

The Storyteller in the Information Age: Vikram Chandra's Entwining Narratives

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I

Vikram Chandra's first two works of fiction - the novel *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995) and the volume of short stories *Love and Longing in Bombay* (1997) – immediately won him recognition among readers, fellow writers and critics as a modern storyteller in an age-old Indian tradition - a latter-day exponent of a very ancient art whose canonic examples include the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and, indeed, the tales of the *Thousand and One Nights*, many of which are believed to be of Indian origin. In both books, there is a storyteller who tells stories to an audience, and also an audience that talks back. *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* offers the reader a Chinese-box structure of stories within stories, framed within the non-naturalistic circumstance of the displaced poet Sanjay, reincarnated as a talking and writing white monkey telling tales of nineteenth-century India. *Love and Longing in Bombay* is structured as a sequence of stories narrated by the character Shiv Subramaniam – the first four in a city bar named the "Fisherman's Rest", to an audience of regulars, the fifth and last more intimately, by Subramaniam in his home, to the book's framing narrator, Ranjit Sharma. In both books, a crucial keyword is "Listen", and, indeed, the storytelling motif is written into the fabric of Chandra's texts.

On the very last page of *Red Earth*, the character Abhay declares that the tale-telling cannot, must not stop, that it must begin again:

I will tell you a story that will grow like a lotus vine, that will twist in on itself and expand ceaselessly, till all of you are a part of it, and the gods come to listen, till we are all talking in a musical hubbub that contains the past, every moment of the present, and all the future (RE 617).

The story that closes *Love and Longing in Bombay*, entitled "Shanti", culminates with a creative act of storytelling that generates a marriage (in fact Subramaniam's own):

By the time Shanti had finished telling the story, the train was an extra two minutes late ... Shiv walked beside the window, and he watched the shadows from the bars move across Shanti's face. With every step he had to walk a little faster.
"Will you marry me?" he said. (LAL 251)¹

In Chandra's fictional world, narrative is not merely an ordering device: it directly forms the characters' experiences, as they make and remake their stories of others' lives and their own.

II

¹ Page references to *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* are to the 1996 UK paperback edition; those to *Love and Longing in Bombay* are to the 1997 UK hardback edition. Page references to these two texts are identified in the body of the article, under the initials RE and LAL, rather than in the notes.

Chandra's narratives are, besides, also part of the great continuing story that is India. The chosen subject-matter of the two books under discussion is the subcontinent – in part or in whole, its past and its present, its inherent dynamic and its relations with the wider world. The author does, of course, fall into the category of expatriate or diasporic practitioners of the genre known as Indian Writing in English (IWE); and, as a US resident who nonetheless spends considerable time in India (he has described himself as a "frequent flyer" between the two countries²), he stands at a particular intersection point, one also occupied by many of his fellow Indo-Anglian writers.

The most celebrated member of what we may call the IWE/diasporic literary school is of course Salman Rushdie, and his case is in many ways paradigmatic of a whole generation. It is hardly necessary today to underline the circumstance, over the last two decades, of the "boom" in contemporary Indian and South Asian fiction in English, be it home-grown or diasporic, as manifested both in worldwide sales and in critical and academic reception. Indian literature had, of course, always and most certainly been 'there', and had gained outside esteem earlier in the twentieth century through the works of such masters as Rabindranath Tagore (who wrote essentially in Bengali, but gained sufficient recognition to be awarded the Nobel in 1913) and the pioneering IWE trio of Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan. However, the global recognition of a whole school of subcontinental writers is a relatively new phenomenon. Many of the best-known South Asian writers now active are in fact expatriates or second-generation emigrants, based in the US, Canada or elsewhere. Into this category fall, apart from Rushdie and Chandra, male writers such as Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry, Amitav Ghosh, or the Canadian-Sri Lankan Michael Ondaatje, and female writers including Anita Desai, Gita Mehta, or Jhumpa Lahiri. The English-medium practitioners of fiction who have remained in India tend on the whole to be better known at home than internationally – cases in point being Shobha Dé and Khushwant Singh, and the most obvious exception being the Booker Prize-winning Arundhati Roy.

Salman Rushdie is generally regarded in the West, rightly or wrongly, as the torchbearer of English-medium fiction of and from the subcontinent. It is a grave mistake, though one often made, to view Rushdie's career solely through the distorting prism of the controversy over *The Satanic Verses*. That exploded in 1988, but, in purely literary terms, his rise to fame has to be dated to the publication, seven years before in 1981, of his second and epoch-making novel, *Midnight's Children*. As representative of the early critical reaction to this book, we may take the comments of the British critic William Walsh, in an essay, "India and the Novel", published in 1983. Walsh describes *Midnight's Children* in the following terms:

(...) a novel unprecedented in scope, manner and achievement in the hundred and fifty year old tradition of the Indian novel in English (...) composed of elements of magic and fantasy, the grimmest realism (...), extravagant farce, multi-mirrored analogy and potent symbolic structure ... indelibly stamped into unity by a powerful personality, which wrestles the language and the fiction down and masters it to serve a huge purpose, namely the personification of India and the realisation of Indian life.³

Over a decade later, Anita Desai, in an interview published in 1985, confirmed the unusual significance of Rushdie's novel for a whole generation of Indo-Anglian writers:

² See Chandra, "Frequent Flyer", 81.

