

ISSN:0976-8165

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English



Vol. 7, Issue-I February 2016

7 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

www.the-criterion.com

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Contemporary Indian Fiction in English: A Study of Postmodernist Narrative Strategy of Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games*

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Contemporary Indian fiction in English has achieved critical acclaim worldwide, for many writers in this genre have bagged and are bagging international awards too frequently. Aravind Adiga is the celebrity who has won the Man Booker Prize for his gripping and blunt debut novel, *The White Tiger* (2008) in 2008. Jeet Thayil's *Narccopolis* set in the 1970's in Bombay was shortlisted for the 2012 Man Booker Prize. British-Indian writer and Kolkata-born Neel Mukherjee is the latest celebrity whose latest novel *The Lives of Others* set in the 1960's Bengal has been shortlisted for the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 2014. Contemporary Indian English novelists have concentrated, more or less, on the new-fangled set of themes such as globalization and subsequent multiculturalism, post-feminism, cyber-feminism, crime and cyber-crime, cultural conflicts, glamour, consumerism, commodifications, BPOs, upward mobility and consequently erosion of ethical values and transforming public sphere. The earlier generation of writers like Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and Kamala Markandaya expose the desired realities of life to effect the desired transformation in society. They, of course, have influenced later generation of writers in India, in some way or another, in their narrative articulation and the changes in material reality. Indian English fiction has always been responsive to the changes in material reality and theoretical perspectives.

Fictional narratives in the wake of postmodernism have undergone radical changes. The realist tradition of Henry James had held a mirror to the events while presenting a picture of likeness of life and its condition. James's famous statement that fiction "presents slices of life" was predicted to a life that remained predictable and socially constructed. However, the modernists like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf used the stream of consciousness mode while Lawrence and Joseph Conrad although substantially changed the notion of a static society and tried different ways of understanding human reality. Narrative forms kept on changing with the experimentation in surrealism and under the French nouveau-roman tradition. Fictional narratives thus have always been subjected to fresh approaches and new experiments. Magic realism is one such mode of *recit de fiction* that has occasioned taking its inspiration from postmodernism. The novelist at times assumes the form of an omnipresent narrator thereby establishing a close link with characters and situations through his views.

The term 'postmodernism' is sometimes applied to the literature and art after World War II when the morale of the western world was rudely jolted by the atrocities and barbarities

of the Third Reich. The postmodernist fiction centralizes linguistic play but also favours devices such as parody and pastiches; it also draws attention to its own status as writing; it mixes genres such as the detective story and psychological novel; it blends high and low cultures. Further, it distrusts 'grand narratives', for it dismisses overarching historicized cultural narratives and favours small, local narratives. Postmodernism constantly implies that there is no grand narrative or meaning (Lyotard), no larger story to life just as there is no difference between surface and depth, between images and reality.

A narrative is a semiotic representation of a series of events connected in a temporal and casual way. The term, however, is potentially ambiguous in the sense that it has at least two main senses. The first is a broad one which includes phenomena like films, drama, diaries, etc. The other is exclusively verbal: it is dependent on the presence of a narrator, a teller and an act of narrating. This pertains to literary genres such as the novel, short story, epic poetry, etc. Theoretical assumptions on narrative are varied but they could be understood on some basic conceptions. Narrative is primarily considered to underpin all our writing and thinking: articulating all forms of knowledge. As with language, there are certain elements which narratives in general have in common with each other, but also are distinctive and distinguishable through differentiation. Frederic Jameson, however, maintains that the all informing process of narrative ...is the central function or instance of the human mind. A theory of narrative usually begins by distinguishing between 'what is narrated (the story) and 'how it is narrated (the discourse). Postmodern works by Borges, Carpentier, Barthes and many others blend literary genres, cultural and stylistic levels, the serious and the playful, that they resist classification according to literary rubrics.

The postmodern turn in Indian fiction in English can be said to be heralded by Rushdie who, of course, needs no introduction. The successful globalised reception of his novel, *Midnight's Children* led Josna E. Regge to comment, 'The 1981 publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* was a watershed in the post independence development of the Indian English novel, so that the term 'post-Rushdie' has come to refer to the decade or so afterwards in which a wave of novels are characterized by an intense self-reflexivity and allusion to historical personages. He is wonderful storyteller who serves us perfectly nuanced and brilliantly imagined characters through his superb mastery of language.

