Reading the Disnarrated: Traumatic Memory, Disrupted Communication, and the Crisis of Modernity in Jeet Thayil's *Low*

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Introduction

Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth argues that the lack of preparedness to respond to an external threat upon the onset of a traumatic event causes it to evade our awareness and result in a missed encounter with the event. This "overwhelming immediacy" of trauma leads to its "belated uncertainty" and makes its impact felt on the survivor after the event has passed (Caruth, *Trauma* 6). Trauma thus refuses to be reduced to a single event but rather acts as a "double wound" that "occurs too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly" in the form of flashbacks, nightmares or disturbing thoughts (Caruth, "Introduction" 3-4). As the event remains inaccessible to the survivor initially, it leaves a void in the consciousness that is difficult to be recalled voluntarily. Contingent upon memory, it resists easy communicability in language and leads to a crisis of representation.

Such effects of traumatic memory are evident in Jeet Thayil's *Low* (2020), which plays out over a single weekend when Dominic Ullis arrives at his apartment in Delhi to find his wife, Aki, dead by suicide, inducing in him a state of panic and numbness. Ullis flies to Bombay to immerse Aki's ashes in the waters of "the city he knew best, where oblivion was purchased cheaply and without consequence" (Thayil 5). During his wanderings in the modern Bombay that now reeks of urbanisation and symbolised a world indifferent to its impending doom, he is haunted by his past conversations with Aki in which she had frequently warned him of her recurrent retreats to what she called 'the low' – a melancholic territory which only she could access, its impact exacerbated by the conditions of modernity. His active attempts at forgetting, thus, are thwarted by a trail of intrusive thoughts examining the reasons for her suicide. Filled with the guilt and regret of his ignorance towards his wife's deteriorating mental health, Ullis is left with no choice except to forge a hallucinatory world to exchange forgiveness with her.[1] His narrative of grief thus emerges as a disjointed one that defies linearity of time. Although such a narrative structure accentuates the circular nature of traumatic memory, narrative "possibility," apart from narrative "rupture," should be considered for representing trauma, thereby establishing the need for narrative experiments (Luckhurst 89).

This paper examines how Gerald Prince's concept of 'the disnarrated,' constituting "events that did not happen, but, nonetheless, are referred to" manifests itself in Ullis's memory and imagination, as he is reminded of events that *did* happen between him and Aki, to express his regret for the ones that did *not* but could have, to prevent his wife's suicide (3).[2] By observing disrupted communication in these past instances and their successful imaginary communication in the present, the paper observes Ullis's journey of grief as guided by 'the disnarrated' to retrospectively translate for himself Aki's experience and his unresolved emotions surrounding his traumatic loss. Drawing upon John F. Schumaker's arguments connecting mental health with modernity, the paper proposes that Aki's depressive condition and eventual suicide are consequences of her loneliness and unfulfilled relationships aggravated by the modernisation that characterises the urban landscape. Finally, it establishes disnarration as a powerful tool for mediating between an imaginary, hopeful world premised on communication and the bleaker modern reality where mental health issues are silenced or stigmatised and thus fail to be expressed – allowing for a socio-cultural critique.

Narrative Rupture: Ullis's Disjointed Trauma Narrative

Low has a third-person narrator who narrates Ullis's experience of trauma upon losing his wife. During Ullis's wanderings in Bombay, he looked for oblivion to submerge his memories with her, using "powdery or liquid substances" as a means for fortification against grief (Thayil 16). Self-healing was difficult for him, while forgetfulness seemed like a blessing. However, bubbling underneath was an all-pervasive anxiety. The more he tried to forget the past, the more it chased him. As Caruth says, flashbacks allow the traumatised to "relive" and "recover a past that encounters consciousness only through the very denial of active recollection" ("Introduction" 152). This constructed for Ullis his own disjointed narrative – of his memories with Aki, reflections on the present state of the world around him, and imaginary conversations with his dead wife – complemented by the narrator's commentary throughout. Such a series of flashbacks, flash-forwards, and digressions contributes to the non-linearity of this narrative, drawing attention to the circularity of traumatic memory and emotions intertwined with loss.

