

Debility and The Maimed Metropolis in Narcopolis

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Abstract

This essay reads Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* (2012) through Jasbir Puar's concept of debility to investigate how the novel constructs marginal bodies and the urban space of postcolonial Bombay as sites of injury, bodily deterioration and state neglect. While there is a significant scholarship on the novel's representation of addiction and urban decay, this essay argues that the central concern of the novel is that of state-sanctioned manufacture of debilitated lives through layers of intentional marginalisation like poverty, gendered violence and environmental toxicity. Employing Puar's debility, Achille Mbembe's necropolitics and Rob Nixon's slow violence, the essay introduces the primary setting, Shuklaji Street, as a liminal political space between being made to live and being made to die. The essay critically looks at how the novel's form – fragmented chronology, stream-of-consciousness narration, and syntactic disintegration – reproduces this condition of temporal and bodily erosion. Using critical discourse analysis, the essay reveals how the novel's language reveals the structural erasure of agency in these bodies. Dimple's gender-nonconforming and repeatedly injured body further demonstrates how debility is produced through the intersection of gender, sexuality, poverty, and addiction. Finally, the essay reads Rashid's opium den and Bombay itself as debilitated spaces, arguing that the den functions as a heterotopian infrastructure in which bodies excluded from normative regimes of productivity can temporarily coexist. Ultimately, it argues that debility is not an individual pathology but a structural and aesthetic condition where survival itself is an extended form of institutional violence.

Keywords: Debility, Necropolitics, Slow Violence, Postcolonial Urbanism, Gendered Precarity, Structural Violence

1. Introduction: Maimed Geographies And The Biopolitics Of Neglect

In Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*, the forlorn, drug-laced residents of Shuklaji Street experience slow death. Describing the residents, the narrator muses, "my memory is like blotting paper, my full-of-holes, porous, shreddable non-memory, remembering details from 30 years ago..." (Thayil, 2012, p. 7)— which could double as how the state sees these residents: porous and shreddable, residing in the state's non-memory. Stealthily autobiographical, Jeet Thayil conjures a psychedelic world with a myriad of characters with amusing quirks, situated in the margins of society, in death worlds, beyond the state's ordained care: Zeenat, a eunuch, neo-literate; Mr. Lee, the Chinaman; Rashid's Opium Den. A narrative capable of multiplying discourses, *Narcopolis* is nonetheless often convincingly read as a novel of addiction, urban decay, and postcolonial Bombay (Gomes, 2014, pp. 244–246; Daniel & Mishra, 2021, p. 45). Yet existing criticism has yet to account for the unsettling political reality beneath its hallucinatory prose, its prosaic quality likened to Henry James, and the slow manufacture of debilitated lives. Long before Bombay is transformed into the neoliberal spectacle of Mumbai, Thayil situates his characters within Shuklaji Street, a forgotten urban enclave populated by bodies calibrated for survival at the threshold of death. Existing beyond welfare yet beneath citizenship, Rashid's opium den functions as a liminal social world inhabited by those whom the state neither fully protects nor completely abandons. Jasbir Puar's theory of debility offers a compelling framework through which to understand this condition. Positioned between Michel Foucault's biopolitical imperative "to make live" and Achille Mbembe's necropolitical sovereign right "to make die," Puar identifies a third political logic: the sovereign impulse "to maim" (Puar, 2017, p. 137). Rather than producing immediate death, power increasingly sustains populations in conditions of perpetual bodily deterioration. *Narcopolis* unfolds within precisely this tactical grey zone.

Palestine becomes a central case in this regard. Scholars reading Puar's work describe it as showing how settler-colonial violence can permanently disable targets and normalise injury as a political technique (Puar, 2017, p. 128; Puar, 2021, pp. 166–167). In that framework, some damaged bodies are rehabilitated or included, while debility continues to be produced elsewhere along lines of race, class, nationality, gender, sexuality, and colonial difference. Situated in India's political landscape, this maps onto a unique axiom of marginalisation: anybody who does not conform to class, caste, gender, or religious hegemony suffers acute state negligence, their life produced as disposable. The characters in the novel reside in a space where their bodies have been rendered useless in terms of capitalism. According to Puar's concept of the neoliberal "will to capacity", contemporary capitalism demands endlessly productive, resilient, self-managing bodies while simultaneously creating the material conditions that make such productivity impossible for entire populations (Puar, 2017, pp. 13–15).

