing outside of the rehab clinic, Rumi disappears into a crowd. Rumi then goes to a beauty salon where one young female prostitute is at work, shuts and locks the door, and forces her into sex. Sopor argues to others that he is free to do drugs when he wants because he claims it affects no one else. Rumi later meets up with Sopor, saying he intends to come back to Safer.

Book 4: Some Uses of Reincarnation

Book 4, Chapter 1, A Large Accumulation of Small Defeats – It is 2004. Dom explains he returns to the city in stages, returning after monsoon season. There are new buildings, new highways, new highrises. While much has changed, Dom sees that much has not. There are still slums. Dom finds an old fellow addict from Rashid's named Shankar who is now clean, married, and employed. Shankar tells Dom if he sees Rashid to say hello, for Shankar himself will not go down there to see Rashid, afraid he might not come back.

Book 4, Chapter 2, The Citizen – Dom travels to Rashid's to discover it is now bricked over and has become an office space, specifically a call center now headed up by Jamal. Jamal and his friends are all devout Muslims, willing to go to extreme measures for their beliefs if needed. Dom then meets with Rashid, who is now sober. Rashid regrets his past life and his business, and explains that everyone from the old days, including Dimple, Bengali, Rumi, and others, are all now dead. Rashid says he himself is worse each day, but alive. Rashid and Jamal are still as distant as ever, as they were decades before. Jamal and his pregnant fiancé, Fahreen, go to a club. Fahreen tells Jamal he can sell drugs at the club, because there are no Muslims there. Jamal knows they must dance or they will die.

Book 4, Chapter 3, The Enfolding – When Dom visits Rashid, again, Rashid confesses he wishes he had never started selling garad, for his place would then still be open. He



explains that Rumi once tried to sell him a set of fake teeth Rumi claimed belonged to Gandhi. Rashid explains he once went to a talk by one of Gandhi's grandsons who said that the sins of fathers are visited upon their children, but that good comes to the grandchildren in the end. Rashid goes on to explain that someone killed Rumi by smashing a piece of concrete pipe into his head, and that the case of the Pathar Maar was never solved. Dom collects some things from Rashid's old shop, including an opium pipe, the dentures, and other things for the purposes of a museum exhibit. Rashid tells Dom to put it all on display to demonstrate their shame. Rashid explains that Dimple came back shortly before she died, that her final days helped get Rashid clean. Dom suddenly breaks the fourth wall, saying that, back at his apartment, he smoked the pipe and the dream he had as a result was the story the reader has just read.

Analysis

India in transformation is a strange and heartbreaking place, Thayil continues to contend as three decades now unveil the year 2004. Dom has returned to the city, though exactly why cannot be ascertained. Dom encounters much that is new, and much that is the same in Bombay. New buildings have gone up, drug culture remains ingrained in the slums, India overall is moving forward, but the slums of Bombay are remaining behind. Despite the absence of the caste system as it had been, present generations of those who live and dwell and work in the slums do not reach out for opportunities, but choose to remain rooted in their past. Consider Jamal, who has organized a drug business as though it was a legitimate, professional entity – and consider that Jamal sells drugs to non-Muslims despite his Islamic faith frowning upon all things. Jamal himself is not using, but has no qualms about selling to infidels. He is perpetuating his father's cycle. Jamal is every bit a hypocrite as his father. The reader should also note the dream had in which a young teenaged girl is forced into anal sex, which in turn symbolizes the immorality and desperation.

There are many different reasons for why people become involved in the "intoxicated life," as Dimple explains. Often, in the slums, it is to escape reality, to climb to the top of the trash heap though one still stands on trash, and that it is the best out of life they can possibly have (to be high). It is obvious why so many choose to indulge, though rather than making their situations better, they only perpetuate their situations – just as Rumi's uncle contended previously. Dimple's finding of Christ and her desire to be better helps her to get clean, though years of drug use have destroyed her health and, despite being sober, she is already sick and declining. Rashid confirms that Dimple, like so many others, have died since Dom left Bombay. The book's main theme continues: drugs are not glorious and romantic; they destroy lives, they corrode culture, and they literally kill.

