



Asian Review of Social Sciences (ARSS)

Vol.5.No.1 2014 pp 50-53

available at: www.goniv.com

Paper Received :04-03-2014

Paper Published:14-04-2014

Paper Reviewed by: 1. Dr.A.Subashree 2. G.Rajbharath

Editor : Prof. P.Muthukumar

---

## A THEMATIC STUDY IN VIKRAM CHANDRA'S SACRED GAMES

R.SIVAKUMAR M.A., SET (Eng.), M.A. (Ling.), M.A. (JMC), M. Phil. (LS), PhD

Assistant Professor in English

Sri Vidya Mandir Arts & Science College

Uthangarai-Tk, Krishnagiri – Dt.635207

E-mail: sivsivkkumar@rediffmail.com

---

Vikram Chandra embraces the history of two centuries, three continents and the struggles which lie at the heart of all cultural growth and definition: a people's relationship with place, religion, language, and other peoples... Chandra tells stories. His virtuosity is rare, sustained and dazzling. No more silence—that is the power of Chandra's extraordinary novel, that where there are people suffering, oppressed or full of joy and intelligence, there can only be the sound of stories and affirmation, “the collective dream of many peoples who were one people.”

Chandra describes his work with vividly atmospheric descriptions, appealing minor characters, and interesting insights into the history and culture of colonial India. Vikram Chandra's considerable gifts as a stylist shine here.

The violence of these [colonial] encounters certainly testifies to the devastation wrought by imperial narratives. Yet and this is Chandra's genius as an entertainer—metaphors that verge on didactic are, in *Red Earth*, first and foremost elements of a good story in this case gory, grandiloquent and glorious battles. The waning days of the Moghul Empire burst enough with warring princelings, foreign adventurers, and anarchic lancers for Parasher to develop a veritable art of blood. At the same time, Chandra's soaring prose frames the duel between homo- and heterogeneity that is *Red Earth*'s true holy war—as when the Chiria Fauj, the synchronized infantry brigades who revolutionize Hindustan's battlefields, endure “the laughter and sneers of the proud wild cavalymen who passed by, sniffing elegantly at roses.” That the chaotic Rathor horsemen inevitably fall to the “clock-work motion” of European military strategy only underlines Chandra's lesson: Contamination is the font of resistance. *Red Earth* takes its title from a “polluted” transaction—between an Untouchable prostitute and her johns... Only the spawn of such unions - “this new thing that nobody wants... . chi-chi, half-and-half, black-and-white”—holds the possibility of truly contravening the struggle between This and That, Us and Them... And that knowledge lays the final ring upon Chandra's circled narrative. Recorded on both passport and page, his voyage opens the road for his vibrant, confused, newborn characters. The reach and texture of his prose speaks the novel language that escapes his fictions: “What was possible to say he couldn't say in English.

Vikram Chandra's fiction openly declares its devotion to the traditional concerns of storytellers everywhere: love and longing, death and despair, valor and intrigue, rein-carnation and redemption. Characteristically, however, these timeless topics emerge from amidst the pressures and preoccupations of contemporary life. The stories begin and end in a particular politicized world marked by the outrageous cost of housing, strange juxtapositions of postmodern gadgetry and ancient beliefs.

Chandra creates comparable electric charges throughout his work. A political writer bent on exploring class conflict, ethnic violence, imperialist domination, and the metropolitan underworld, he self-consciously underscores his aestheticism. He delights in doubled narrative structures that generate dynamic tension between past and present, old and young, the West and India, romance and realism, the human and the not human. An episode from *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* exemplifies the effects of this practice. Chandra took his title from a Tamil poem from the third century A.D.:

“In love or our hearts have mingled or like Red Earth and Pouring rain” (210)