The novel starts with seven pages of an uninterrupted sentence, which is also the first chapter. An unusual stylistic choice is further coupled with an unstable, possibly posthumous or drug-altered "I" to produce the narrative effect of necropolitics. Necropolitics names the organisation of life at the edge of death through war, abandonment, racial hierarchy, exclusion, and the management of dead bodies (Gouws, 2024, p. 45; Protasov & Loshkariov, 2026, p. 88; Sumba, 2021, p. 48) — a politics of death centred on sovereignty, coloniality, and unequal exposure to mortality, one that also illuminates India's regulation of non-normative bodies. The stream of consciousness illuminates the "temporal erosion" that permeates the lives of bodies living under necropolitics. It refuses outright climactic relief to the readers.

The opening lines, "my memory is like blotting paper, my full-of-holes, porous, shreddable non-memory, remembering details from 30 years ago," have both an *asyndeton* and a *synathroesmus* (Thayil, 2012, p. 7). An *asyndeton* is a repeated cluttering of words without a conjunction in order to produce an effect of cataclysmic breathlessness. The adjectives are synonymous, and yet with the progression of the sentence, they embody a starker nature of disintegration. The same idea of debility is reinforced and intensified, in

the form of a rhetorical device called synathroesmus.

The entire first chapter forebodes the perilous lives of the characters. The unreadability, the incongruous word placements, and the complicated syntax are a legitimate attempt by Thayil to refuse us (an assumed dominant reader) entry to the lives of these people. The use of achronological, fragmented chapters is both a mimetic construction of debility itself, not only through plot but also through the narrative structure, and is also a stylistic choice to resist dominant ideology. Édouard Glissant's "right to opacity" argues that Western/colonial power demands transparency that the colonised subject must be fully legible, translatable, comprehensible to the dominant culture (Glissant, 1997, p. 189). Opacity of language, form, or meaning that resists full comprehension becomes a way to preserve the narrative's autonomy (Adorno, 1997, p. 23)

Throughout Shuklaji Street, addiction, malnutrition, disease, respiratory illness, psychological deterioration, and bodily exhaustion have become ordinary reality. It is characteristic of Puar's debility, which is defined as the sustained wearing down of populations through political, economic, and social structures rather than individual pathology (Puar, 2017, p. 139). Thayil's descriptions of smoke thickening the air, bodies collapsing onto charpoys, deteriorating lungs, and faces weathered by years of opium consumption transform impairment into the dominant atmosphere of the novel. The interior of the den is that of accretion, not incident. No single image of the novel is dramatised as a crisis; each is folded into the same ambient register as the last. The formal levelling of verbs like "thickens" embeds impairment more as the atmosphere of the novel, a space where debility persists.

2. Beyond Pathology: Debility, Capacity, and the Limits of Liberal Disability Frameworks

The novel repeatedly depicts bodies that exhibit the physical consequences commonly associated with disability, yet the chronicity of their pain is accepted as normal, rendering them unworthy of medical rehabilitation. Recalling his arrival at the den, the narrator notes driving "through roads mined with garbage, with human and animal debris, and the poor, everywhere the poor and deranged stumbled in their rags or stood and stared," admitting he "saw nothing out of the ordinary in their bare feet and air of abandonment" (Thayil, 2012, p. 12).

