

Freedom in Fragments: An Existential Reading of Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis**

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Abstract

This paper explores Thayil's Narcopolis (2012) through the lens of existential philosophy with a precise focus on how its characters, particularly Dimple, the protagonist, grapple with freedom and self-deception in this shadowy world of addiction and marginality. Using some of the key insights from Sartre, Heidegger, and Camus, such as bad faith, authenticity, and thrownness, the study attempts to explore how the protagonist struggles to find meaning in lives that are marked by loss, dislocation, and narcotic escape. Notably, the opium den in the narrative is not just a physical refuge but a symbolic space where personal responsibility is evaded and freedom is quietly surrendered. The narrative also stages moments of painful clarity and existential reckoning, especially with special reference to Dimple's later reflections on her life. In this way, Narcopolis presents the problematics of a layered human struggle to negotiate with the existential weight of choice and freedom.

Keywords: Freedom; Bad faith; Addiction; Thrownness; Authenticity; Marginal lives.

Introduction

Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* follows a fragmented narrative centered on the dispossessed, the disoriented, and the drug-addicted denizens of 1970s–90s Bombay. In many ways, the novel engages the broader currents of Indian Anglophone literature, from postmodern fragmentation to South Asian urban imaginaries. This paper, however, hones in on the novel's existential dimensions by drawing on some of the philosophical insights of Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus with a view to illuminating its portrayal of freedom and self-deception. The story revolves around Dimple, a transgender *hijra* who aspires to achieve authenticity and meaning amid social marginalization and addiction. Through her complex relationships with Dom Ullis (the drug-addicted narrator), Mr. Lee (a melancholic Chinese exile haunted by trauma), and Rashid (the opium den owner turned mystic), the narrative explores existential crisis and the ceaseless search for meaning. Dom cannot escape his addiction and alienation; Mr. Lee clings to a nostalgic past in exile; and Rashid oscillates between piety and vice. Accordingly, each character navigates personal suffering, delusion, and fleeting moments of clarity. In this sense, Sandeep Mishra calls it “a turn from the allegorical novel to the phenomenological novel of consciousness in pain” (40). This turn, in a way, also aligns with Jean-Paul Sartre's idea that “man first of all exists... and defines himself afterwards” (*Existentialism Is a Humanism* 22), which simultaneously highlights how the characters swing between striving for meaning and resisting it. As Arpita Sen observes, *Narcopolis* offers “a lacerated poetics of city and self” (111), depicting a city and selves in fragments.

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Jeet Thayil is best known for his Bombay Trilogy: *Narcopolis* (2012), *The Book of Chocolate Saints* (2017), and *Low* (2020). These novels chronicle the psychic and physical decay of Bombay from the 1970s to the early 2000s. Unlike dominant narratives in the public domain—such as Salman Rushdie’s mythic *Midnight’s Children*, Vikram Chandra’s gritty *Sacred Games*, or Suketu Mehta’s nonfictional *Maximum City*—which often frame Bombay through cosmopolitan vitality, resilience, or noir spectacle, Thayil’s portrayal is resolutely subterranean. *Narcopolis*, in particular, constructs a counter-narrative by way of foregrounding addicts, hijras, exiles, and sex workers living in the shadows of the metropolis, and in this way, the novel deconstructs the city’s seductive mythos and presents instead a landscape of narcotic haze, existential drift, and broken time. It is against this larger backdrop that *Narcopolis* emerges as a philosophical meditation on freedom and meaning, set within the ruins of urban disenchantment.

Before proceeding, it is worth highlighting that scholars have examined *Narcopolis* through lenses of gender performativity and embodied trauma or as a commentary on postcolonial urban space. The present paper, however, engages with the novel’s rich intertextual dialogue with existential philosophy, and this is how the paper aims to affirm that *Narcopolis* is far more than only a tale of drug culture and urban marginalization; rather, it is a profound meditation on freedom, bad faith, and the possibility of authenticity amid despair.