Low demonstrates that the human experience of grief is subjective, and traversing through loss is a personal journey that may crave solitude instead of a spontaneous overflow of concern and consolation from people known and unknown. When Ullis learned of Aki's suicide, he was first struck by panic, which "sat like a heavy bear on his chest" for many days as he attempted to come to terms with the reality (Thayil 3). The third-person narrator reflects on the manner in which loss can provoke other-worldliness – Ullis "felt separated from his body… as if he'd been insufficiently anaesthetized" (Thayil 13). He remembered not the cremation process but the impact it had left on him: "he'd been shaken by [the priests'] indifference and dazed by all that was expected of him" – such knowledge gaps are characteristic of traumatic memory (Thayil 3). Caruth says about traumatic events that there is "latency within the experience itself " – Ullis's grief was not repressed or forgotten, as it would be for Freud, but had not been experienced till the time her memories started coming back to him (quoted in Pederson 31).

Ullis's experience of loss thus also illustrates that grieving is not a mechanical process comprising of a linear series of "pointless" rituals (Thayil 3) or of stages including "anger, violence, negotiation, nirvana, so on, so on" (163), but a circular one "with no beginning and no end" (166). Intense feelings may come and temporarily recede, only to revisit against one's conscious will. Since the truth of the traumatic event cannot be known or experienced at the time of its occurrence but returns to haunt later on, it is in this voluntary inaccessibility that the central aporia of trauma lies (Caruth, *Trauma* 152). Grieving involves comfort that flows only in one direction, and in Ullis's case, it mostly flowed in the reverse as he was the one comforting those who consoled him for his wife's suicide. Like Ullis, who, under the simultaneous effect of trauma and drugs in the city of paradoxes, oscillated between remembering and forgetting, highs and lows, his narrative also generates a mixed mood and a disjointed structure, unbalanced as life itself.

Narrative Possibility: The Disnarrated in *Low*

According to Judith Herman, the fundamental dialectic of trauma is "the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud" (1). As Ullis set out to seek fortification against the traumatic experience of Aki's suicide, his memories kept resurfacing. The inaccessibility of a traumatic event and its dependence on memory makes it difficult to be organised, causing narrative rupture while creating a need for exploring possibilities of narrating trauma. According to Prince, the disnarrated can encompass expressions of "impossibility or unrealized possibility… observed prohibitions… ignorance… nonexistence, purely imagined worlds, desired worlds, or intended worlds," among others (Prince 3). Prince's ideas on disnarration first appeared in a 1988 essay for *Style*, were developed in his 1989 essay in French ["L'Alternarré"], and were subsequently published in 1992 as a chapter in his book *Narrative as Theme*.[3] The disnarrated manifests itself differently in works and with varying degrees of

explicitness. Prince's concept has been examined by scholars as both a discourse-level and a story-level phenomenon. It has been built upon by others to examine questions of plot, to identify the presence of linguistic markers like negatives and counterfactuals and their function such as creating suspense, or for its use as a structuring principle or a characterisation device.[4]

In *Low*, linguistic markers of disnarration are present but rare, such as the use of negation. The most prominent examples are the life slogans that Aki and later, by variation, Ullis adopted. Sunk into a low-like state after Aki, who lived life by the catchphrase, "Don't worry. Nothing will happen" (Thayil 90), he modified it into his own mantra, "I don't see why not" (14). At many points, his state, his beliefs, or his actions echoed Aki: his belief in the nothingness of life ["He was all out of resources, inner and outer" (Thayil 55)] or rising environmental concerns, or his death-wish [Before immersing his wife's ashes, he wondered: "How easy it would be to slip in and let go and sink, to breathe inside the deep. Nobody would attempt a rescue." (162)] By responding to others' propositions with the five-word phrase of double negatives instead of a simple 'yes,' Ullis compels the reader to catch glimpses of possibilities often ignored or taken for granted when we say 'no' to life's experiences, and to the cues that the universe wants to give. Aki's unexpected suicide, for which he blamed himself, transformed him into a person who began "to see the living as brief and wondrous apparitions, each worthy of affection and attention" (Thayil 183). Simultaneously, it also reveals an underlying feeling of strength that follows grief – "Nothing bad could happen because the worst had occurred" (Thayil 172). He feared no other "catastrophe" now that his greatest fear had materialised: "his wife [was] dead by her own hand" (Thayil 88).