This paper attempts to offer an accessible account of postmodernist narrative strategy as a distinctive mode of writing and set out defining attributes of the genre in Vikram Chandra's novel, *Sacred Games*. Vikram Chandra is among the new breed of writers who divides his time between Mumbai and Berkeley. His first novel, *Red earth and Pouring Rain* (1995) won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for Best First book and the David Hingham Prize. His first collection of stories, *Love and Longing in Bombay* (1997) won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for Best Book (Eurasia Region) and was shortlisted for the Guardian Fiction Prize. *Sacred Games* (2006) is his latest book and longest too, running to whopping 900 pages. Chandra portrays a faithful documentation of the city's underside from his firsthand experiences. The

significance of *Sacred Games* as a postmodern novel of new India lies in the way the aesthetic techniques in the narrative form embody tenet of neoliberal surveillance and create a narrative panopticon which can be best understood through a Foucauldian paradigm.

Sacred Games, a metaphysical thriller, is a cops-and-criminal story, centering on the detective figure of police inspector Sartaj Singh and the criminal underworld of Ganesh Gaitonde, the most wanted gangster kingpin the dreaded criminal syndicate G-Company in India. The novel is littered with a vast *dramatis personae*. The novel is a magnificent story of friendship and betrayal, of terrible violence, of an astonishing modern city and its dark side. This novel reveals Chandra's sureness of touch and his hold on the narrative structure.

The art of narrative technique is a highly aesthetic enterprise. It is simply defined as an account of a sequence of events. There are a number of aesthetic elements that typically interact in well-developed stories in the novel, *Sacred Games*. Such elements include the essential idea of structure, with identifiable beginning, middle and ends, focus on temporality, namely, retention of the past, attention to present action and future anticipation; and a substantial focus on character and characterisation. In this novel there are elements of intertextuality, with copious connection, reference, allusions, similarities, parallels, etc.

The authorial narration in *Sacred Games* gives the author the opportunity to intervene between the reader and the story, and also the authority to render a scene as he sees it rather than as the people see it. This gritty saga of violence draws upon the best of Victorian fiction, mystery novels, Bollywood movies and Chandra's firsthand research on the streets of Mumbai. Sartaj Singh, the turbaned dapper policeman in 'Kama' in *Love and Longing in Bombay* is the hero of *Sacred Games*. Just as Kashmir is an overwhelming presence in the novels of Salman Rushdie, Chandra's Bombay is the modern Indian city replete with stories that are waiting to be told. This book recreates a world that does its setting absolute justice. In both form and content, Chandra's novel proclaims a self-confessed emulation of the nineteenth century socialist novels and detective fictions. As the description on the blurb of the book reads: "Drawing inspiration from the classics of nineteenth-century fiction, mystery novels, Bollywood movies and Chandra's own life and research on the streets of Mumbai, *Sacred Games* evokes with devastating realism the way we live now but resonates with the intelligence and emotional depth of the best of literature." The similarities are evident in elements of 'realism' and the faithfulness with which the novel delineates the intricate 'realities' of the society. Most reviewers praising the novel focus on this element of 'realism' and Chandra's expert craft laying bare the hidden underbelly of India. The judges for the *Crossword* award for English fiction, Anita Roy, Mukul Kesavan and Shoma Choudhury, asserted their choice of the book in recognition of Chandra's quality as "a master of the Close-up-zooming to capture every nuance and detail of his characters lives" (Citation by Judges). Similarly, reviewer for *The Independent* (UK), Soumya Bhattacharya points out the exemplary realism of the novel, calling it an "excursion in the pleasures of realism: the kind of psychological realism that descends from 19th-century European and English fiction". Frequent comparisons are drawn between Chandra's narrative and dark

world of social realism of Dickens's crime fiction. Similarly for reviewer Karl Pohrt of Shaman Drums, the novel evokes Mumbai "with the same vivid intensity that Dickens brings to his descriptions of London." Mumbai, a metropolitan city, in this novel is portrayed realistically as an illegible terrain resembling Henry Morton Stanley's "darkest Africa." In talking about his underworld explorations for *Sacred Games*, Chandra reveals how he tapped multiple sources that include his adventurous visits to the dens of real life underworld dons like Arun Gawali and his meeting with ferocious mafia, Hussain Ustra.

The artistic technique of Vikram Chandra is revealed through the presentation of the diverse elements with precise details as story teller. As a novelist of immense quality, his great effort to achieve the best work of art stands as a proof for their skillful techniques and impressive artistic ability in bringing together the diverse elements like a craftsman. There are frills in the drawing of the characters that he has done with precision; Chandra brilliantly develops the two main characters - Sartaj Singh, who is honest and committed to his job, and Ganesh Gaitonde, a Hindu gangster, who runs vast empire of criminal activities. The parallel development of Sartaj and Ganesh Gaitonde is skilfully and beautifully done. They are both vulnerable men.