The novel ends in as much confusion as which it began. The reader will recall that the structural composition of the novel reflects the incomprehension of a drug addict. As the reader learns at the end of the novel, the entire book has, disappointingly, been a drug dream of Dom. It is doubtful now that he ever left Bombay at all; and it is apparent his refusal to bring Dimple with him is evidence that he was never going to leave – and



provides retrospective evidence that the entire novel has been a drug-induced hallucination.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Dom return to Bombay in 2004? What does Dom do while he is in Bombay? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Dom collect old things, such as an opium pipe, from Rashid's? Do you believe he ever intended to use them as museum exhibits, or was it simply the work of an addict manipulating another to get what he wanted? Explain.

Discussion Question 3

What does Dom learn about people like Rashid, Dimple, Rumi, and Bengali? What does this provide evidence of with respect to drugs and the culture in which they all spent the prime of their lives wasted?

Vocabulary

inaudible, recovery, convalescent, sobriety, obsolescence



Characters

Dom Ullis

Dom is a Bombay man of uncertain age who becomes an opium addict early in his life. A nominal Christian, Dom has no concerns about doing drugs, visiting brothels, and whittling away his life doing nothing in particular. Very little is known about Dom except that he disappears for much of the novel, reappearing only later on. Dom returns to the events of the novel in 2004, presumably now clean and sober after getting into trouble in New York, to see what has become of the people and places of his past. In reality, Dom is still an addict, and the novel comprises the content of his latest drug-induced dream.

Dimple

Dimple is a transgendered female, forced into a sex change as a young boy after the death of her mother and thereafter coming to be sheltered by, and keeping company with, Mr. Lee. From Lee Dimple learns about opium, the drug trade, and the world surrounding drugs. When Lee dies, Dimple goes into the drug trade, originally preparing pipes at Rashid's before using them herself. While at Rashid's, Dimple also prostitutes herself out and becomes close with a number of patrons, including Dom.

Dimple soon realizes she needs to escape the world in which she has found herself, but is unable to do so for decades. When Dimple finds God, she is determined to change. Only when Dom checks her into rehab is she able to make that change, getting clean and sober – though it is too late. Her body is already in decline, and she dies of illness sometime later.

Rashid

Rashid is a father, husband, and owner of the opium den and brother known as Rashid's. A Muslim in theory but not in practice, Rashid is an opium addict who has no qualms about feeding the addictions of others, creating new addicts, or prostituting out girls and women. Rashid is physically abusive toward his son, Jamal, and resists the cocaine trade at first – coming to regret it many years later. Rashid is eventually forced to get himself clean, and he retires in obscurity while his son takes over his business.

Rumi

Rumi is a comparatively financially secure member of the slums of Bombay, coming from a place where he has a stable marriage and a stable job with his wife's company. His forays into the slums are for pleasure and adventure, finding great joy in feeding his addictions. Rumi is a point of irony: while others are trying to escape the slums, Rumi



willingly descends into them. Eventually, Rumi and his wife divorce, after which time Rumi descends fully into the slums. He eventually dies of his addiction.

Jamal

Jamal is the son of Rashid. Jamal hates his father, both for his father's brutality and his father's lack of commitment to Islam. Jamal carries on in trading drugs after his father is forced out of the business, even using his father's former opium den to trade. Jamal carries on in life doing the only thing he believes he knows how to do – trading drugs. Ironically, Jamal will not deal drugs to fellow Muslims, but only to non-Muslims, as he believes this is consistent with his faith.

Mr. Lee

Mr. Lee is a Chinese refugee who escapes to India where he opens an opium den and becomes addicted to opium. He shelters and cares for Dimple, hoping she will have a better life than she has had so far. Eventually, Lee's ill-health and opium addiction kill him.

T.S. Pande

T.S. Pande is Head of Theology and Symmetry at Haryana University. Pande has written a book called The Uses of Reincarnation. Among other things, Pande argues that everyone is responsible for their own actions and lives despite their circumstances.

Salim

Salim is a drug supplier. Little is known about him except that he begins lacing his drugs with strychnine to give them a greater kick in order to compete with new drugs arriving on the scene. Salim does not last over the course of the decades – like others, he is ultimately believed to be dead.