The word "mined" is an overt metaphorical reference to a war zone, a physical space where necropolitics can be the most sensorily perceived. However, the "garbage" is denied metaphoric quality, as it sits next to "poor" in the same sentence. This is called overlexicalisation through categorical equivalence. The grammar doesn't argue that the poor are debris; it simply positions them there, letting classification perform the ideological work as opposed to an explicit comparison. (van Lueewen, 2003, p. 27)

The word "abandonment" is a nominalization, where there is no overt subject or object that orchestrates the "abandonment" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 143–144). This linguistic choice mimics the structural diffuse power whose non-intervention is so ideological that it isn't even legible at the level of grammar. The generalisation of "poor" is an active construction to remove the agent, which are the structures that dehumanise the poverty-stricken subjects, likening them to "garbage". (van Lueewen, 2003, p. 32) As Spivak argues, subaltern subjects are structurally denied a position from which to speak as agents; rather than being spoken about, maps directly onto sentences where the poor appear only as categories, never as grammatical subjects performing actions (Spivak, 1988, p. 271–313).

Sociopolitically, this casual acceptance of precarity directly mirrors the state's punitive stance toward real-world users: large shares of arrests under the NDPS Act target personal possession rather than systemic trade, while medical treatment provisions are rarely utilised (Balhara et al., 2024, p. 115). Such neglect exposes the boundaries of conventional disability frameworks. While disability in Euro-American liberal discourse often relies on formal diagnosis, legal recognition, and rights-bearing citizenship

(McRuer & Johnson, 2014, p. 155), debility names the slow, unrecognised wearing down of populations through precarity, environmental toxicity, and structural neglect.

The bodies in Narcopolis bear the marks of this slow violence, yet their injuries never become sufficiently legible to warrant constitutional protection. Female and gender-nonconforming bodies, in particular, are rendered killable through legal terror, dispossession, and the erasure of grievability (Rathour, 2023, p. 326; Sharma, 2025, p. 42). This structural vulnerability is compounded by inescapable financial precarity: "For people like her, for the poor, the only incredible thing in the whole world was money and the mysterious ways in which it worked" (Thayil, 2012, p. 95).

Money is mystified in this context, by being referred to as "mysterious". By doing so, Thayil presents money as a quasi-divine entity that is beyond human comprehension and individual control. This is representative of what it means to live under state negligence; the grammar of dissatisfaction and dissent is even erased on a linguistic level. This eliminates any agency that a non-normative person has under such a system, where financial sustenance is at best arbitrary and unaccountable. By perceiving money as something inexplicable, the ideology of the dominant structures interpellates subaltern subjects like Dimple to feel that their lack of money is inevitable and an unchangeable and ordinary fact of life.

3. The Economy of Slow Violence: Temporal Erosion and Postcolonial Governance

Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence further clarifies the temporal structure of this debilitation. Violence in Narcopolis rarely arrives as a singular catastrophic event; instead, it accumulates gradually through toxic environments, addiction, poverty, informal labour, and social abandonment (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). In the post-colony, violence is described not only as instrumental but as embedded in governance itself, producing an economy of death through diffuse, non-state power (Mbembe, 2003, pp. 11–40). These structurally debilitated bodies are subjected to violence dispersed invisibly across years, quietly eroding their nervous systems, lungs, memory, and desire. Thayil's recursive narrative mirrors this temporal logic. The novel resists dramatic climaxes in favour of prolonged deterioration, suggesting that structural violence is most effective precisely because it escapes immediate visibility—a claim that demands an ethics of location, attentive to how such violence is read differently depending on where one stands (Spivak, 1988, p. 275). This structural wearing down is reflected in the interiority of its characters: "He read because it gave him instant gratification in a way nothing else did, and as was the case with all addicts, gratification was the important thing" (Thayil, 2012, p. 84). The tragedy of Shuklaji Street is therefore not simply that its inhabitants die, but that they continue living while their capacities are systematically diminished.