Chandra's presentation of the fact is sensitive. One morning Sartaj, one of the few Sikhs on the Mumbai police force, is forty year old, divorced man who stand out with his emphatic markers of identity through his turban and beard. He often brushes along the dark alleys of the underbelly, has personal contacts among the outlaws and knows the underworld like the back of his hand. One day, Sartaj Singh gets anonymous tips that Ganesh Gaitonde desires to meet him. Sartaj Singh does not know why the gangster has chosen him. The day before he had been called to a man barricaded in his bedroom whose wife wanted to kill him and who kept stabbing a kitchen knife into the door panels. The husband had thrown his wife, while Pomeranian, out of window of their fifth- floor flat while having an interaction with him. Thinking of the poor little body on the pavement, Sartaj Singh says: 'Love is murdering gaandu. Poor fluffy (SG P. 5).' The third person narrative voice dominates his novel which pans on Sartaj as he polices and disciplines the city:

Sartaj shrugged. The Gaitonde they had read about in police reports and in the newspapers dallied with bejeweled starlets, bankrolled politicians and brought them and sold them... The early morning man with the tip-off had hang up abruptly and Sartaj had jumped out of bed and called the station while putting on his pants, and the police party had coming roaring to Kailshpad in a hasty caravan bristling with rifles. (29)

He had failed in the past to track Gaitonde and then sets out to find out the legendary boss of the G-Company, the legendary mafia crime, Ganesh Gaitonde, is held up in a nearby safe house. Sartaj Singh and his colleague, the constable Katekar waits outside for the notorious ganster, Gaitonde, who demands to speak only to Sartaj. Sartaj Singh tries to keep the feared mafia don talking in the house, but by the time he and Katekar get into the building, the notorious criminal has committed suicide killing his female companion.

The story develops. Sartaj and his colleague tries to unearth the cause of Gaitonde's suicide and identity of the dead woman. Sartaj investigates into Gaitonde's contacts and past, and proceeds to Gaitonde's revelation of secrets, and a recapitulation of a dramatic murder. His superiors inform him that the Government's top intelligent agency RAW will oversee the case and urges him to find out everything he can about Gaitonde's last day and about the woman found with him. Above all, his superior informs him that this investigation must be kept secretly. When Sartaj Singh plods off dutifully in search of details, Gaitonde's autobiographical narrative was so rudely interrupted by his suicide.

The novel teems with several other characters revealing the multifaceted aspects of the Mumbai urban life – the dance bars, the lower middle class life of the constables, the chawls or slums, the network of religious gurus and the corrupt politicians. However, the main focus of the novel is on Gaitonde's recounting of his early days, the genesis and summation of his criminal career and his ultimate death.

One of the sub-plots of the novel involves an Indian intelligence officer K.D.Yadav. The man has knowledge about the whereabouts of Gaitonde. Yadav's niece Anjali is also an intelligent agent who works with Sartaj Singh. She helps in unravelling the conspiracy involving counterfeit currency, arms and ultimately an apocalyptical plot to engineer a nuclear war between India and Pakistan by shadowy groups. Gaitonde, an arrogant and merciless killer with enormous ambition, had connected these groups. K.D. Yadav narrates the story of Gaitonde. Now, the story moves backward. Ganesh Gaitonde is another protagonist of this novel, just the opposite of Sartaj Singh. Gaitonde metamorphoses from a runaway teenager Kiran to a notorious gangster in Mumbai, assuming the name Ganesh Gaitonde.

Guru-Ji as his spiritual guide, an internationally famous Guru-Ji, becomes his close. He discovers that his Guru-Ji has helped Ganesh come in contact the Guru Swami Shrinidhar Shukla. His mission is fed messianic fantasies by Guru-Ji who names him Arjuna to signify his warrior status in preparation for rooting about Kaliyug. He has human feelings and takes good care of his employees. In spite of his wealth and power, Ganesh feels empty and alone, after his wife and son. He feels uncomfortable to admit his family history and also fears to tell about his future to Guru-Ji, though he becomes his confident and supporter. His guru's philosophy is to change his mind.

Ganesh Gaitonde is the wealth head of one of Mumbai's most powerful criminal gangs, who has secretly collaborated with the Indian to carry on an atomic attack that will destroy the city in order to attribute responsibility to an Islamic terrorist organization that has been created for this purpose. Ganesh Gaitonde has unwittingly helped in the importation of nuclear weapon for the terrorist group. Later he realizes his mistake and tried to stop the attack, and waits in the atomic bunker at Kailashpada, where he will survive the city's destruction. His only companion is Jojo Mascarenas. They planned to stop an atomic attack for the good of the humanity, organized by his Guru-Ji Swami Shridhlar Shukla.