Soporo

Soporo is a drug addict who also attends and helps handle classes at Safer. Soporo declares he can do drugs and hurt no one else by doing them. Soporo is an ironic character, for by his very addiction, he is hurting others.

Xavier

Xavier is a famous artist and poet known for his opposition to beauty. Xavier and Dom meet at one of Xavier's shows, and the two go on a binge of drugs. Xavier is one of the

people who cannot claim his circumstances (i.e., growing up in a slum) forced him into drugs. Xavier does them of his own free will. Xavier's fate is ultimately unknown.



Symbols and Symbolism

Opium

Opium is the drug of choice in Bombay in the 1970s and early 1980s, and symbolizes the corrosion of Indian society. Opium is highly addictive, and nearly every character in the novel is addicted to opium at some point. The quest to get high leads opium addicts to kill, brutalize, steal, manipulate, lie, and debase themselves in any possible way all for a high. Opium is ultimately crowded out by cocaine.

Strychnine

Strychnine is rat poison, and symbolizes just how low people are willing to go to get high and to make money. When cocaine begins pushing opium and other drugs out, dealers like Salim begin adding strychnine to their drugs to give them an extra kick to increase addiction and desire. The use of strychnine by both dealer and users demonstrates just how desperate and horrific they have become that they would get high and make a buck by using rat poison.

Cocaine

Cocaine is the drug of choice in Bombay in the 1980s and 1990s, and symbolizes the continuing corrosion of Indian society. Cocaine, plentiful, easy to obtain, and highly addictive, becomes so common in Bombay that some even give it away for free to ensure return customers, or to complement the use of other drugs on the scene. Ultimately, cocaine succeeds all other drugs, with other drugs being unable to compete.

The Uses of Reincarnation

The Uses of Reincarnation symbolizes personal responsibility. The Uses of Reincarnation is a book about human life in general and reincarnation by T.S. Pande which argues, among other things, that one does not actually have to die to begin life again; and that everyone is responsible for his or her own life despite the circumstances – even those beyond one's control. The book becomes a Bible of sorts to Dimple, who reads it. The book galvanizes her to take control of her own life.

Statue of Jesus Christ

A statue of Jesus Christ symbolizes peace, rebirth, forgiveness, and second chances. After reading Pande's book The Uses of Reincarnation, Dimple goes to church where she prays for forgiveness. She asks Jesus to look on her with love, and this begins a new phases in Dimple's life where she will slowly, steadily change her life for the better.



Bribe

A bribe made to a police officer by Rumi symbolizes the ongoing corruption of India's postcolonial culture. Rumi's uncle chastises him for this, saying all it is doing is perpetuating wrongdoing rather than making things better. The bribe is a clear example of the attitude many Indians have: they would rather pay a bribe than deal with legal justice. Rumi had a clear chance to do things the right way, but he refused to do so.

Drug-free dreams

Drug-free dreams are symbolic of clarity, honesty, and truth. Dimple begins having drug-free dreams in rehab, in which she can clearly remember things about herself, the past, and loved ones long gone. These drug-free dreams help Dimple to realize she is making progress, and help her to realize she can indeed be better.

Museum exhibit

A museum exhibit is symbolic of shame. When Dom arrives at Rashid's, he learns about what has become of many members of their old drug circle. Dom asks to bring home some old mementos from Rashid's place, which Rashid consents to. Rashid believes that Dom will be creating a museum exhibit out of these things – such as an old opium pipe – to illustrate the shame and immorality of their generation. The exhibit is also a testament of shame for Dom, for Dom does not actually intend to create an exhibit, but merely wants to smoke opium.

Anal sex dream

An anal sex dream symbolizes the corrosion of India and the loss of the country's innocence, and the traditions and values of India being destroyed. Dimple dreams of a 13-year-old girl having anal sex while she is in recovery, which in her mind causes her to reflect on what India is doing to itself. Instead of sex, or life, the traditional and proper way, life is being used selfishly by Indians without real thought or regard for what is being degraded – in the dream, a young girl; in real life, the very life and culture of the country of India.