Existential Unrest and the Search for Meaning

Narcopolis unsettles conventional realism from the very outset and plunges the reader into opium dens that operate outside the normal civic order. As Ritu Arora observes, the novel’s disintegrating narrative and hallucinatory style serve to “[unsettle] the reader’s horizon of plain realism” (74). The opium den in the story thus becomes a liminal space where ordinary expectations, social order, and responsibility dissolve. In Sartrean parlance, the pervasive opium haze symbolizes bad faith. Subin T. Daniel and Binod Mishra note that “The characters in *Narcopolis* turn to drugs as a way of obliterating personal responsibility... the opium den becomes a metaphor for Sartre’s notion of bad faith” (52), where characters deny their freedom and accountability. In this context, the entire narrative can be read as “a philosophical metaphor for postcolonial disorientation” (117), as Priyanka Mehta puts it—a world thrown off balance where individuals, like postcolonial Bombay itself, struggle to find their bearings.

Dimple, the protagonist, represents the tortured quest for meaning. She, being a transgender woman living and working in Rashid’s brothel and *khana* (opium den), forms the existential heart of *Narcopolis*. Her very body is a site of conflict and meaning. As Neelam Sharma describes, Dimple’s gendered self “is both hyper-visible (as a source of spectacle and violence) and radically invisible (as a person denied subjectivity)” (102). In other words, society sees her as an object of curiosity or scorn but refuses to truly see her as a full subject. She lives in fear of being truly seen and judged by others. This fear reflects the tension between her facticity (the given facts of her existence: being a *hijra* sex worker in a brothel) and her transcendence (her capacity to project beyond those facts toward a different future). Her anguish “arises from being caught between facticity... and her transcendence, her dreams of learning and independence” (Renu and B.K. Jha 235). Consequently, she yearns to live freely, manifesting that “the only way to deal with an unfree world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion” (Albert Camus 91). In this way, her very life in the brothel is a constant rebellion and negotiation.

This internal battle is evident in how Dimple straddles two worlds. She does not remain cloistered in the brothel. She spends her days at the *khana* and forges unique bonds (for example, with Mr. Lee). This is how she seeks to reinscribe the confines of her marginalised position. However, crucially, she never entirely rejects her origins at the brothel. This suggests that unlike a character in total denial, she does not utterly renounce her facticity; however, she

also fails to take concrete steps toward the transcendence she dreams of and drifts in a state of self-deception, telling herself comforting lies rather than risking change. As Jonathan Webber explains, bad faith often involves “pretending that our characters are fixed and unchangeable” (89). Dimple at times does pretend that her lot in life is unalterable, and, in this way, her predicament, as Kritika Joshi observes, is “fragile and enacted through precarious negotiations with desire, violence, and abandonment” (58). Thus, she is constantly negotiating her identity under difficult conditions, trying to survive in a world that offers her little agency.

A striking illustration of Dimple’s identity struggle is the mask of *Zeenat*. Rashid, the opium den owner, at one point asks Dimple to wear a burqa and gives her the Muslim name Zeenat to fulfill his own fantasy. Dimple acquiesces to this role without protest, as if she desires to try on a new self. Notably, even as she plays this role, Dimple inwardly recognizes its absurdity as she also considers the burqa a costume designed by men afraid of their own lusts (a sharp insight into the garment’s patriarchal symbolism). As a result, she continues to alternate between sarees and burqas, effectively existing as “Dimple or Zeenat, Hindu or Muslim” (Thayil 158), as circumstances demand. This identity performance underscores an existential fact that Dimple is *being-for-others* by refusing to be her *being-for-itself*. Jean-Paul Sartre states, “Human reality is a being that is what it is not and is not what it is” (*Being and Nothingness* 58). Accordingly, Dimple’s oscillation between her true self and the role of Zeenat dramatizes this fluidity. Every time Dimple becomes Zeenat to appease Rashid, she is, in Sartrean terms, denying her authentic self and exhibiting bad faith.