However, unrealised possibilities can also be conveyed without linguistic markers. Disnarration pertains to tellability (termed by Prince as narratability), which entails that something is worth telling because it could have been otherwise. Singh argues that since the disnarrated is either overtly remembered or can be inferred from a text, it is "worth narrating and worth remembering" (144), unlike the unnaratable, which according to Prince, is "not worth narrating" (1) because of reasons like convention, narrator's knowledge and narrative importance.[5] According to Prince, the disnarrated can be present as "terms, phrases, and passages that consider what did not take place…whether they pertain to the narrator or his narration… or to one of the characters and his or her actions" (3). This paper argues that "the events that did not happen" (Prince) or the "forking paths" (Baroni) that disnarration is often helpful in revealing are not mentioned explicitly in the text, but reside in Ullis's traumatic memory, as he is reminded of events that took place, while expressing his regret for the ones that did not.

Behind Ullis's drug-addled weekend odyssey in Bombay is a lurking subtext of his remembrances of Aki's attempts at telling him about her problems and her wish to die, which either missed being communicated or were miscommunicated in their conversations – a psychological consequence of modern urban living. Her mental health experience in the territory of 'the low' as narrated in Ullis's recollections continued to be overlooked by him. Ullis's de-romanticised present, where he had "ashes in a box clutched in his unworthy hands," stands incompatible with the bohemian romanticism of his dead partner to whom he had promised, "We'll help each other stay alive" (Thayil 28). Disnarration thus presents itself in Ullis's memory and imagination, as he gets flashbacks to Aki's attempts at conversation while expressing his regret for having missed them. As failed communication of words and meanings takes the shape of death for him and comes back in his memories to haunt him, he proceeds to either drown his reminiscences in alcohol and drugs or self-flagellate himself through guilt trips.

Mosher builds on Prince's idea to include in the disnarrated "words that are not expressed but could/should have been, [and] acts that could/should have been performed but are not" (Mosher 407). Oscillating between highs and lows, Ullis eventually attempts to render his unresolved trauma into a believable alternate reality, where he is able to complete the

conversation with Aki through hallucinatory imaginings – manifesting the disnarrated by definition. A critique of contemporary society, where mental health issues are usually brushed under the carpet, thus surfaces, as their modern life marked by disrupted communication contrasts with the imaginary world that lets Ullis and Aki have the difficult conversation that should have happened earlier and could have prevented her suicide.

Disrupted Communication: What Could Have Happened

Aki had expressed her fascination with death and her long-nurtured wish to die on her first date with Ullis: "Ever since I was little…I've wanted to die" (Thayil 27). Ullis had regrettably failed to read this longing of hers. She had often mentioned to him about her episodes of what she called 'the low' – periods of extreme physical and mental exhaustion - that he had failed to understand. She often used to complain to Ullis that nobody loved her; however, she didn't blame anyone for this, but it did open for her gates to 'the low,' "the great constant of her life," which she could always access or return to (Thayil 27). She was unafraid of anything in life – violence, physical danger, isolation, or intimidation. Her experience lay silent in her vivid dreams and fantasies of dying and escaped timely communication. Ullis regretted not seeing the ample clues she had recorded in the form of signed declarations from him and poems and emails for him. Her dissatisfaction with life, her immunity to surprise or shock, her liking for goodbyes, and her reluctance to bring children into a world she perceived as uninhabitable and dying – his traumatic memories now compelled him to put the pieces of the puzzle together.

While various factors associated with modernity are responsible for depression, Aki's 'low' seems to emanate from her loneliness and unfulfilled relationships. Characterised by advanced scientific understanding and meaninglessness, modernity makes us vulnerable to nihilism, adversely impacting our mental health (Roberts 277). John F. Schumaker argues that the conditions of modernity have given rise to forces, processes, and cultural motivations leading to an enormous mental health crisis – "an age of insanity" (1).[6] He observes that if a culture does not recognise the need for social connectedness, its members will be vulnerable to psychological and emotional disorders (7). Aki had an isolated childhood, reinvented herself as a bully in school, could not marry the man she loved, and eventually decided to spend life with a man she barely knew. Her unhappy life had made her averse to the idea of bringing children into a world nearing its end. Her mental health deteriorated due to her discontent with the modernity that shapes the urban landscape and is characterised by social alienation, impaired affective communication, and disorientation, among others (Schumaker 28).