³ Walsh, "India and the Novel", 257-258.

It was a very ambitious and bold book. And, partly because of the success of the book, it led to a whole generation of writers and gave them the confidence they might not have had otherwise. It may be said to have set free the tongues of the younger writers - a tremendous influence upon their work.⁴

Midnight's Children set the ground rules for many of its IWE successors, in more ways than one. It operates within the magic-realist mode as exemplified by Latin American writers such as Alejo Carpentier and Gabriel García Márquez, mingling conventional realism with elements of dream, fantasy and the marvellous, and drawing in the process on the storytelling resources of classical Indian myth and epic. It traverses a major swathe of the history of the subcontinent, homing in on the crucial moment of independence, midnight of 1 January 1947, but spreading backwards to the early twentieth century under the Raj and forwards to Indira Gandhi and the Emergency. Spatially too, its narrative crosses the subcontinent, from Kashmir to Bombay and extending to Pakistan and Bangladesh; and its pages throb with a restless sense of urgency, a refusal to exclude the political and historical dimensions and an insistence of commitment to both the act of writing and to the Indian reality that it signifies. We may sense this urgency in the book's conclusion, when Rushdie's narrator Saleem goes out to face near-certain death on the throbbing streets:

Yes, they will trample me underfoot, the numbers marching one two three, four hundred million five hundred six, reducing me to specks of voiceless dust ... because it is the privilege and the curse of midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and be unable to live or die in peace.⁵

III

It is, then, in the first place in the context of the magic-realist/IWE mode opened up by *Midnight's Children* that we may locate the *tour de force* that is Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*. Over more than 600 pages, Chandra's narrative sweeps, dizzyingly yet densely, across time and space, taking in several centuries of Indian history, as well as nineteenth-century England and contemporary America.

"Tell a story", declares the man-monkey Sanjay at the very end of the novel (RE 616); and, indeed, the whole book is made up of interlinked and interlocking stories. With breathless virtuosity, Chandra's narrative propels the reader backwards and forwards between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (India and England) and the contemporary world (India and the US). Fiction intermingles with history and myth: the dramatis personae include the historical adventurers Benoît de Boigne (1751-1830), from what is now the French territory of Savoie, the German Walter Reinhardt (1720-1778) and the Irishman George Thomas (1756-1802). Above all, the key character Sikander is based directly on a historical figure from the nineteenth century. Chandra explains, in an interview of 1998 with the Italian critic Silvia Albertazzi: "at Columbia University in New York, in the library, I found a translation of the autobiography of Colonel [James 'Sikander'] Skinner, which was what made me write *Red Earth*".⁶ The narrative also incorporates divine personages from the Hindu pantheon:

⁴ Desai, interview with Lalita Pandit, 163.

⁵ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 463.

⁶ Chandra, Albertazzi interview, 73 [as this interview was published in Italian, I have re-translated my quotations from it back into English]. The translation of Skinner's book was, incidentally, into English from Persian, the

Hanuman, Ganesha, and Yama, deity of death. The stories accumulate, hard on one another's heels: George Thomas loses himself for years among the Vehi, a strange, archaic forest tribe (invented by Chandra); later, in Rajputana, he falls in love with a princess whom he glimpses unveiled when the elephant bearing her howdah falls into a gully; in Calcutta, a Shakespeare-obsessed Bengali supervises an English-language printing press; an English doctor's diary exposes the dark underside of a Victorian boarding school; a group of students crossing America by car pick up a mysterious woman hitchhiker; Abhay, a young Indian studying in the US, brings his girlfriend Amanda home, only for the relationship to collapse under her culture shock in a monsoon-drenched hill-station. The key characters are: Abhay from the cosmopolitan 1990s, torn between Indian and American values; and the colonial-era duo of Sikander, the warrior and man of action, and Sanjay, the poet who reincarnates as a monkey into Abhay's late twentieth-century world. Many of the narratives are told on the maidan outside Abhay's home, by and to a strange company that includes the family and its neighbours, the reincarnated Sanjay and the three divinities: the contemporary, the historical and the mythical blend into a single story-telling circle.