When Carl asks why she takes drugs, Dimple, our queer protagonist, replies that addiction offers "the comfort of it... an antidote to loneliness... it becomes your family" (Thayil, 2012, p. 182). Her response shifts addiction away from moral failure and towards survival. Introduced as a hijra and later subjected to repeated forms of bodily modification, Dimple occupies the intersection of gender variance, poverty, addiction, and urban precarity. Drawing upon Puar's notion of assemblage, Dimple emerges as radically relational, shaped less by individual agency than by the infrastructures that continually produce vulnerability (Puar, 2007, pp. 211–216). Within the punitive social landscape surrounding drug use, queerness, and poverty in India, her body remains permanently exposed to injury. In this sense, the state governs not through direct annihilation but through the continual production of diminished life.

The narratorial quality of fragmentation that lingers through the text is the same structure that Dimple uses to describe her dependent relationship with drugs. The ellipses in the speech embody the accretion that replaces explanation in the text. There is a gradual escalation from "comfort," which is purely affect, to medicine, to kinship. Subverting the traditional pathologising imposition on addiction, for her, addiction is

survival. The sentence persists to retain an active grant of agency to addiction; “it” remains an impersonal subject that further solidifies the grammar of dispossession in the text.

4. Gendered Necropolitics: Assemblage, Precarity, and Transfeminist Resistance

Dimple's precarity is legible only through the same structures that Puar identifies in her earlier work on homonationalism, where the inclusion of some queer subjects depends on the production of racialised others as threats (Puar, 2007, pp. 38–42). As a hijra in postcolonial Bombay, Dimple occupies the position of the excluded rather than the included, her gender variance offering no path toward the recognition homonationalism extends elsewhere. This exclusion is reinforced by the fact that citizenship law and public discourse decide who counts as belonging and who becomes vulnerable (Chakraborty, 2020, pp. 330–339; Palacios, 2014, p. 55)—determinations from which Dimple, doubly marked by gender non-conformity and addiction, is structurally excluded. Her exposure to injury is compounded by the way bordering and legal abandonment let both state and non-state actors govern women through threat and destitution (Heimer, 2022, p. 142), a condition Dimple shares with the other women of Shuklaji Street, for whom Rashid's opium den substitutes for the protections the state withholds.

Dimple, an intersex by birth, defines herself as “woman and man are words other people use, not me. I’m not sure what I’m. Some days I’m neither, or I’m nothing. On other days I feel I am both.” (Thayil, 2012, p. 11)

Transfeminist critique's push beyond a narrow, institutional "women's politics" is instructive here, since Dimple's hijra identity cannot be assimilated into conventional feminist or citizenship frameworks. Work on racialised citizenship makes a parallel argument, showing how media and law construct respectability and degeneracy in ways that determine who has a rightful claim to belonging (Palacios, 2014, p. 28) — a claim Dimple's body foreclosed by definition.

This pattern extends to diffuse violence toward LGBT bodies more broadly, where social discourse marks certain groups as more vulnerable to rights violations (Ribeiro et al., 2021, p. 215), and to the Indian context specifically, where feminist discourse has often suppressed caste and been marked by an upper-caste perspective, leaving Dalit women, like Dimple, with little institutional support (Chakraborty, 2020, pp. 330–339). This fits broader necropolitics work arguing that gender was underdeveloped in Mbembe's original account, but that the framework becomes most useful precisely when extended to gendered death and resistance (Islekel, 2022, p. 89)—which is exactly the register in which Dimple's slow debilitation must be read.

Dimple's body modification keeps resurfacing in the novel with the uncomfortable social reality. She was surgically altered as a child, and she carries the injury with her into adulthood. She is seen instinctively touching her scar at several points in the novel. A gesture that reads less as recollection but as a subconscious compulsion, her body litigating violence that she doesn't have the vocabulary to narrate. Her body becomes an archival record of this violence, directly inscribed on her flesh. This leaves her in a condition of chronic injury and mental destitution folded into one continuous state. As a sex worker, she has little control over her own body, and that lack of control isn't separate from the violence done to her as a child. The two belong to the same continuous pattern of dispossession.