There were also times when Ullis disrupted communication by evading conversation. Colin, the singer of Aki's favourite song 'Wonderful Life,' had been appearing recurrently in her dreams. Trying to understand her fascination with his shy smile and his expression of need for a friend, she asked Ullis, "Did it mean I was depressed?" (Thayil 36). It is the only instance in the text when Aki's 'low' is explicitly referred to as "depression." Although an absence of the use of biomedical terminology by the narrator or characters suggests Thayil's unwillingness to pathologise or homogenise her experience, he does intend to remind the readers of the silence surrounding mental health issues in the contemporary society and the urgent need for timely confrontation. Even though Ullis wanted to revert to Aki's question in the affirmative, he deliberately chose to respond with "I don't know," as he thought it would have depressed her further (Thayil 36). Such myths and misconceptions are emblematic of the lack of mental health awareness, resulting from and leading to evasive behaviour like Ullis's. Their conversation speculating the reason behind Colin's death ended abruptly and remained as "one of the things he [had] put off for later," regrettably, because he thought "there would always be time for the

small things" (Thayil 37). It was only when it was too late that Ullis lamented how he had ignored Aki's earnest belief in the mortality of human life.

Ullis is traumatised by how Aki had constantly warned him about her probable slipping into the 'low' "as if it were a full-time job… [or] a republic to which she had a multiple-entry twenty-year visa…[or] her low country lay everywhere like a vast spiritual archipelago" (Thayil 89). He was aware that these episodes turned the most threatening when they coincided with her menstrual periods – that is, when hormonal imbalances, physical discomfort, and mental disturbances simultaneously hit her, causing severe mood swings. Yet, despite all signs, no precautions were taken – they argued in the car about Aki's decision to quit her frustrating job, and he came home late that day – even though it was the first day of her periods. His attempts at drowning himself in oblivion through drugs reflect his regret and anxiety of having been a failure "as a husband and a man" (Thayil 5).

As missed communication points to the silence around mental health in modern society, there are also instances of miscommunication in Ullis's remembrances when words fail to translate into their intended meaning. Although Aki had warned Ullis of her 'low' in their first meeting itself, "the words she'd used were so simple and so terrible there could be no reply" (Thayil 88). In responding to her father's thoughts on Colin Wilson's "most brilliant" book, *The Outsider,* and his appreciation for the book's "continuing relevance to 'modern questions of existence and nothingness,'" Aki pretended to believe that existentialism was "so twentieth century" and she couldn't care less, as against her otherwise apparent tussle with such questions throughout the novel (Thayil 157). From the novel's description of Aki's condition, it is evident that her experience of the 'low' was ignored because of the stigma associated with mental health issues – although it was alluded to by Aki repeatedly in her conversations with Ullis, he was unable to grasp its meaning and significance, her attempts residing in her crushed hopes. Ullis had once told her that she should never share her dreams with anyone, but what he had meant was that she should only tell them to those she trusted. However, the failed timely translation of spoken words and unspoken emotions now lay with Ullis as a heavy knot in his chest, making him feel guilty and remorseful about saying such a thing to his wife, which he now perceived as an unforgivable crime.

Aki was evidently frustrated at the recurrent failure of her attempts at communication with Ullis, as it was difficult for her to initiate a conversation about leaving her job: "I've been meaning to tell you but I don't know how to say it" (Thayil 101). Her apprehensions were proved right as an argument immediately followed, which later returned to Ullis as traumatic memories because it was on the same night that Aki had hung herself. It had certainly taken courage for Aki to decide to privilege her mental health and well-being, and to "let her frustration show" by sharing the problems with her husband, only to invite his disagreement and anger, manifested in his rash driving and threats of a car crash (Thayil 103). Serving as a testimony to the breakdown of communication, this argument took place in Delhi's "murderous traffic" around the India Gate, marked by drivers yelling, cars honking, and "a pall of smoke [hanging] over everything" (Thayil 103). The city life seemed unbearable to her, and she wondered how people could "submit" to its characteristic "unrelieved ugliness" where even the sky wasn't visible (Thayil 103).[7] As their minds "idled in their pollution machines" on the roads of a city marked by hyper-industrialisation, they argued over Aki's desire to quit her frustrating job and start her own publishing house, which, to Ullis's disappointment, was not a wise decision to make as her salary was essential to pay the bills for maintaining their modern urban lifestyle (Thayil 103).