The plot moves forward along parallel track. Gaitonde takes him to the Kailashpada bunker but Sartaj Singh does not know that he once looked at the terrible head of the Mumbai underworld with humanity. He does not even know that he has met him, as he was disguised. Gaitonde chooses him because he is a guardian of order. As he thinks Sartaj Singh's humanity is not cancelled out by his uniform and he is the only person to whom he wishes to expose. Sartaj Singh arrives in the Kailashpada bunker and usually tries to convince the gangster to leave in what he was involved as a gangster. He listens to Gaitonde as he tells the story of his first exploits in Mumbai and at a certain point becomes interested in the story, but when the bulldozer that he has requested manages to make a hole in the bunker's walls he stops listening:

You're coming in. I am still talking but you aren't listening to me anymore. Your eyes are a fire. You want me, you and your riflemen. But listen to me. There is a whirlwind of memories in my head, a scattered faces and bodies. I know how they skirl through each other, their connection and their disjunctions. I can trace their velocities. Listen to me, if you want Ganesh Gaitonde, then you have to let me talk otherwise Ganesh Gaitonde will escape you as he escaped every time, as he escaped every last assassin. Ganesh Gaitonde escaped even me almost. Now at this last hour, I have Ganesh Gaitonde, I know what he was, what he became Listen to me, you must listen to me. But you are now in the bunker (SG P.816).

At last Sartaj Singh hears Gaitonde's story out of his determination to deliver his story and himself that the investigation is born that will lead to Inspector's saving Mumbai from the atomic explosion.

The use of the *style indirect libre* to explore the complex world of crime is seen through Sartaj's ruminations in passages like these:

The dead body had wanted more than marriage for his sisters, he had wanted a television set and gas range... no doubt he had dreamed of a brand new car... What he had dreamed was not impossible, there were men like Gaitonde ...And there were boys and girls who had come from dusty villages and looked down at you from the hoardings, beautiful and unreal. It could happen. It did happen, and that's why people keep trying. It happen... Katekar nodded and Sartaj knew that Katekar understood...(215)

Thus Vikram Chandra portrays bloodshed and violence in a flash mode in modern Bombay city. He sustains suspense at the end of the novel. The meat of this novel clings to the bones of crime story and there's certainly plenty of crime in it; the book is really a passionate tribute to contemporary India in all its vigor and vulgarity to the future course of investigation. Thus, in this novel Vikram Chandra displays his skill as an excellent detective story-teller.

In the novel, *Sacred Games*, the characters work as the well-respected handyman of a pickle factory, a unusual position, which further develops Chandra's engagement with the city by narrating a plot full of intrigue, melodrama, sex and violence that can rival any late Victorian

novel of Bollywood film. Chandra narrates the story in such a way that the main focal point is the individual's negotiation of his role, space and place in this often hostile urban environment, which he also explores on all levels of Bombay movie starlet, the rich businessman to the airline stewardess, the corrupt politician to the high court judge, the gang lord to the spiritual guru, and the hairdresser to the policeman. Chandra as a Mumbai man presents what concerns the Mumbai city now. The novel teems with several other characters revealing the multifaceted aspects of the Mumbai urban life – the dance bars, the lower middle class life of the constables, the chaws or slums, the network of religious gurus, and the corrupt politicians.

The idioms in which the novel is written are equally striking and unapologetic. The argot of the Bombay street and the idiom of the world of the gangster is splattered with an array of Hindi expletives and phrases that remain translated. Chandra masterfully narrates so that their meaning becomes readily discernible from their context. Chandra puts the reader into sink or swim situation and then the reader is forced to engage on different level with the characters and the city and encouraged to get involved in the story characters and their language and their idioms. Chandra's novel follows a comparable intertextual strategy. The main characters in the novel are no book reading types. But intertextuality in literary kind is implied in the detective conventions that Chandra follows, and critics have variously suggested such presence as Charles Dickens, Fyodor Dostovsky , Edgar Allan Poe and Raymond Chandler. There is also an immediate intertextual link within Chandra's own oeuvre through a recurring character, with the story "kama" from *Love and Longing in Bombay*. Most striking, though, is an intertextuality of a different kind, with the literary novel rubbing shoulders with Indian mass culture. Allusion and quotations to Bollywood movies and *filmi* songs are legion in this novel.

