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JEET THAYIL WAS IN THE CITY TO ATTEND A POETRY IN TRANSLATION WORKSHOP. IN A CANDID CHAT HE TALKS ABOUT HIS LOVE FOR 'BOMBAY' AMONG OTHER THINGS

Saima Afreen

When author, musician and poet Jeet Thayil is not weaving a story from opium clouds of Bombay-based dingy dens, he is busy writing poetry or engaged in a translation workshop. His recent work 'Collected Poems' is a melange of old and new poems. The winner of 2012 DSC Prize for South Asian Literature was in town for Poets Translating Poets workshop organised by Goethe Zentrum Hyderabad. We caught the other side of Thayil - the funny man, who while enjoying his morning drink, was set for a rapid fire round that turned out to be whacko, witty and yet loaded with dark humour much like his debut novel 'Narcopolis'. Excerpts:

What was it like being into drugs and writing poetry at the same time? Were you inspired by Coleridge?

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The narrative of Narcopolis is poetic. Did you do it deliberately? Or was it natural?

I wanted to do something very different. I wanted to do something really unpoetic. But then as I was writing somebody kidnapped my cat. I had a very beautiful cat that I liked a lot. Three days later, the kidnapper gave me a phone call. When I answered, I heard the cat meowing and then I

heard this voice telling me that if I don't write a poetic novel, my cat will die! Maybe it's true, maybe not. (chuckles)

The raconteur in 'Narcopolis' begins the story and disappears. Did you get influenced by Joseph Conrad's technique in 'Heart of Darkness'?

Are you talking about Conrad the conman? That's the only Conrad I know (grins). I was in a restaurant in Bandra, Bombay. A sleazy one, that one. I ordered a *keema ghotela* with a fried egg on the top. The waiter brought the dish with a double whiskey. I had my food and drank the whiskey. Then I looked for the waiter. But he was not there. I looked again but he just was not there. Then I realised that this could be a technique for a novel. Just the way he disappeared, why can't the narrator of my novel disappear. And that's how it happened. Joseph Conrad had nothing to do with my technique.

In that case, are we going to see this disappeared character again in your upcoming work?

You are going to see it soon, as I, too, am going to disappear.

Are you done with Bombay having excavated its alleys of drug mafia, eunuchs, the goons and typical bhaagir? Also, when you say Bombay and not Mumbai are you stuck in some frozen time-zone?

Oh, I don't think I have done that at all. I think there are many more layers of excavation of that city waiting to be carried out. I just, maybe, have touched the surface of it. I don't think anyone can do with that part of Bombay. That city is endlessly, inexhaustibly, vibrantly alive in that area, particularly.

No, in fact, I tell all my friends, who come to India from other countries and go to Bombay and do the mistake of calling it Mumbai, I correct 'em. And I tell them that whatever you do please call it Mumbai and not Bombay. Then they apologise and buy me endless rounds of drinks to make up for their sin. (guffaws)

Quite a blasphemy, eh? Of course, it is a blasphemy! How can one take away such a lovely word 'Bombay' and replace it with an ugly

word 'Mumbai' especially when you do not belong to Shiv Sena!

You once quoted Auden in an interview: 'Writing makes nothing happen'. How justified do you think your comment is?

I just added another word in uncle Auden's quote! Do you think this stuff that I am writing or you are writing will bring any change? Who cares? Many people hated 'Narcopolis'. And it might be possible that who hated it might outnumber people who loved it. I don't hold it against them. Some people didn't read it completely and hated the book. In fact, this might be a requirement for being a book reviewer as reviewers don't read the book yet they sound like pundits. And they are read by those who have not read the book and will not read the book. So, they think that these reviewers are brilliant! And they quote the reviewers, who have not read the book! It is like Chinese whisper. I was working for

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- Jeet Thayil, poet, author and musician

this newspaper called India Abroad and my editor told me not to read the books even when those were meant for review.

When you go back to your writing desk will it churn a novel?

Yes, it will be a novel. But I'd rather not disclose about it as I am superstitious. All I can say is that half of it is set in India.

On poetry translations...

Translating poetry is absolutely unjustified. It's like putting a gun to the head of a very small puppy and saying: 'What do you mean?' The puppy just barks and wags his tail. The puppy doesn't care. He doesn't worry about meaning of translation in another language. The puppy is just happy to be there; to be this lovely delightful object that you can read and someone else can read and find pleasure in.

Complex cityscapes appear and disappear in your works. Do you think they are temporary prisons for a poet?

That's a very nice question. I never thought about it. I am a poet so I am perverse and I like to be inside the prison.

Which side of you overpowers your work: the poet, novelist or musician?

I think the side that overpowers everything at the moment; the side that wants to have another beer (grins).

Does a poem change when it is performed on stage?

It's like Quantum Physics. Performance has its own requirements. Even the act of performing a poem changes it. Often in the change the elements of improvisation are interesting especially when you perform a poem written long back.

How has journalism shaped your writing?

I think it was good in terms of shaping my skills as an editor. I have been a journalist for years. I have learnt editing for concision and compression. Those were very good lessons.



PICT: VINAY MADAPU