Observing the impact of the physical world on our mental health, Schumaker argues that urban living "turns people in on themselves"; "the perceived indifference of others" unconsciously

causes fear, loneliness, and distrust (140). After the argument, the narrator reveals about Aki, "something had shifted [in her head], she could feel it" (Thayil 105). In the office, when she discussed memories of her relationship with Ullis in responding to questions from her friend Amung, she suddenly felt "the need to communicate" and "find a way to talk to him" (Thayil 107). Was suicide, then, her newfound *way* of communication, her last resort, impervious as he seemed to all other ways? Aki's silenced or ignored experience throws light on the society's unease with initiating discussions around mental health issues, let alone resolving them.

Breaking the Silence: What Should Have Happened

Aki's disembodied spirit accompanied Ullis on his wanderings as an absent-presence – much like the disnarrated itself[8] (Warhol 49) – as tangible ashes in a white box, or intangible memories in Ullis's head and finally as a constituent of Ullis's "each throbbing cell" (Thayil 220). However, a fruitful conversation could only occur when she momentarily becomes a viewpoint character. Appearing from the ceiling like a ghost with "a bloated face, only the lips moving, the bloated eyes half shut," she made Ullis wonder, "Are you here or not here?" (Thayil 131). The ghost underscores the persistence of traumatic memory. It was in this heroin-induced dialogue that they could gather the courage to confront each other, communicate their feelings and achieve closure. It is only in this hypothetical diegetic world that the silence and stereotypes around mental health issues could be broken, and ignorance could be substituted with empathy. By bringing to notice unrealised events or rejecting norms or conventions, the disnarrated makes the latter even more visible. Thus, in cases like these, Prince's proposition "this could've happened but didn't" (3) may also be rearticulated as what should've happened but didn't (Mosher 407).

It is also important to examine here how and by whom the disnarrated is recalled. The choice of the narrative in deciding who is allowed or privileged to recall the disnarrated provides a window into its narrative politics. Aki assumed a voice only in an illusory conversation, where he presented the suicide as Aki's mistake and his wish to forgive her. In other places, too, the narrative is more pronounced about Ullis's grief at his wife's suicide and *his* guilt and regret at not having been able to understand her experience than about Aki's suffering when she was alive.[9] He had been in the quest for forgiveness from her, but now expressed his wish to forgive her.

Another imagined conversation in Ullis's dream-like state provided him an opportunity to understand if their marriage was fulfilling and also became a means to absolve himself of guilt by presenting his side of the story – that he had called her multiple times when he could not find her home and even went out in search of her, that the women in the background of their phone call were not laughing at her but dropping him home, and that she could have waited for a few more minutes as he was on his way to her. This chimerical space of dreams and hallucinations also provided him an opportunity for a possible flash-forward into his life without Aki: he assumed Aki's nudge to let her go as she requested him to stop "beating" and "berating" himself for her suicide, advised him to immerse her ashes quickly, and asked him to "accept heroin as [his] new god" (Thayil 195). And yet, as she asked him to forget her, she asserted the very improbability of it all: "You can't stay away forever. And anyway, wherever you go there I'll be" (Thayil 134). As she reminded him of the saying, "he who saves one life saves the world entire," she paradoxically followed it up with the ultimate truth of existence, "No one will be saved" (Thayil 133).