Dom's last dream

Dom's last dream symbolizes the inescapability of addiction, as well as the fact that drugs are not romantic and are not glorious. Dom's last dream comes when he smokes opium at the end of the novel, in which it is revealed that everything read by the reader was only an opium-fueled dream. This means that Dom's dreams of getting clean, and perhaps even everything in the dream –including the people and circumstances of his life – may be entirely fictional thanks to Dom's drug addiction. Dom's dream also reveals

the fact that to do drugs is to actually not live. Images of life, rather than life itself, are experienced.



Settings

Bombay slum

An unspecified Bombay slum serves as the primary setting for the novel. The slum is described as a crime-ridden, dirty, and hopeless place where people are quick to seize or manipulate one another for their own ends, or for drugs. People use the bathroom in the middle of the street; homeless people are common; a serial killer is believed to be roaming the streets; crimes of all sorts are regular; and many people are in poor health. It is a place many of the poor seek to escape, while many of the wealthy venture into the slums for pleasure and adventure. Others, like Rashid, think they will never get out of the slum and so scramble for prestige, power, and wealth at the apex of the slum's social hierarchy itself. The novel's particular Bombay slum is where Rashid operates his opium den and brothel, where Dimple works, and is where the lives of every character in the novel comes to exist at some point or another.

Rashid's

Rashid's is an opium den and brothel owned and operated by Rashid. It is symbolic and representative of the way the lives of so many drug addicts revolve around drugs. Rashid's is one of the most popular opium dens in the Bombay slum in which it operates, in large part because so many men find Dimple's company so pleasurable. When Rashid refuses to change over from opium to cocaine, corrupt government officials shut the place down. It is reopened when Rashid has the son of a drug supplier kidnapped. Ultimately, Rashid's is taken over by Jamal, who transforms the place from an opium den and brothel into a call center for his drug trade. Rashid's is visited by Dom one final time at the end of the novel, where he collects some old mementos, such as an opium pipe.

Christian Church

A Christian Church is sought out by Dimple after reading Pande's book, *The Uses of Reincarnation*, and becomes symbolic of a new life. Dimple seeks out the Church to appeal to Jesus Christ, wanting Him in her life, and wanting Him to help her find her way out of the slums. The Church becomes a galvanizing moment for Dimple, who will from thereon be in search for a way to escape the slum.

Dom's apartment

Dom's apartment is located in a better area of Bombay. It unveils that Dom is not of the slums, but prefers to spend time in the slums. Dom's apartment is where Dom returns after his final visit to Rashid's, presumably to begin organizing the artifacts from



Rashid's for a museum exhibit, but in reality to smoke the opium pipe he has taken from Rashid's.

Dom's opium dream world

Dom's opium dream world, incorporating all of the settings, circumstances, events, and characters of the novel, is materialized when Dom smokes opium at the end of the novel. It becomes a question of debate as to whether or not anyone or anything in Dom's dream – beyond Dom himself – actually exists. It is revealed to the reader by Dom that everything that has been previously read is a dream, so whether people such as Dimple also exist in real life is uncertain.



Themes and Motifs

India in transformation is a strange and heartbreaking place

India in transformation is a strange and heartbreaking place, argues Jeet Thayil in his novel *Narcopolis*. The India in which the novel begins is the India of the 1970s, sometime but not a long time after the end of British colonial rule. Indians are now free to fully determine their own lives and their own future. But far too many have embraced freedom irresponsibly rather than responsibly.

Greater freedom means indulgence to many in Indian society. People like Xavier and Rumi indulge in the seedy side of life, while others like Dimple believe it is the only life possible for them. Others, like Rashid, want to capitalize on their position in life, as well as the addictions and selfishness of others – so they open drug houses. At the same time, responsible Indians are thriving in their own lives. Rumi's wife's family's company is succeeding beyond its wildest expectations because it is open and honest. Rumi's uncle condemns him for bribing a police officer, saying the honor, culture, and very life of India are at stake in such things, while Rumi is only perpetuating corruption as others are struggling so hard to do better.

By the 1980s, cocaine begins to overtake opium as the drug of choice especially in the slums of India. This brings an entirely new wave of addictions, crime, dangerous mixing of drugs, and drug supply. As a result, new generations are lost to drug addiction and crime. However, the darkness of the drug world in the 1980s paves the way for religious rediscovery by the end of the decade and the beginning of the 1990s. Dimple embraces Christianity as a foundation from which to change her life – and does so successfully. Through the 1990s and early 2000s, Jamal embraces Islam much the way his father did – hypocritically and incomplete. Jamal's version of Islam forbids him to sell drugs to other Muslims, for example, but allows him to sell drugs to anyone else he wants.