The stories unfold endlessly: the closing words of the book, "we will start all over again" (RE 617), send the reader back full circle to the beginning. It should be obvious enough that Chandra is writing within a very ancient Indian and eastern tradition. The novel's title itself is, as the author explains in a note, taken from a classical Tamil poem, by Cempulappeyanirar.⁷ Behind the narrative there lies, certainly, the presence of the great Indian epics; to quote Chandra, again from the Albertazzi interview: "As I wrote it, *Red Earth* seemed a novel quite remarkably out of fashion. I mean, its form comes from the stories of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* which my mother and aunts used to tell me when I was small. This type of spiralling narrative, with its juxtapositions and unexpected meetings, is an ancient Indian form".⁸ The figure of Hanuman, for example, obviously evokes the *Ramayana*. In addition, the British printing-press owner Markline speaks, in a condescending Eurocentric fashion that might recall Thomas Macaulay's notoriously cavalier dismissal of all of classical Indian literature⁹, of the conventions of Indian epic narrative: "Plots meander, veering from grief to burlesque in a minute. Unrelated narratives entwine and break into each other ... Beginnings are not really beginnings, middles are unendurably long and convoluted, nothing ever ends." (RE 335). Here, whatever the prejudices the character may be expressing, the reader may conclude that our novelist is describing by stealth the features of his own narrative, and, by implication, *favourably* comparing the Indian tradition to which he lays claim with the linear, rationalist fictional models of the West.

At one remove from the literature of the subcontinent, another eastern presence lies behind Chandra's text, namely the *Thousand and One Nights*. The linking device of Sanjay the human monkey is a direct reference to the *Nights*. In the opening episode, Abhay, back in India on vacation, shoots and wounds a white monkey which has been annoying him. The monkey survives and is tended by Abhay's parents; inside the house, it displays a surprising

language in which Skinner had expressed himself despite his British origins, thus bringing into play multilingual and multicultural complexities of the kind that haunt Chandra's novel.

⁷ The poem is quoted in the text of *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (RE 233.)

⁸ Chandra, Albertazzi interview, 72.

⁹ "I have read translations of the most celebrated Arabic and Sanscrit [sic] works. I have conversed both here and at home with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. I am quite ready to take the Oriental learning at the valuation of the Orientalists themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia." (Macaulay, "Minute on Indian Education").

facility with the typewriter, and begins to use that medium to reveal - in English - the tale of its previous life as the poet Sanjay:

On the twenty-ninth day, Ashok sat before his desk and pulled the cover off a peculiar black machine, which I was later to realize was a typewriter. Then, however, I watched curiously as ... the paper rolled up and curled over, revealing to me, even at that distance, a series of letters from the language I had paid so much to master. Intrigued, I lowered myself to the ground and walked over to the machine. I hopped up onto the table and circled the black machine, running my claws over the keys with their embossed, golden letters. I touched a key lightly and waited expectantly ... I pressed a key and an 'a' magically appeared next to the 'i' ... Ashok looked on with growing uneasiness; clearly, my actions were too deliberate for a monkey. I learned much too fast. (RE 9-10)

The reader is swiftly asked to accept this outlandish circumstance as given: "I hurriedly typed: 'do not fear me. i am sanjay, born of a good brahmin family'" (RE 11); and later on, finds the monkey not only typing but writing with the pen: "'After death?', I wrote (wondering at the smooth glide of the strange metal pen over the paper). 'Why, this, all this: life again.'" (RE 123).

To some non-Indian readers, this writing monkey might appear a typically late-twentieth century magic-realist device, a deliberate and arbitrary piece of strangeness - as in, say, "Axolotl", a story by the Argentinian fabulist Julio Cortázar in which a man mutates into a primeval amphibian. In fact, however, not a few readers will have met Chandra's monkey before, in the pages of the *Thousand and One Nights*. As part of the tale, or, rather, the set of interlocking tales that goes under the name of "The Porter and the Three Girls of Baghdad", each of three one-eyed dervishes narrates his life-history. In "The Tale of the Second Dervish", the narrator is metamorphosed into an ape by a malignant jinnee, but, finding himself in a king's palace, seizes a scroll of parchment and begins writing poems on it, thus revealing his estranged humanity:

I sprang upon the men and snatched the scroll from their hands ... ape though I was, I made a sign to them that I wished to write. "Let him try" said the captain. "If he scribbles we will chase him away, but if he writes with a fair hand I shall adopt him as my son. For never in my life have I seen a more intelligent ape". I took the pen, dipped it into the inkpot, and began to write. I wrote out six couplets, each in a different script
 ...¹⁰

The subsequent adventures of this ape are not paralleled in Chandra (he is finally restored to human shape at the cost of losing an eye); even so, Chandra's novel contains a character - a French adventurer called Moulin - who has, like the dervish, lost an eye in a fight and bears "a scar that stretched across his forehead to an empty eye-socket" (RE 234). The similarities between the two monkey episodes are striking ("Clearly, my actions were too deliberate for a monkey. I learned much too fast"; "Never in my life have I seen a more intelligent ape"). Indeed, there can be little doubt over the source of the simian scribe, since Chandra has in fact explicitly mentioned the "writing ape" of the *Thousand and One Nights*, in an essay entitled "The Cult of Authenticity" (of which more later) which he published in 1999 in the *Boston Review*.¹¹ The parallel is, at all events, arresting given that it is through a miraculous act of

¹⁰ Dawood (trans.), *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights*, 272.