The pressures of the gaze further complicate Dimple’s quest for authenticity. She is constantly objectified by men, and, at least initially, she herself craves this objectification as validation. The narrator notes that men would look at Dimple lingeringly—drinking in “the freshness of her, her white skin and black eyes, and the red leaves of henna that trailed from index finger to wrist” (Thayil 56). Subin T. Daniel and Binod Mishra underscore that Dimple’s “identity is constantly negotiated through external gazes and social constraints” (53). Dimple enjoys the power and allure of her beauty, and she is terrified of losing it. She works hard to maintain her appearance for others and feels as if her beauty is the only asset that gives her life meaning, signifying self-deception. She herself admits, from beyond the grave, “I was the deadest, and I was covered in blood” (Thayil 19)—a chilling confession that she felt *dead* even while she was alive. The implication is that by never truly living for herself, by ‘dying’ into the roles others imposed on her, Dimple had been spiritually dead long before her physical death. Jean-Paul Sartre argues that “to live without embracing freedom... amounts to non-being” (*Being and Nothingness* 439). Dimple’s life, lived largely in bad faith and fear, is a kind of non-existence—a living death. As Jean-Philippe Deranty notes, existence is intimately related to freedom as “an active engagement in the world” (209). By that measure, Dimple’s disengaged, passive life was barely an existence at all. Little wonder that Pankaj Vaishnav describes Dimple’s persistent feeling of death-in-life as not merely metaphorical but “existential” (4), and her condition illustrates the dire consequence of bad faith: a life unlived, a self lost.

Mr. Lee is a poignant counterpoint, becoming a kind of existential mentor to Dimple. In this sense, their relationship stands out as a rare instance of genuine care and understanding. With him, Dimple feels seen and valued as a person. In existential terms, this could have been an ‘awakening’ for her—an opportunity to pursue authenticity (to “take up [her] existence in totality” (Martin Heidegger 263). However, Mr. Lee himself is mired in his own form of bad faith. Like Dimple, he relies on opium to numb the pain of his past rather than confront it directly. As Subin T. Daniel and Binod Mishra observe, opium for Mr. Lee “is a metaphor not just for escape but for deferral of being” (53). He confides to Dimple that “he needed opium for its pain-killing properties, just as she did... It was a bond between them, the itemizing of pain” (Thayil 69). Thus, even as Mr. Lee and Dimple share a compassionate bond, it is founded on their mutual escape from pain rather than a mutual overcoming of it. Dying in a *strange*

land terrifies him, and his final wish is thoroughly unfulfilled: he makes Dimple promise to “rebury me in China. However long it takes, you rebury me” (Thayil 120). Dimple, caught in her own difficulties, ultimately fails to carry out this promise—a failure that will come to haunt her.

By the end of this first part, the analysis establishes a world where the protagonist is steeped in existential unrest and, in different ways, is searching for meaning while simultaneously running away from it. The next section will further examine how Dimple enacts patterns of bad faith and how she variously flees from the anxiety of freedom and the weight of responsibility.

Bad Faith and the Anxiety of Freedom

In this section, the analysis explores the protagonist’s responses to the anxiety of freedom in the sense that many of Thayil’s characters cling to fate, addiction, or social roles to avoid facing the truth of their freedom. Tellingly, our thrownness (the givens of our situation) “does not limit our freedom; rather, it defines the conditions under which freedom emerges” (Martin Heidegger 174). However, the protagonist often gets this wrong, behaving as if her thrown conditions (poverty, gender, trauma, etc.) negate her freedom, when in fact those conditions are precisely the backdrop against which meaningful freedom must be exercised.

Dimple’s trajectory, in the latter half of the novel, exemplifies this dynamic, as she continues to use opium and later graduates to *garad* (a crude, impure form of heroin) to numb herself; however, this substance, in turn, brings hallucinations and nightmare visions. In this way, Dimple, after the death of Mr. Lee, is haunted by his ghost, which is a psychological manifestation of her unresolved guilt. The narrative describes that “...she didn’t take his ashes home with her and find a way to return them to China” (Thayil 122), and so Mr. Lee’s presence lingers in her mind. The narrative underscores her condition: “All she’s sure of is her own solitude and regret and, above all, her anger” (Thayil 158). As a result, she is now alone and regretful. Existentially, Dimple has not yet accepted what Heidegger would call ‘Being-guilty’. Martin Heidegger argues that guilt is an inescapable part of being human—it is “not a fault; it lies in the being of Dasein, even when it has not done anything wrong” (237). That is, simply by existing and having to choose, we incur ‘guilt’ because every choice negates innumerable other possibilities. Dimple’s case dramatises a more concrete guilt, i.e., breaking a promise to the dead. Deep down, she knows that it was her responsibility, however difficult.