In the novel, this beautiful poem appears when three boys have secretly followed the father of two of them – Hercules Skinner, an officer in the British East India Company – to an assignation with a village prostitute. After the father leaves, the woman discovers the boys and quotes the poem in the course of explaining “what happens here” (210). The woman's daring to rename the sordid transaction just witnessed as “love” serves neither to justify Skinner nor to undermine the woman's credibility. Rather, the electric charge between the concrete rendition of a brusque, impersonal, grunting exchange and the abstract invocation of love remains scandalous. Chandra exposes his readers – like Skinner's sons, whose own mother is a captive, dishonored Indian princess – to a kind of forced training in Keatsian “negative capability”. Holding love and sex – for –pay, subjugation, and the mingling of hearts together in the mind exerts a wrenching pressure on received conceptions of these terms. In effect, the scene insists that imperialism is, at the same time, brutal domination and a transformative, generative process – a crime and an inheritance.

The intricately wrought structure of *Red Earth* interrogates the imperial legacy and the broader heritage of the Indian past from the perspective of a troubled present. The novel is divided between the narratives of Sanjay Parasher, a nineteenth-century poet and revolutionary, and Abhay Misra, who has returned to India after going to college in southern California. Sanjay's story is a romantic saga of “adventure and passion and honour.... Unearthly horrors and epic loves. Chandra incorporates in Sanjay's tale of his own life a number of historical figures, most notably Colonel James “Sikander” Skinner, whose memoirs had sparked Chandra's vision for the novel. Chandra's highly fictionalized version further heightens the romance of his material. For instance, since both the soldier Sikander and the poet Sanjay are conceived through the mediation of magical laddoos they share as parents the six people who touched the sweets prior to their mothers eating them. Sanjay's story takes up many of the central themes of the literature of empire-cultural conflict and hybridity, the acquisition of the colonizer's language, and the emergence of militant nationalism – and refracts them through the prism of romance. Romance is often seen as a historical mode, and there is in *Red Earth* a preference for symbolically rich individual episodes over sustained progressive narrative. However, Chandra's approach aims not at dissolving history so much as it seeks to place British imperialism within a larger historical perspective, stretching back to Alexander the Great and forward to the present. His orchestration of echoes and correspondences across this lengthy sweep of

experience works, in the manner of historical metafiction, to defamiliarize received historical knowledge and to explore the role of language in shaping consciousness.

Abhay's narrative of his undergraduate days quickly signals its distance from Sanjay's fantastic tale when an apocalyptic flash of light is revealed to be no more than the result of lightning striking a transformer. While one of Sanjay's many parents was the beautiful witch, versed in the arts of love, Abhay befriends a porn star; the epic battles of the past are replayed as a cricket match in Texas. The opposition of realism to romance is thoroughly complicated, however, as the mirror play between the stories progresses. The more Abhay's current dilemmas are excavated, the more Sanjay seems his alter ego.

Chandra's elaborate frame tale constitutes the space in which all the novel's opposing strands converge. At the outset, Abhay is estranged from his Indian home and focuses his hostility on a monkey, Sanjay returns to human consciousness. As a result of a deal between the god of death and Hanuman the monkey god, protector of poets, Sanjay is permitted to type his story as long as the attention of the audience is held. When Sanjay's monkey fingers cramp, Abhay and Abhay's parents are recruited to carry on. Chandra's re-creation of Scheherazade as a typing monkey results in an emphatically polyphonic narrative told to a heterogeneous audience, which increasingly appears as a microcosm of India. While Abhay's reconciliation with Sanjay suggests the healing potential of stories, the brawls that break out in the crowd underscore the political volatility of national narrative.

In *Love and Longing in Bombay*, Chandra again employs a frame tale with dual narrators. Hanuman had advised Sanjay to use a frame story, arguing: "Straightforwardness is the curse of your age. Be wily, be twisty, be elaborate" Since, Hanuman is called "the most cunning of the dialecticians" as well as "the perfect aesthete," Chandra's continued adherence to his advice implies a political as well as an aesthetic motive. Metafiction may appear a privileged mode for engaging the diversity of contemporary Indian experience.