¹¹ Chandra, "The Cult of Authenticity".

writing - the production of a text within the text - that Chandra anchors his eminently modern fiction in the immemorial story-telling traditions of the East.

Chandra is, nonetheless, also, as we have seen, very much one of that generation of subcontinental émigré writers whose life and work straddle East and West; and the text of *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, as might be expected, is also pervaded by references to the literary heritage of the West. In this respect, Chandra's narrative resembles Michael Ondaatje's Booker-winning novel of 1992, *The English Patient*. Ondaatje presents in his novel, among other stories, an intense, but ultimately doomed, relationship that unfolds towards the end of the second world war in an Italian villa, between Hana, the Canadian nurse who tends the patient of the title, and Kip, a Sikh sapper in the British army. He thus explores the problematic subject of East-West communication through an intimate relationship - a device also used by Chandra. Ondaatje's text deploys a formidable arsenal of literary allusions, albeit from the Western tradition rather than from the East. In the villa's dilapidated library, Hana takes up a stray volume of James Fenimore Cooper, or Stendhal; when she reads aloud to her "English patient" (who is actually Hungarian), the novel's text directly quotes the famous opening of Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* ("He sat, in defiance of municipal orders, astride the gun Zam-Zammah on her brick platform"). Kip, in a flashback to his recruitment in England by Lord Suffolk, recalls how his gaze focused on a copy of Herman Melville's novel *Pierre, or the Ambiguities*. The density and recurrence of these intertextual references suggest that Ondaatje is deliberately placing his own novel within a much older tradition in which sense is made of a chaotic world through the written word. Thus, the bedridden patient recalls of another character: "He was a man who wrote, who interpreted the world ... When we came on messages on our travels - any wording, contemporary or ancient, Arabic on a mud wall, a note in English written in chalk on the fender of a jeep - he would read it and then press his hand upon it as if to touch its possible deeper meanings".¹²

Chandra's novel follows a comparable intertextual strategy. There is explicit allusion to some of the same writers - to Melville ("Mrs Christiansen has started on *Moby Dick*" - RE 196), and, crucially for the Anglo-Indian theme, to Kipling. Abhay discovers a copy of *Kim* at Amanda's parents' house (RE 588); the Irishman George Thomas finds himself "taken for a Pathan" thanks to his "sunburnt skin" (RE 125) - a detail which may recall Kimball O'Hara, Kipling's part-Indianised Irish orphan who blends effortlessly into the alleys of Lahore. Shakespeare himself briefly appears centre-stage, in the episode of the Calcutta printing works and its overseer and devotee of the English dramatist, Sorkar (RE 316). The adventures of the murderous Dr Sarthey - whom Sanjay, after following him to London, eventually identifies as the perpetrator of the infamous "Jack the Ripper" murders - have something of the atmosphere of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Chandra's text is laced with literary allusions both explicit and hidden, and a number of the intertextual relationships thus set up merit particular comment.

Red Earth and Pouring Rain contains a fascinating trace of a writer who has himself been seen as the modern high priest of intertextuality, namely the celebrated Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges. At the end of Chandra's novel, Sanjay receives the gift of longevity from Yama, in exchange for the agonizing loss of his tongue. He laboriously tracks the killer Sarthey from India to England, passing through endless vicissitudes on the way:

¹² Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, 61, 222, 93, 188, 243.

In the Punjab, on the banks of the Ravi, Sanjay was assaulted by robbers ... and left for dead in the water ...; near Kabul he was kidnapped by a minor chieftain and enslaved for thirteen years in a barren village near Herat ...; in Basra he was given a place on the deck of a ship sailing to Cairo ...; he walked into a sandy wilderness that seemed endless ...; when he emerged in Jerusalem he was detained as a madman in a squalid prison ...; when on the outskirts of Jaffa he found an open window in a merchant's house, he entered and took bags of gold and silver ...; then a passage to Crete and on to Otranto was simple, and the walk up the long length of Italy to Rome was nothing but easy (RE 546-547).