By 2004, India is moving forward. When Dom returns to the city, he finds much has changed, and much has not. There are still slums, still drugs, and still crime – but nothing like decades past. New buildings are going, religious revivals are taking root (one of which Jamal is a part), businesses are booming, and the country at large is improving. Dom visits the people and places of his past to find almost everyone and everything is changed. Rashid is one of the few who have not died of complications from their drug use, or directly from their addictions. Despite moving forward, there is still such sadness in India. Dom himself proves this by ending the novel returning to the opium pipe.



There are many different reasons why people become involved in the “intoxicated life”

There are many different reasons why people become involved in the “intoxicated life,” argues Jeet Thayil in his novel *Narcopolis*. A large cast of characters helps Thayil explore why so many people choose to become involved with drugs, either using or selling. Each character has his or her own reasons for getting involved.

Dimple herself explains the reasons of many later in the novel. She explains that so many people venture into the “intoxicated life” because it is the best they believe they will ever have. Dimple becomes involved in the drug world because as a transgendered woman, her options are extremely limited. Having experienced opium under Mr. Lee, Dimple goes with what she knows and gets involved at Rashid’s. Rashid himself wants to climb to the apex of the slum caste, and makes something of himself by becoming wealthy and popular from the addictions of others. Rashid also uses the drugs he sells, for he considers himself above the desperate addicts who come to his den despite being of the same class as them.

For Mr. Lee, getting into the opium trade was a matter of financial survival after fleeing China. Lee’s use of opium, however, kills him in the end. Lee, Dimple, and Rashid are to be contrasted with Rumi and Xavier. Rumi and Xavier are a class apart from the slums. Whereas others want to escape the slums, Rumi and Xavier freely visit that which they are not a part of in order to feed their addictions, find adventure, and have pleasure. Their own stable lives are not enough for them, so they voluntarily choose to lose themselves in addictions and compromise the security and freedom so many others below them would kill for.

Dom himself presents a strange case. College educated and not of the slum class, Dom has more opportunity than anyone else in the novel. However, he chooses to waste away his life by getting high. The root cause of this is never discovered, but he does explain he enjoys the company of Dimple, which is why he prefers Rashid’s. Dom is the one character who makes a clear break with the drug life and the city of Bombay by physically leaving the place. However, he is the only character at the end of the novel to return to Bombay and to drugs.

Everyone is responsible for their own lives

Everyone is responsible for their own lives, argues Jeet Thayil in his novel *Narcopolis*. Thayil advances this argument through Dimple’s read of Pande’s book *The Uses of Reincarnation*. In this book, Pande argues that “...there are no innocents and no bystanders, because all living things play an active role in their incarnations...” (Book 3, Chapter 9, p. 192). In other words, no matter what circumstances someone finds themselves in, they are responsible of their own actions and their own lives.



Mr. Lee begins selling opium in India as a means for survival after fleeing from China. Mr. Lee does not have to get into the drug trade to survive, but he chooses to do so because it is easy and a source of easy money for him. Dimple, though learning about opium from Lee, and despite being transgendered, does not have to go into prostitution or drugs in order to survive. She voluntarily goes to Rashid's with opium pipes to encourage Rashid to hire her.

Xavier, Rumi, and Dom, all members of a class beyond the lowest caste of the slums, do not have to use drugs. They choose to use them and to engage in corrupt and immoral behavior for various reasons, such as seeking pleasure and adventure. Xavier, Rumi, and Dom do not have to do this, or find pleasure and adventure in such a particular fashion, but they choose to do so. The misery and misfortune that befalls them as a result is of their own making.

The idea that someone must be consumed by his or her circumstances is thoroughly dismantled by Dom's return to the slums of Bombay at the end of the novel. There, he encounters Shankar, a former addict and regular at Rashid's, who, like countless others, was born into the slums. Shankar, however, has taken his life into his own hands. He is now clean, sober, married, employed, and has a steady life although he lives and works in the slums. Despite this, Shankar makes a conscious effort to avoid returning to his past.