As the narrative moves into the 1990s, Dimple’s alienation becomes more pronounced. Communal violence and social shifts have changed Bombay, and Rashid’s opium *khana* is eventually transformed also. Rashid now gives her a separate room to live in, halfway between the *khana* and his household. Despite the fact of transitioning to a quasi-domestic space, Dimple finds no community as Rashid’s wives refuse to speak to her. She drifts in a limbo of not belonging anywhere, which signifies that her predicament here is not just social isolation but a deep ontological loneliness. She is confronting what Albert Camus calls the absurd: “the confrontation between the human and the unreasonable silence of the world” (28). In this silence, she begins to question what her life means and what role she has in anyone’s world. She wonders what place she holds in Rashid’s life beyond the transactional (sex and occasional conversation). Interestingly, Rashid’s interaction with Dimple remains largely sexual and secretive. The narration notes that “He had an aversion to touch, to any kind of friendly touching, and cuddling was out of the question. He didn’t like to be seen with her in public” (Thayil 190). This painfully shows that Rashid, for all his professed care, is ashamed of Dimple in the eyes of society. She is kept literally and figuratively in the shadows. The narrative likens their lovemaking to that of “the plague-stricken couple” (Thayil 191) who have frantic sex “to the death” (Thayil 191)—a comparison that frames their union as desperate and void of genuine human connection. Having denied real affection, Dimple’s world shrinks further. Her drug use intensifies to the point where she notices “the chemical is rotting her mind” (Thayil 192). She

begins to have paranoid hallucinations: “I have conversations with a dead man, and I think I’m being spied on” (Thayil 193)—a stark piece of evidence of her mental deterioration. At this juncture, she has not yet grasped the existential insight that even a ‘thrown’ existence without inherent meaning is “not a tragedy but a call to invent meaning” (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism* 24).

There is a poignant event that facilitates Dimple’s self-recognition, i.e., her experience of watching a Bollywood film with Rashid. In the movie’s plot, the character played by Zeenat runs away from a broken home, renames herself Janice, and manages to forget her past life. This event strikes Dimple to the core, and she begins to fantasize about reinventing herself with a new name to perhaps start over and leave her painful past behind. However, *Narcopolis* is unsparing in showing that such fresh starts are illusory. Dimple soon comes to the realization that no change of name can erase the wounds of her early life. “She understood the exact nature of Janice’s suffering. To know you were unloved by parents was a wound that never healed” (Thayil 168). This moment is pivotal. All her attempts at forgetting (through drugs, through adopting new personas) have failed because that existential wound remains. Here we see Dimple on the cusp of an existential breakthrough: she is recognizing her thrownness, i.e., the permanent facts of her past, as an inseparable part of her.

However, even in this moment of clarity, Dimple flinches. She makes an existentialist error as she refuses to accept Sartre’s dictum that “We are our choices” (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism* 25). The protagonist, instead of owning her present choices, has been blaming her past for what she has become; it is a subtle form of bad faith. In this sense, she is on the verge of this realization but not quite there yet. Here, it is interesting to highlight that Rashid becomes a catalyst for her movement toward freedom. As his own life unravels, he offers Dimple a peculiar form of respect. What is also striking is that she eventually chooses to wear the burqa of her own free will, no longer merely to please Rashid but as an assertion of control over her life. Speaking counter-intuitively, the garment that was once a code of her oppression becomes a tool of her agency. By deciding for herself when and how to present as ‘Zeenat,’ Dimple performs her agency, realising that “her life at the brothel was coming to an end” (Thayil 128). She begins to see a possibility to redefine her existence, a first hint of authentic resolve. At this juncture, Sartre’s idea “freedom is what you do with what’s been done to you” (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations* 40) is very apt. Now, she exercises choice and aims to transcend the boundaries of her inscribed existence. A character nicknamed Bengali observes that Dimple now seems to hold sway over Rashid, almost as if their dynamic has flipped: “She talks as if she is his wife, and Rashid listens like a husband... she’s his business partner, and she’s better at it than he is” (Thayil 176). In other words, this shift from object to subject is a crucial step in her existential journey, and when Rashid finally acknowledges his love for Dimple, she, for the first time, is openly affirmed as a person of value. Jean-Paul Sartre held that “to love is, in essence, to affirm the other’s freedom” (*Being and Nothingness* 474). Dimple experiences an intersubjective recognition that she has never felt before. Martin Heidegger also confirms that the true recognition between people “is not the abolition of difference, but... the basis of mutual recognition” (159).