This arduous journey, elongated beyond all verisimilitude by the device of the traveller's miraculous longevity, in some ways recalls a comparable sequence in a tale of the marvellous by Borges entitled "El inmortal" ("The Immortal"). Chandra has, in fact, avowed his "affection" for a writer whom he even calls "Borges-bhai", in "The Cult of Authenticity" - in which essay, multiplying the intertextuality, he praises the Argentinian as "the writer who loved the *Thousand and One Nights* so much that he wrote an essay about its various translations".¹³ In "El inmortal", the narrator, a Roman legionary who has lost his mortality by plunging into a magic river, recounts his wanderings:

I travelled over new kingdoms, new empires. In the fall of 1066, I fought at Stamford Bridge ... In the seventh century of the Hegira, in the suburb of Bulaq, I transcribed with measured calligraphy, in a language I have forgotten, in an alphabet I do not know, the seven adventures of Sinbad and the history of the City of Bronze. In the courtyard of a jail in Samarkand I played a great deal of chess. In Bikaner I professed the science of astrology and also in Bohemia. In 1638 I was at Kolozsvár and later in Leipzig ... On the fourth of October, 1921, the *Patna*, which was taking me to Bombay, had to cast anchor in a port on the Eritrean coast.¹⁴

The resemblance between the two sets of wanderings is striking. There are certain differences (Chandra uses a less drawn-out time-scale than Borges, and Sanjay's travels are towards a purpose and a goal, which is not the case with Borges' wanderer), but in both cases there is a sense of the arbitrary and the magical, on a strange journey that seems everlasting but finally ceases: in the end Sanjay dies to be reincarnated, while Borges' soldier becomes an ordinary mortal once more. We may also note Borges' textual evocation of - here too - the *Thousand and One Nights* (Sinbad), his intertextual allusion to Joseph Conrad (in whose *Lord Jim* the eponymous hero makes his famous leap from a ship called the *Patna*), and his indirect reference to India (the name *Patna* also denotes the capital of Bihar, and Borges' vessel is sailing to Bombay). The parallel appears especially striking if we recall that the Argentinian writer's work as a whole has been seen as a summation or condensation of an entire literary heritage; in the words of Harold Bloom, Borges' work "draws upon the entire Western Canon

¹³ Chandra, "The Cult of Authenticity". Cf. Borges, "Los traductores de las *1001 Noches*" ("The translators of the *Thousand and One Nights*").

¹⁴ Borges, "The Immortal", 146-147 (Spanish text, "El inmortal", 24). The original reads: "En el otoño de 1066 milité en el puente de Stamford (...) En el séptimo siglo de la Hégira, en el arrabal de Bulaq, transcribí con pausada caligrafía, en un idioma que he olvidado, en un alfabeto que ignoro, los siete viajes de Simbad y la historia de la Ciudad de Bronce. En un patio de la cárcel de Samarcanda he jugado muchísimo al ajedrez. En Bikaner he profesado la astrología y también en Bohemia. En 1683 estuve en Kolozsvár y después en Leipzig. (...) El 4 de octubre de 1921, el *Patna*, que me conducía a Bombay, tuvo que fondear en un puerto de la costa eritrea".

and more".¹⁵ Chandra, we may conclude, has drawn in turn on the canonic master from Buenos Aires in constructing his own story of stories.

Also hidden in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* is what seems a clear reference to another master of the enigmatic short tale, namely Edgar Allan Poe - who, as it happens, wrote, in "The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade", his own ironic pastiche of the *Thousand and One Nights*, in the shape of an apocryphal eighth voyage of Sinbad. Poe is mentioned by name in Chandra's novel (in one of the American sequences, a character called Tom confesses: "I read Poe behind the gym" - RE 196); and, as with Borges, a tale of Poe's appears to lie behind one of Chandra's episodes. "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" (1845) is a story primarily about mesmeric or hypnotic therapy, set in Virginia in 1827, which also includes an inset narrative that flashes back to an episode in the imperial history of the British East India Company under Warren Hastings - the revolt of Cheyte Singh, Rajah of Benares, in 1781. Poe found the historical circumstances, and numerous details for his story, in an essay entitled "Warren Hastings" by none other than the already-cited Thomas Macaulay, published in 1841.

In Chandra's narrative, George Thomas, in the course of his wanderings, enters the warrior-land of Rajputana (far from Benares), and the reader is told: "Here, Raja Cheit Singh of Benares had come to marry off one of his sons, and Thomas was retained as part of a cavalry escort". His new employer is in a "desperate hurry", anxious to return home as soon as possible: "the Rajah was threatened by his eastern neighbour, that profiteering, hungry amoeba-like being that had not yet metamorphosed into an empire, the East India Company. An old question of ascendancy and tribute had simmered for months ... and the enemy had taken advantage of the Rajah's absence to escalate the level of conflict to open manoeuvring in preparation for war, for invasion and besieging" (RE 126). This is the same Cheit or Cheyte Singh as appears in Poe's tale. In 1781, Hastings demanded tribute from the Rajah, who refused to pay; the British took revenge by imprisoning him in his own palace, and Poe's narrative focuses on Cheyte Singh's dramatic escape. It was a short-lived triumph, however, as soon afterwards the Company incorporated Benares into its dominions. In "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains", "the man escaping by the string of turbans, was Cheyte Singh himself".¹⁶

The parallels between Poe's and Chandra's texts go beyond this episode; there is also a structural similarity, for both fictions alternate between India and the US. The events of Benares appear in Poe's tale as a waking dream experienced by the protagonist, Augustus Bedloe - which appears to have been put into his head, via remote hypnosis, by his physician, a Dr Templeton, who had actually served as an officer under Hastings and had lived through the events in person. Poe's story thus moves from the US to India, then back to the US again. The figure of the manipulative doctor is central to Poe's tale: Bedloe dies soon after the dream - supposedly from a poisonous leech, but the reader may suspect murder by Templeton; the motif returns in Chandra's novel in the shape of the Jekyll-and-Hyde figure Dr Sarthey. "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" is, in fact, the only story by Poe which includes an Indian theme; nonetheless, it strikingly anticipates certain aspects of Chandra's novel, by combining a structure based on East/West alternation with the themes of imperial warfare in India and exploitative professionals in the West.