5. Conclusion: Spatial Heterotopias and the Manufactured Metropolis

Against this backdrop, Rashid's opium den functions as an alternative infrastructure for the management of debility. It also resembles what Michel Foucault terms a heterotopia: a real space that exists in tension with the dominant social order, simultaneously inside and outside it (Foucault, 1986, pp. 22–27). Within the den, the relentless demands of capitalist productivity are temporarily suspended. The smokers are not

required to maximise efficiency, accumulate capital, or perform normative health. The den therefore represents a paradoxical sanctuary — a space that neither cures impairment nor exploits it but allows exhausted bodies to exist outside the relentless pressure of neoliberal optimisation. If the modern city demands capacity, the den makes room for incapacity.

The den's heterotopian quality is visible not only in its suspension of productive time but also in the company it assembles. Thayil catalogues its occupants as a 'hodgepodge': Dimple, who 'looks like she could be Mr. Lee's daughter' without being so; Rumi, a caste mark alongside cowboy boots; and Rashid, whose faith is lost, replaced, then reclaimed. Each figure is introduced as a contradiction the world outside the den would not accommodate (Thayil, 2012, p. 153). Newton Pinter Xavier's paintings make this explicit: his 'altered Christs... remain firmly outside the purview of the British isles, and... that of the Indian subcontinent' (Thayil, 2012, p. 13) — belonging fully to neither the colonial metropole nor the postcolonial nation, existing, like the den itself, in the interstitial space Foucault's heterotopia names. The den does not resolve these contradictions. It exists to hold them, becoming a site where identities incompatible with the dominant social order can coexist without being forced to cohere.

It is in this den that the drug-induced residents find alternative discourses to strengthen themselves. There are frequent philosophical meditations on religion, violence, sex, and art, with each one attempting to cope with the perils of personhood.

Dimple names this directly: "It isn't the drama of heroin that we're addicted to, it's the drama of life, the chaos of it . . . the intoxicated life is the best of the limited options we're offered." (Thayil, 2012, p. 231). This summarises the primary intent of the novel. Dimple resists the pharmacological reading of addiction but directly questions the conditions under which one resorts to addiction. Yet, even in this moment of temporary agency, her speech unconsciously assumes the same linguistic constructs. She is unable to produce the name of an agent, replacing it with the passive, impersonal subject, "it". Rumi immediately replies, "You've got to face facts and the fact is life is a joke. . . There's no point in taking it seriously because whatever happens" (Thayil, 2012, p. 232).

As the narrator writes, "I found Bombay and opium, the drug and the city, the city of opium and the drug Bombay" (Thayil, 2012, p. 7). Ultimately, Narcopolis suggests that Bombay itself is the novel's most profoundly debilitated body. As the city gradually transforms into neoliberal Mumbai, redevelopment, speculative capital, and urban gentrification reorganise urban space according to the demands of productivity and consumption. Entire neighbourhoods become expendable while the populations inhabiting them are slowly worn down through poverty, toxic environments, and institutional neglect.

The novel starts with defining itself as a story about "Bombay, which obliterated its own history by changing its name and surgically altering its face . . ." (Thayil, 2012, p. 1). The spatial politics of the novel is underlined in the beginning itself by asserting the shifting nature of the overlapping layers of several cultural interactions. This is strongly elucidated in the plethora of characters co-existing in the den. 'Surgically altering' anticipates the language later used for Dimple's own body: the city is debilitated in the same terms as its residents marked, cut, and reshaped by forces it does not control. The obliteration, moreover, is causal rather than descriptive. The city's history is erased by its renaming, language itself enacting the violence rather than simply reporting it, the same mechanism by which 'abandonment' and 'offered' elsewhere evacuate agency from acts of structural harm.

Bombay is the tireless psyche of all these debilitated bodies and many others, capturing the collective longing of its forgotten citizens: "We're waiting for a glance or a word, some acknowledgement that we are here" (Thayil, 2012, p. 279). In this world, the deepest tragedy is not death but the normalisation of lives lived in perpetual proximity to it, a condition in which survival itself becomes the most enduring form of

violence.

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