There is nothing glorious or redeeming about drug use

There is nothing glorious or redeeming about drug use, argues Jeet Thayil in his novel *Narcopolis*. Thayil, a former drug addict himself, makes it clear that contemporary conceptions about drug use – that it is somehow romantic or wonderful – are all wrong. Thayil explores this in great detail through his characters.

Mr. Lee gets involved with opium as a means of financial survival. Lee's addiction to opium, however, takes a massive toll on his body and hastens his death. He is so addicted and so weak by the end of his life he can only get high until he dies. Despite seeing what drugs can do to a person, Dimple commits to a life of drugs herself. Each time readers encounter Dimple, she is thinner, more haggard looking, unhealthy, and ultimately, described as very ugly. Dimple's health is so wrecked by her use of drugs that even after she gets clean, she falls ill and eventually dies.

Rashid's own drug addiction fuels his violence toward his family, such as his son, Jamal. Rashid's binges wreck his body to the point that he realizes he must clean himself up or he will die. He does this, but his life has been so disrupted by his drug addiction that he spends the rest of his life cooped up in his old apartment. Jamal betrays the tenets of his Islamic faith to sell drugs, compromising his moral and spiritual integrity to the point of hypocrisy.



When Dom returns to Bombay after being away for over a decade, he is intrigued to see how much, and how little, the city has changed. Dom goes to speak to Rashid to learn about what has become of the people they used to get high with. Rashid reveals the stark truth of drug addiction: most of their crowd are dead, either directly from their drug addictions, or, as in Dimple's case, the consequences of drug use even after getting clean. When Dom returns to his apartment to get high, the idea that everything the reader has just read can be understood as the argument that to do drugs is not to actually live. Real life is, instead, wasted.

Drugs are not a victimless crime

Drugs are not a victimless crime, argues Jeet Thayil in his novel *Narcopolis*. Toward the end of the novel, Sopor makes the argument that "Either way, I'm free to make a choice because it affects no one else in the world except myself, and that, friends, is the happy and unadorned truth of the matter" (251). Thayil uses the novel to deconstruct this argument.

First, the idea that doing drugs affects only the self is not an argument to do drugs. It is demonstrative proof that affecting the self is itself a crime against the self – to violate one's health and life in all its aspects. Injuring oneself is still an immoral act. Additionally, should one overdose, die, or require some sort of help or assistance, one is now affecting other people because other people will have to come and help the one who has used drugs. Dimple, in ill-health, must rely on the kindness of others after she gets clean to survive.

Second, the idea that doing drugs only affects the self is spurious, as someone like Sopor does not make his own drugs. Even when one does make one's own drugs, others are affected. There is a trade in raw materials, the growing and harvesting of plants for drugs, the processing of the drugs, the selling, dealing, and using of drugs, and the crimes, manipulation, violence, corruption, and crime that spring up as a result. Sopor's so-called use of drugs alone at home comes at the end of a long and winding trail of other lives affected by his use of drugs. Additionally, to get high, Sopor will do whatever he must to get the drugs. The same is true of Dom, who lies to Rashid about why he wants an opium pipe.

Third, should one be loved, cared for, or depended on by others, one is directly affecting others. Lee's opium-addict father sells everything in the house in order to buy opium to feed his addiction. Rashid's drug-altered mental state fuels his violence against his children. Rumi's wife is cheated on by Rumi, and the family's hard-earned money goes into Rumi's drug and prostitution habits.



Styles

Point of View

Jeet Thayil tells his novel *Narcopolis* in the first-person and different, unidentified third-person point of view in a chaotic kind of stream-of-consciousness. The first-person narrator, Dom, narrates different parts of the novel, including early on and at the end (for it is through his eyes the novel begins and ends as an opium dream); and narrators shift and the plot suddenly changes continuously through the course of the novel. As the novel unfolds, there are many references to “he” and “she” without clear notice of who they actually are – until either later on in the chapter or until there are enough clues to make a determination. This is done intentionally to create a sense of confusion, uncertainty, and illogic, all reflecting the drug high of the characters portrayed in the novel. This can cause the reader to become easily confused or misled, but this is done intentionally to demonstrate that drug use is not the clairvoyant experience it is hyped as.