The intertextual element in Chandra goes beyond the older literary tradition, Eastern or Western, and also takes in implicit reference to contemporary Anglo-Indian writing -

¹⁵ Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 471.

¹⁶ Poe, "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains", 147.

specifically, to his celebrated coeval, Salman Rushdie. Like Chandra, Rushdie has drawn quite visibly on the *Thousand and One Nights* in his fictions. The "Calf Mountain" of *Grimus*, his first novel, is the magical Mountain of Kaf, as mentioned several times in the *Nights*; at the beginning of *Shame*, the poet Omar Khayyam Shakil imagines his home mountains populated by angels who could have stepped out of the seventh voyage of Sinbad; and in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* he transparently evokes the famous story-cycle in the names of the characters Haroun and his father Rashid (pointing straight to the Caliph Haroun-al-Rashid of the *Nights*). Rushdie and Chandra further resemble each other in their use of intertextual references to Western literature: Chandra's Western literary allusions are paralleled in, for instance, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, a novel which puts down roots in that heritage by overtly recalling the likes of Lewis Carroll and - again - Edgar Allan Poe.¹⁷

There are also audible echoes in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Both novels are subcontinental epics stretching from the British era to the present day. Both, too, focus on a duo formed by two male characters: in Rushdie, Saleem and Shiva; in Chandra, Sanjay and Sikander. There are certain similarities between the two duos, heightened by the magic-realist mode employed by both novelists: Major Shiva and Sikander are both confident, outgoing men of action, with whom Saleem and Sanjay are contrasted as more introverted, insecure figures. Both pairs are linked by circumstances of birth: Saleem and Shiva are changelings, exchanged at birth by an ayah's machinations, but are also both members of the privileged group of "midnight's children", born on the stroke of Independence and endowed with magical powers ("to Shiva, the hour had given the gifts of war ... and to me ... the ability to look into the hearts and minds of men"¹⁸); Sikander and Sanjay are bound together by the manner of their birth, both of them conceived from miraculous, glowing laddoos initiatically eaten by their mothers (RE 153-154). The shadow of part-European origins hovers over Sikander, for, the miracle of his birth apart, his father is a British soldier, Hercules Skinner; while, comparably, Rushdie's Saleem believes that his own true father may be a Bombay Englishman.

There are, of course, also significant differences between the fictional trajectories of the two pairs. Sanjay actually gains in self-confidence and physical presence across the novel, finally acquiring - at a terrible price - magical longevity, and going on to kill Sikander, by now his deadly rival. Saleem, by contrast, born with a miraculous faculty of second sight (or hearing), in the end loses that power when he becomes a victim of the sterilisation campaign of the Emergency; while Shiva goes from strength to strength, rising from humble origins to become an officer in the Indian army, and is one of the handful of the group of "midnight's children" who manage to keep their magic powers intact.

Certainly, Chandra has staked out his novelist's claim on the same time-honoured ground as Rushdie - the territory of the ancient tradition of story-telling, be it of East or West. In *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Rushdie offers the reader a metaphor for fiction:

The Ocean of the Streams of Story was in fact the biggest library in the universe. And because the stories were held here in fluid form, they retained the ability to change, to become new versions of themselves, to join up with other stories and to become yet other stories; so that unlike a library of books, the Ocean of the Streams of Story was much more than a storeroom of yarns. It was not dead but alive.¹⁹

¹⁷ Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 238, 360.

¹⁸ Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 200.

¹⁹ Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, 72.

Haroun's father, Rashid the professional story-teller, loses and finally regains his gift; the sea of stories risks being poisoned forever, but in the end is preserved. Chandra, too, is drawing on that same age-old ocean of story, "not dead but alive".

At a crucial moment in Chandra's novel, with the listeners clustering on the maidan to hear the tales, it seems as if, here too, the sea of stories may have to dry up:

Today the television cameras came, and also the death threats. We have been warned by several organizations that the story-telling must stop. The groups on the very far right - of several religions - object to the "careless use of religious symbology, and the ceaseless insults to the sensitivities of the devout". The far-left parties object to the "sensationalization and falsification of history, and the pernicious Western influences on our young" (RE 419).