Modernity's Mental Effects: Eco-Anxiety in *Low*

This sense of impending doom is all-pervasive in the novel. Modernity has not only impacted our relationship with ourselves and other humans but also with nature. Schumaker notes that "the fundamental way in which moderns experience themselves and the world is creating the conditions for an environmental holocaust, and an associated indifference" (155). Our lack of

ecological awareness is worsening our "planetary health" and "giving free reign to the modern ecological pathologies" (Schumaker 156). However, he also observes how, according to some theorists, modern people internalise the threats to their physical world, causing ecological anxiety, guilt, despair, or grief. In the novel, this became apparent not only in Aki but also in Ullis's reflections on ecological ruin. Although he had left the polluted Delhi for his native Bombay to immerse his wife's ashes in pure waters and to submerge himself in the nostalgia of the city he had grown up in, the modern Bombay was a far cry from the ideal healing place he had imagined it to be. On his first taxi ride in the city, he observed a burial site being replaced by a huge monument in construction and deciphered, "the statue's completion and its annihilation would occur simultaneously" (Thayil 7). Later, he realised that it was difficult for him to find pure water not only in Bombay but in the entire country. During his (what was supposed to be a) "joyride" with Brinda and Niranjan, even when they were "in the middle exactly of nowhere," he thus did not miss the chance to immerse Aki's ashes upon temporarily finding "clean and fast-moving" water, which was soon getting replaced by sewage smell and plastic waste (Thayil 161–3). The filthy condition of the city provoked him to ponder over the disastrous consequences of modern living on the planet and made him wonder if displacement is an effective human response to calamity. He subtly extended his argument from Bombay to the whole world and from climate crisis to existential crisis: "It's true of everywhere…It's already crazy we live the way we live…We take pride in our resilience…But it's happening more often and it gets worse every time…Why do you do it? There's nowhere to go and everywhere is the same" (Thayil 196-7). The environmental crisis outside mirrors and simultaneously aggravates the psychological crisis within, adversely impacting our relationships.

His drug-addled Bombay appears like a bricolage of random lurching, taxi rides, dubious deals, dim bars, and decadent parties with friends and strangers alike. The city became for him a metonym for forced oblivion and profound disconnection resulting from the consumption of various chemical substances like cocaine, heroin, sleeping pills, alcohol, and the stimulant drug mephedrone or 'meow meow'. But along with the highs, came the lows, as Ullis, much like Ullyses, wandered directed or directionless, traversing the everyday monotony of the modern world. Striving for balance, Bombay, like the novel itself, emerges as a paradox where death and rebirth occur at once, where "anything [is] possible at the end of days" (Thayil 7). Waking up from bouts of excess that characterise modern living, Ullis found himself "surprised, guilty and vaguely resentful to be alive" in a "noxious city" where skyscrapers tower over slums, unmindful of modernity's environmental or psychological consequences (Thayil 177). Thayil talks about Bombay in an interview: "the city bounces back [in the face of tragedy] because it cannot afford to do anything else. People live from hand-to-mouth, precariously, and they don't take time off to mourn; as a result, the city is always in need of therapy" (Handal 2019). As the novel also puts it, "the new Bombay devoured the corpse of the old… [and] cared only about the life it was living" (Thayil 180–1). There is a pervasive sense of an approaching apocalypse in the novel as if, like Aki, the city too, or perhaps the world, is sinking low. Schumaker observes that the modern identity holds a huge capacity for "environmental dissociation," which allows one to perceive environmental threats but also keep them out of their working consciousness, giving rise to a society marked by "a collective dissociative amnesia that involves a complete forgetting of the human-nature relationship" (157). However, to counter this "strategic cultural blindness," we need a "cultural consciousness" towards achieving a "true state of ecological modernity" that privileges mental health, where it is important for people to feel more disturbed about the environmental crisis and reach a "conscious state of ecoanxiety" in order to bring radical changes for developing harmony with nature (Schumaker 165-7). Only when we connect with nature peacefully can we empathise with each other and develop more peaceful relationships with each other and, ultimately, with ourselves.