Language and Meaning

Jeet Thayil tells his novel *Narcopolis* in language that is simple, questioning, and flowing by way of stream-of-consciousness. This is done in conjunction with the confused narration of the novel to create a hazy and convoluted form of writing that is representative of a drug user’s mental and emotional state when high. In only particular places of the novel will there be moments of sober clarity, such as when, in recovery, Dimple says, “When you come down to it, the high life, that is, the intoxicated life, is the best of the limited options we are offered –why would we choose anything else?” (229). In other places, there is almost absolute confusion, especially when characters are actually high and narrator and character alike are unable to make clear sense of reality, of dreams, and of imaginings. Consider the confused but prescient discussion on love and life that Dimple has with Dom: “Well... I’ve learned some things, to my cost, the kind of thing you’re better off not knowing if you mean to live in the world. For example, I know something about love and how lovers want to consume and be consumed and disappear into each other. I know how they yearn to make two equal one, and how it can never be” (12).

Structure

Jeet Thayil divides his novel *Narcopolis* into four major parts preceded by a prologue, and with each part being divided into chapters. Each chapter therein is divided into sections, marked by changes in plot, or have no delineations between changes at all. The parts and chapters of the novel, numbered and entitled, provide a rough guide to the events of the novel, with the chapter titles reflecting the events of that chapter. Each part is also titled, and the title also reflects the events that occur within that section of

the novel. For example, Part 4, The Uses of Reincarnation, deals with life begun anew after drugs, while Book 3, Chapter 7, Business Practices Among the Criminal Class: C & E, deals with the shutting down of Rashid's due to Rashid refusing to bring in cocaine, as well as the reopening of Rashid's when a supplier's son is kidnapped to be used as leverage to reopen the shop. The confusion within the chapters themselves reflects both the stream-of-consciousness of the novel, and the idea that the entire novel is reflective of the mindset of a drug-addict.



Quotes

Well... I've learned some things, to my cost, the kind of thing you're better off not knowing if you mean to live in the world. For example, I know something about love and how lovers want to consume and be consumed and disappear into each other. I know how they yearn to make two equal one, and how it can never be.

-- Dimple (Book 1, Chapter 1)

Importance: Here, Dimple speaks on differences not only between men and women, but about knowing things about the world. Primarily, Dimple talks about what it means to live in the world. For the narrator, not knowing about things like love allows a man to separate his soul and his animal appetites, and indulge himself in life. Love forces one to live for another, rather than living for oneself. Women do not separate the soul and animal appetites, and consider them the same. To love means doing something other than drugs, and a life with drugs is not a life of love.

We're waiting for a glance or a word, some acknowledgement that we are here. If you dip your hand you'll hear us. You should listen. Even if you can't bear it, you should listen.

-- Narrator's dream self through Dimple (Book 1, Chapter 1)

Importance: During an opium-fueled dream, the narrator confronts himself through a vision of Dimple. The narrator has an inner being, an inner soul, an inner voice that he has been ignoring. He is told that that inner light is with him, but that he only needs to engage it to listen to it – even if he cannot stand what that inner voice is saying. It is clear that inner voice is a moral conscience.

Time is a bomb; the world is on fire.

-- Song lyrics (Book 2, Chapter 7)

Importance: Lee recalls his involvement in the bloodbaths in the Communist Party of China, including being arrested for reporting on a rebellious general. Being abducted and thrown into a cramped truck, Lee remembers song lyrics that seem fitting to the occasion. Time changes everything, and that there is chaos in the world is what the lyrics seem to mean to him at present.

This is our reality. Anything can happen to anyone at anytime.

-- Wei (Book 2, Chapter 7)

Importance: Wei describes the world of the slum in which Dom, Dimple, Rashid, and others live and deal. Life in general is impossible to predict or get ahead of, but life in the slums of Bombay is impossible. Drugs, murder, death, adultery, prostitution, sickness, poverty – all these things make up the lives of those like Dimple and Wei.

This is what he thought about as he lay beside his sleeping wife, Rumi told Dimple, and it have him pleasure to remember the adventure with the prostitute...