The reference to "death threats" will make many think of Rushdie: the forces of religious and political obscurantism seem intent on silencing the narrative flow, in Vikram Chandra's fictional world as in Salman Rushdie's all-too-real universe. Still, and despite the encroachments of the religious hardliners, it is a sacred figure, Hanuman, who insists: "Go on ... Don't be afraid of what you have to tell ... Tell the story" (RE 420). Even when, at the very end, a listener, the young girl Saira, is injured by a gratuitous terrorist bomb, the storytelling refuses to stop. The characters go on weaving their tales; the reader reads on; and Vikram Chandra, in this his first novel, offers the reading public of both East and West a tribute to the age-old, yet ever-new, power of the word to bridge cultures across time and space, in the act of weaving *narratives that entwine*.

IV

After the omnivorous inclusiveness of this first book, *Love and Longing in Bombay* came as a somewhat different departure. In this collection of stories, rather than embracing the subcontinent in its grasp Chandra's writing explores the city of Bombay (he does not in this book call it Mumbai, other than right at the very end)²⁰ as Indian microcosm. There is, of course, an established and considerable tradition of Indo-Anglian writing centred on Bombay, the vast, throbbing, infinitely diverse metropolis which, to quote the historian Sunil Khilnani, has become "lodged in the popular imagination as a totem of India itself ... a place of bewilderment and exploitation, and an enticing and necessary destination brimming with opportunities".²¹ Bombay has been considered the manifestation *par excellence* of the modern city in India, and it features as an effective protagonist in its own right in a number of key literary works: in a good four novels by Rushdie, in Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988), in Shobha Dé's *Starry Nights* (1991) or *Strange Obsession* (1992), or in Rohinton Mistry's *Tales From Firozsha Baag* (1987), a short-story collection which anticipates Chandra by homing in on closely-observed urban lives.

Mistry chronicles the interlocked fortunes over time and space of the residents of one Bombay apartment complex, activating a plurality of voices; Chandra takes a different approach, linking otherwise diverse locations through a single framing narrator. At the same time, he explores a number of different genres (ghost story, love story, tale of detection, comedy of manners). This apparent heterogeneity is given thematic coherence by a naming device: the

²⁰ LAL 256. In *Sacred Games*, by contrast, Chandra uses "Bombay" and "Mumbai" interchangeably.

²¹ Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, 136-137.

title of each story evokes one of the fundamental concepts of Hindu philosophy - "Dharma", "Shakti", "Kama", "Artha" and "Shanti". In these stories, Chandra lays both pre-Independence history and magic realism aside, offering an essentially realist panorama of contemporary Bombay. The story titles ground his vision in tradition, but it is India's modern side that comes to the fore.

In his article "The Cult of Authenticity", Chandra views today's India as a hybrid of old and new, "full of elephants and snakes and mysticism, and also cell phones and nuclear weapons and satellites"²². The story "Artha" highlights the new India of information technology, with its enterprise "Mega Computers, Ltd.", a software start-up ("She was leaning into the bluish-white glow from a seventeen-inch monitor, motionless as a stalking crane and as acutely alive, fingers lightly on the keys" - LAL 164). "Artha", narrated within the main narrator's frame-narrative by a young computer programmer of Muslim origin, presents an unresolved mystery, a disappearance whose trail leads the seeker deep into the city's underworld, but denies both him and the reader the gratification of a solution. The modern facet also dominates in "Kama", the story which introduces Sartaj Singh, the Sikh inspector of police who will return triumphantly in *Sacred Games*. This story concerns a murder case, again unresolved: a respectable middle-class couple are found to have secrets linking them to Bombay's seamy side, and their son proves to be a member of an extremist Hindu militia, but the murder itself remains an enigma. In these two stories, Bombay becomes a twentieth-century, Asian manifestation of the modern metropolis as pictured by Walter Benjamin in his seminal writings of the 1930s on nineteenth-century Paris. Benjamin, writing on Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire, declared: "The original social content of the detective story was the obliteration of the individual's traces in the big-city crowd".²³ In Chandra's "Kama" and "Artha", the individual's traces are obliterated in the vast crowd that is Bombay, while the characters' endeavours at detection, amateur or professional, are ironically frustrated. In these, *Love and Longing in Bombay's* two longest stories, as well as in the collection as a whole, the contemporary blends age-old tradition to give birth to a highly Indian mode of storytelling.

V

The Indo-Anglian school of writing, however well-regarded in the West, does not always meet with the warmest of receptions among subcontinental critics and journalists. Rushdie, Chandra and the rest are frequently accused in certain Indian milieux of being out of touch, cutting themselves off from their roots, failing in their writing to reflect the realities of the "real India". This adverse view of expatriates and exiles is often compounded by a dislike of the Rushdiean magic-realist mode (as used by Chandra in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*) and an expressed preference for more traditional or classical realism *à la* Narayan. For every critic like Dharanidhar Sahu, author of an essay on magic realism which hails the genre as combining the time-tested storyteller's art with the sophistication of the postmodern,²⁴ there will be another on the watch, waiting to denounce the "un-Indianness" of non-resident and magic-realist writers, as in Pankaj Mishra's passionate denunciation of Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* as "empty bombast", a valueless example of a genre which, Mishra believes, denies "everything that makes the novel an art form".²⁵

²² Chandra, "The Cult of Authenticity".