In terms of his narrative style, Chandra is assiduous in etching out the minutiae of the scenes to vivid details, whereby both his main characters – Sartaj and Gaitonde – have great eye for details. Gaitonde's description for Paritosh Shah's hub is replete with visual shots of photographic precision:

Paritosh Shah was a family man. I waited for him on a second floor-hallway, near a staircase that exhaled occasional blasts of sharp urine-stink. The building was six stories tall and ancient, with a bamboo framework roped and nailed to its tottering façade, and worrisome gaps in the ornate scrollwork on the balconies. The second floor was full of male shahs, who passed by where Kanta Bai's boy had left me on the landing, and they called each other Chachu and Mamu and Bhai, and ignored me entirely. they walked by dirty shirt and ragged trousers with the barest of glances. They were a flashy, gold-ringed lot who wore mostly white safari suits. I could see their white shoes and white chappals lined in untidy rows near the uniformed guard at the door. Sometimes inside was the sanctum of Paritosh Shah, guarded by a hoary old muchhad perched on a stool with an absurdly long-barelled shotgun. He wore a blue uniform with yellow braid, and his moustache was enormous and curved at the ends. (57)

The descriptions not only echoes the descriptions of Chandra's real life expeditions to the haunts of the gang lords, the elaborate depiction of the scene is undeniably voyeuristic, bringing home to the readers the graphic details of the world of the gangsters.

The novel also creates the effect of gaze not only in its visual details but also in its auditory ones, especially by carefully recording the linguistic eccentricities of the underworld. His novel is an extensive study in the "tapori" language – a type of Mumbai street language, popularly associated with the underbelly that uses a syncretistic mix of various other linguistic registers like Marathi, Konkani, Gujrati and Tamil, drawing from the wide variety of immigrant populations in Mumbai. He weaves the novel with an extensive use of the Rushdiesque 'chutnified' English almost to the point of exhaustion – the novel is replete with the words of typical 'Mumbaispeak' like "bhai", "chavvi", "bole toh", "lodu", "thoko", etc. The chutnified English is more than often expository moments in the narrative, revealing the covert linguistic code that circulate among members of the underworld. Gaitonde's narrative voice is thus spectacularly revelatory:

They learned the language, and they walk, and they pretended to be something, and then they became it. And so for American dollars, we said chocolate, not Dalda like the rest of our world; for police, Iftekar, not nau-number; a job gone wrong was ghanta, not fachchad; and a girl so impossibly ripe and round tight it hurt to look at her was not chhabis, but a churi. (118)

Chandra uses temporal distortion or flashback. It is the literary technique Chandra's narrative propels the readers backwards and forwards between the past and present in a manner the readers feels the first hand experience. Chandra narrates the flight of the Singh family to India during the partition riots or the injustice suffered by Gaitonde in a small rural village. He does not only provide the background information that reveals what has shaped the characters and explains his actions but also reveals the ruptures that have shaped the modern Indian nation, a nation haunted by the evil forces.

In the novel *Sacred Games* Vikram Chandra as a master story teller seeks to present a reality outside the literature, with the narrator as one of the major connection between life and art from the point of view of his experiences. In both its form and content, Chandra's novel proclaims a self-confessed emulation of the nineteenth century socialist novels and detective fictions. This novel is the only fictional text in the conventional sense among the two books about Mumbai. In this novel, Bombay becomes the twentieth century Asian manifestation of the modern metropolis pictured by Walter Benjamin in his seminal writing of the 1930s on nineteenth century Paris. The character, the Sikh police inspector, Sartaj Singh, in the novel is a carryover from the earlier magnificent collection of stories, *Love and Longing In Bombay*. This novel is dual biography of Mumbai Ganglord, Ganesh Gaitonde and the police officer, Sartaj Singh. The two biographies drift apart from in their range and direction: at the very beginning there is a dialogue between the two main characters through the door of a bunker in which

Gaitonde has built himself a final retreat before his suicide. Sartaj carries out his investigation about the criminal with sincerity and the political context of Gaitonde's evil record, Gaitonde's non-realistic posthumous dialogue with Singh, charts the major phrases of his career in urban crime.

Chandra's *Sacred Games* reflects and revolves round the characters like Sartaj Singh, Ganesh Gaitonde and Suleiman Isa but it has many characters with individual identities such as K.D.Yadav as crafted. Throughout the novel Sartaj Saingh remains in the centre and his determination to catch Gaitonde, who has been depicted in opposition to Sartaj Singh, is a major theme of the novel. The frequent adventure held between Ganesh Gaitonde and Sartaj Singh heightens the intensity of the novel.

The novel *Sacred Games* is a successful, non-exoticised and genuinely autochthonous instance of Indian Writing in English; and it is difficult to reduce him to simple formulas.

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