-- Narrator (Book 3, Chapter 7)

Importance: Here, the author offers a unique insight into the mind of one of the novel's many characters. Rumi, despite the chaotic state of his life, still has a stable place to call home and a wife. Rumi's deviations are of his own choosing, rather than those that are thrust upon him. He has a job with his wife's family that pays well. Rumi is ironic: whereas other characters like Dimple and Dom are trying to get away from the life they live, others like Rumi willingly indulge in that same life.

She said, tell me about your life upstairs, what is it like to have a family and never be lonely?

-- Narrator, quoting Dimple (Book 3, Chapter 9)

Importance: Dimple comes to admire Rashid because Rashid – despite his drug addictions and immoral life – still has a family and children. Rashid is never lonely, though he is unhappy; Dimple is unhappy, and is always lonely. Rashid does not recognize what a gift his family is. Instead, he beats up his son.

...there are no innocents and no bystanders, because all living things play an active role in their incarnations...

-- T.S. Pande (Book 3, Chapter 9)

Importance: While reading a book about reincarnation, Dimple absorbs an important piece of information that applies to everyone no matter what they think. Everyone's life touches another – even when it comes to personal choices someone thinks are personal and do not affect others. People are the central figures in their own lives, and all lives touch upon other lives somehow.

...love me because I'm poor and alone like you.

-- Dimple (Book 3, Chapter 9)

Importance: Dimple's own ascent out of drugs and the slum world of Bombay comes through her discovery of Christianity by way of Pande's book about reincarnation. Dimple has always believed in God, but has chosen to ignore Him for years. Dimple realizes that her life is going nowhere, and that she is only wasting it away. The eventual path on which she is on is death. Dimple, though she does not get clean immediately, now sets herself on another path that begins to diverge from the one on which she is on.

It was around this time, while the city killed itself and the smell of charred flesh hung in the air, that Rumi told her he'd killed someone, or almost killed someone.

-- Narrator (Book 3, Chapter 10)

Importance: Part of Dimple's decision to get clean comes through the way she sees the way the city is eating itself alive. So much sin – from drugs to prostitution to crime to violence – are parasitic rather than sustaining or life-affirming. To live by the sword is to



die by the sword. To try drugs is to die by drugs. To live a horrible life is to die by that life.

I'll die if I stay here.

-- Dimple (Book 3, Chapter 11)

Importance: Dimple finally realizes what her life in Bombay means. When she learns Dom is going to be leaving the city, she is desperate to leave as well. She tells him that if she stays in the city, she will die in the city. She knows exactly what the future has in store for her. However, instead of bringing her with him, Dom puts Dimple in a rehab facility.

When you come down to it, the high life, that is, the intoxicated life, is the best of the limited options we are offered – why would we choose anything else?

-- Dimple (Part 3, Chapter 12)

Importance: Dimple explains, at rehab, why so many people in the slums aspire to lives of crime, drug addiction, intoxication, and so on. She explains they do this because the intoxicated life is the best life they have available to them in the remnants of the caste system of India and the limits of the slums. The intoxicated life helps to create classes, belonging, popularity, and success – as far as these things are possible in the slum life.

Either way, I'm free to make a choice because it affects no one else in the world except myself, and that, friends, is the happy and unadorned truth of the matter.

-- Sopor (Part 3, Chapter 12)

Importance: Here, drug-addict Sopor argues that his decision to go home and do drugs does not affect anyone beyond himself. His statement is one of irony: his drug use does, indeed, affect others. It affects the people who grow, process, sell, bribe, manipulate, force people into addiction, profit off the addictions of others, commit violence against others in the drug trade, and so on. It also adds to the overall slum world from which drugs come. Nevertheless, Sopor's argument provides a direct counterpoint to the book which Dimple reads that contends there are no innocents and bystanders.

Dance or we die.

-- Fahreen (Part 4, Chapter 3)

Importance: When Fahreen and Jamal attend a nightclub, she tells him he can sell drugs because none of the other people in the club are Muslims. The brand of Islam that they practice opposes their selling of drugs to other Muslims, but not to other non-Muslims. In some respects, this breaks the confines of the slum world of the past because it excludes certain people from being targeted by the drug trade, but in many respects, all it does is make things worse and highlights the hypocrisy of someone like Jama – who himself suffered because of the slum world, and now preys upon others who will in turn suffer.