Despite its formal and thematic continuities with *Red Earth*, *love and longing* feels quite different. Though less than half as long, *Love and Longing* achieves a denser, richer portrait of Indian society because its focus on Bombay and on recent history allows a more detailed exploration of the layered stories that constitute the present. The Scheherazade figure, a retired civil servant name Subramaniam. Is calmer and wiser than Sanjay or Abhay, more capable of self-forgetting. Interactions between India and the west recede in importance or are internalized, whereas relations among Indians assume prominence. Indeed, *Love and Longing* undertakes a veritable survey of contemporary difference as the tensions and attractions between Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and Parsee; modernity and tradition; secular and religious; old money, new money, and no money; military and civilian; cop and suspect; male and female; gay and straight; and old and young are all examined in the stories. Chandra prefers to approach these differences indirectly. All five stories, for example, involve the history of communalist conflict in South Asia, but none takes such conflict as its overt subject. One learns halfway through the ghost story "Dharma" that protagonist lost his leg in one of the Indo-Pakistani wars, and the themes of self-mutilation and haunting take on a collective dimension only retrospectively. One is inclined to read the different ethnicities of the male loves in "Artha" as they do—a minor component of their mutual attraction – until the narrator wanders through city streets emptied in the wake of Hindu-Muslim riots. Chandra's finesse serves to bypass the familiar discourse on these topics, not to deny the structuring power of such social identities but to allow them to be rediscovered at deeper, more intimate levels.

At the end of the last century, an enormous scandal hit the Indian city of Mumbai. The unfolding saga revealed of corrupt relationships and violence that would make stone god blush. One of the nastiest surprises was the degree to which organized crime had become entangled with the dream factory of Bollywood. A film star was charged with conspiring to blow up the Mumbai stock exchange, gorgeous starlets were caught smuggling up to Mafia dons, and black money was rumored to be behind mega – budget productions. Violence, intimidation, money – laundering and corruption had become the norm while the dons became newspaper celebrities, reveling in their power and glamour. Mumbai, it seemed, was living through a gangland glory period, like Chicago in prohibition days.

## Reference

- Alitzer, Thomas J.J., and William Hamilton, eds. *Radical Theology and the Death of God*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Gospel of Christian Athesim*. Philadelphia: Westminister, 1996.
- Anidjar, Gil. "Secularism." *Critical Inquiry* 33 (2006): 52-77.
- Asad Talal. *Formations of the secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003.
- Berger, Peter. "Sociology: Disinvitation?" *Society* 30 (1992): 12-18
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Sacred Canopy*. New York: Doubleday, 1967.
- Bhat, Javaid Iqbal. "Loss of Syncretic Theatrical Form." *Folklore* 34 (2006): 39-56
- Bowker, John. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*. New York: Oxford UO, 2005.
- Chandra, Vikram. *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*. London: Faber & Fabrer, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Sacred Games*, New Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2006.
- Ganguly, Sumit. *The Crisis in Kashmir: Portents of War, Hopes of peace*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1975.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the world*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1987.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Violence and the Sacred*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1977.
- Hasan, Mushirul. *Will Secular India Survive?* New Delhi: Manohar Books, 2004.
- Mufti, Aamir. "Critical Secularism: A Reintroduction for Perilous Times." *Boundary* 2(2004): 1-9 ss
- Nietzsche, Fredrich. *The Gay Science*. New York: Vintage, 1974. Print.
- Press Trust Of India. "Mandate for strengthening Secularism: Manmohan." May 22, 2004. Web. Sep. 22, 2009.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Midnight's Children*. London: Vintage, 1981. (Translated from the Italian by Luke Seaber)
- "Scarce." *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*. 2vols. Glasgow, New York, Toronto: Oxford UP, 1971. 2616. Print.
- Singh, Amardeep. *Literary Secularism: Religion and Modernity in Twentieth Century Fiction*. New Castle, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2006. Print.
- Vahanian, Gabriel. *The Death of God*. New York: George Braziller, 1961. Print.