Conclusion

The disnarrated embodies the underlying message that the narrator is hinting at in the novel: "Communication is concealment" (Thayil 128). Even as we disclose when we speak, certain details remain with ourselves. However, it is when these details are constantly referred to in the narrative that they constitute the disnarrated. Singh argues that it is the "*time and again* remembrance by the text of all that was possible but did not happen" (emphasis original) that differentiates the disnarrated from the unnarratable and the unnarrated (144). The paper observed how *Low* is replete with Ullis's remembrance of all the times when hints to her depressive condition were either miscommunicated or missed being communicated. There is a sustained looming probability of Aki's survival hinged on the possibility of successful communication with her husband in a world with an open conversation about mental health. In his digressions, often pertaining to politics, Ullis dubs the then American President Donald Trump as "everyman" while suggesting a complete collapse of communication: he observed him as a "living proof that you could say anything and it didn't matter" (Thayil 128). The apprehension behind incomplete communication, failed expression, or untranslatability of difficult experiences also surfaces in the novel when Ullis is expected to say "a few words" for Aki while immersing her ashes "to communicate the infinite and the unsayable" (Thayil 163). He continued pondering: "What was more inadequate or disappointing or futile than a few words? When there was so much to say, why say anything? And where to start?...Why say the obvious?" (Thayil 163)

Disnarration proves to be a powerful tool for mediating between hopeful outcomes and a bleaker reality where such outcomes are unlikely (Freed 207). Although the 'low' seemed to be a pervading presence in Aki's life, there is no mention of any attempt at confronting and resolving the problems it posed. The disnarrated in the novel reminds the readers of the real world where mental illness is silenced and stigmatised while introducing them to an imagined world that holds possibilities of communication and catharsis – inviting them for a socio-cultural critique. During the current mental health pandemic, Thayil's work prompts us to not collude with the collective denial and discomfort surrounding such concerns but look for fresh narrative modes of translating unresolved experiences and unrealised imaginings into reality. Disnarration, therefore, proves useful as "a way of grasping structures of creation and meaning… a discursive practice pertaining not just to narratives, but to our view of… [possible] realities" (Shastri 11).

Notes

[1] The novel has been read as autofiction: Bombay is the city where Thayil spent many years of his life and became a drug addict. Thayil also clarifies in an interview that Aki's character was based on a person from real life – evidently his wife, Shakti Bhatt – who died by suicide in 2007 and to whom the book is dedicated. *Low* can thus be seen as an attempt by Thayil to communicate his own experience of the grief and trauma surrounding her sudden death.

[2] Prince builds upon Shklovesky's idea of negative comparison, Labov's theory of comparators of unrealised events, and Marie Laure Ryan's concept of "virtual embedded narratives."

[3] See: Dannenberg, Hilary P. 2014. "Gerald Prince and the Fascination of What Doesn't Happen," *Narrative*, 22(3): 304–11.

[4] See: Shastri, S, editor. 2016. *Disnarration: The Unsaid Matters*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan. Shastri's edited volume comprises essays that understand the varied use of disnarration in the academic reading of texts.

[5] Robyn Warhol, in her essay investigating the functions of unnarration and disnarration in Dickens novels, identifies four types of unnarratability: the "subnarratable," including "what need not be told because it is obvious or boring," the "supranarratable" constituting "what cannot be told because it is ineffable or inexpressible," the "antinarratable" comprising "what should not be told because of trauma or taboo," and the "paranarratable" involving what "would not be told because of literary convention" (Warhol 48).

[6] Although Schumaker argues this, especially in the context of the Western World, and contrasts it with the Non-Western to show how modernity, according to the Western definition of the word, has not taken deep roots in the Non-West (which, thus, does not suffer a mental health crisis), the traits he associates with modernity are relevant to metropolitan cities like Delhi and Mumbai, marked by rapid urbanisation and industrialisation. In talking about the impact of the physical landscape on its people, he points to the psychological problems associated with city life (139-40).

[7] Later, Ullis pointed out a similar paradox in Bombay life: "I find it hard to believe that people live here. It's uninhabitable for most of the year… It's unlivable, yet people live here." (Thayil 196)

[8] Warhol says this for both the disnarrated and the unnarrated.

[9] When Ullis told Payal about his dead wife, nowhere did her 'low' feature in his confession, which was rather about his own suffering – he believed that Aki intentionally "wanted" him to find her dead to "punish" him (Thayil 81). His rationale behind holding "on to her, to her ashes," was that he was "no good without Aki" (83).

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