Reckoning, Responsibility, and the Possibility of Authenticity

This section explores the moments of existential epiphany and suggests that even in this bleak landscape, transformation is possible, which is a painfully won self-awareness. The true emotional crescendo of *Narcopolis* comes when Dom and Dimple’s paths cross one last time. Once, Dom goes to a *garad* den for a fix and meets an older, ruined woman he barely notices. As he waits in a stupor, he gradually realizes that the disfigured woman serving him is none other than Dimple. Time and drugs have ravaged her: she is toothless, with a visible hole in her chin from disease or addiction.

As Dom prepares to leave the place, the protagonist suddenly approaches him and pleads, “Take me with you; I’ll die if I stay here” (Thayil 221). This simple, desperate request signifies her existential awakening. At the brink of literal and figurative death, she finally chooses to act. In this plea we witness what may be Dimple’s first wholly authentic choice: she confronts the nothingness that yawns before her and asserts her will to live. As Nivedita Patel interprets it, Dimple’s cry is not “a cry for rescue but an assertion of lived agency, a final refusal of being reduced to non-being by narcotic passivity” (89). In asking Dom to take her along, Dimple is effectively refusing to fade into nothingness. Dom, moved perhaps by old affection or compassion, agrees to take Dimple out of the den. Now, Dimple expresses one last wish: she wants to see the sea “as if she wanted the sea to send a boat to collect her and take her away, take her somewhere calm and clean, where she could rest and repair her own wounds” (Thayil 222). Dimple’s desire for the sea is essentially a desire for transcendence, for deliverance from the rot that has consumed her life. Interestingly, the protagonist attains a kind of authenticity and peace that eluded her in all her years of living. By choosing at last to leave the den and face the world, she embraces her lonely existence on her own terms. In existentialist terms, the protagonist demonstrates “her desire to transcend the rotting of the self” (Pankaj Vaishnav 8). She no longer blames others; she actively rejects excuses and embraces responsibility for herself. This is the essence of what Sartre would call good faith, i.e., living honestly and owning one’s freedom.

The preceding discussion adequately foregrounds that the novel presents a world of fragmentary lives, caught between illusion and reality, denial and recognition. However, Dimple’s late-life lucidity and agency demonstrate a movement (however fragile) toward existential authenticity. Notably, *Narcopolis* does not offer a traditional redemption. Instead, the novel frames redemption as a matter of degree and moment: a fleeting clarity here, a merciful act there. The ending is deliberately unresolved in the sense that Dimple’s story, for example, is left fragmentary, and this lack of closure is itself a statement, i.e., existence is an open-ended project. Perhaps that is the point Thayil drives home: to exist is not to find eternal peace but to have the continuous ability to choose, to fail, and to choose again in the face of absurdity. In this way, the novel is less a tragedy than a reckoning. Even in their most broken states, individuals have the ability to make choices (as the protagonist finally did) and thereby assert meaning. In this sense, *Narcopolis* is far more than just a tale of addiction or social decay; it is a meditation on the fragmented pursuit of freedom amid despair. It celebrates, in a subdued yet profound way, movement over inertia, self-authorship over self-deception, and presence over erasure. In one of the existential reflections often attributed to Albert Camus, “To exist is to change, to change is to mature, to mature is to go on creating oneself endlessly” (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 45).

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