²³ Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, 43.

²⁴ Sahu, "Notes on Magical Realism", *passim*.

²⁵ Mishra, "Anatomy of an Anti-Novel", *passim*.

Vikram Chandra has not escaped the strictures of the authenticists, and in his already-cited essay "The Cult of Authenticity" he recounts a telling incident. On 12 April 1999, Chandra says, Dr Meenakshi Mukherjee, the noted Delhi-based critic, gave a talk entitled "Indian Fiction in English: the Local and the Global": "She spoke about a book called *Love and Longing in Bombay* by Vikram Chandra. It [she said] has as titles of chapters the Sanskrit words, dharma, kama, artha, etc ... Such language (and choice of words) would embarrass any regional writer writing in an Indian language." Mukherjee's critique effectively implies that diasporic Indian writers are twice damned - damned if they don't write about India, for losing their roots, and damned if they do write on Indian themes, for being "inauthentic" and offering orientalist stereotypes and clichés for the delectation of ill-informed Western readers. In her view (to quote Chandra quoting her), "these writers have to (...) exoticize the Indian landscape to signal their Indianness to the West, in the context of the Western market". Certainly, it cannot be denied that words like "karma" and "dharma" have, since the early 60s, been taken over, often with scant understanding of their cultural context, by Westerners seeking to appropriate Indian spirituality for their own purposes. As Gita Mehta puts it in *Karma Cola*, her remarkable documentary satire on that whole tendency: "Together with their own 'laid backs' and 'mellowed outs' went our Karmas, Sadhanas, Nirvanas, Tantras, and Sanyas ... America has taken our most complicated philosophical concepts as its everyday slang".²⁶ Meenakshi Mukherjee's position against Chandra was later endorsed by Uma Parameswaran of the University of Winnipeg in Canada, who (though herself a diasporic writer and critic) claimed in an article of 2001 that the novelist had "chosen to misconstrue" Mukherjee's word, seeing Chandra as typifying diasporic writers' alleged "focusing on negative Indian stereotypes" (even if one might think his visible debt to the epic and story-telling traditions should be sufficient refutation of such a charge?)²⁷.

Against this kind of authenticist line, Chandra, in "The Cult of Authenticity", strikes back at Mukherjee, establishing convincingly enough that "dharma", "shakti" and the rest, even if they have been misappropriated by spaced-out Californians, are and remain authentic elements of the Indian tradition, both erudite and popular. His riposte deserves quoting at length:

I come from a family of film directors and writers and producers, and I was certain that I'd grown up watching movies with titles like the ones I'd used. So I phoned Ashish Rajadhakshya, editor of "The Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema", and asked him to put some queries to his database. He came back with some interesting numbers. It seems that to date, 31 feature films called "Dharma" have been made in India; if you allow for variations on the word (like "Dharma Yudh"), that number goes up to 84. Similarly, thirty movies called "Shakti" have been produced; it's 54 if you allow variations. For "Shanti", the numbers are ten and eighteen. For "Kama", three and three. For "Artha", one and six. I suppose some overworked clerk at the Ministry of Permissible Language forgot to send out the right memo to the film industry.²⁸

Those willing to sympathise with diasporic writers against the authenticists' would-be norm may conclude that in Vikram Chandra's hands at least, Indo-Anglian writing runs no risk of losing the sustenance of its roots. It may be argued that the experience of expatriation, total or partial, is particularly fertile for intelligent literary creation, since émigré writers, who can never belong fully to either their home country or their land of adoption, are all but forced, as

²⁶ Mehta, *Karma Cola*, 99.

²⁷ Parameswaran, "Age: Same Rage", 9, 10.

²⁸ Chandra, "The Cult of Authenticity".

global nomads, to develop a critical perspective on both, balancing one set of values against the other in a constant, unresolved tension. Hence the conversion of hybridity and mixity into positive values, and hence, one might wish to claim, the richness of vision exhibited in Chandra's writing, and also in the transcultural fictions of the likes of Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh or (at least the earlier) Rushdie. As Edward Said eloquently put it in *Culture and Imperialism*, "No one today is purely *one* thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are no more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind".²⁹ Those critics who insist that exponents of a particular literature have to be only "one thing", in some impossibly pure, unadulterated fashion, risk missing the plot as the nascent "World Literature" of the twenty-first century unfolds. Meanwhile, in Vikram Chandra's fictional world, the storytelling never stops.

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APPENDIX: A NOTE ON *SACRED GAMES*

Vikram Chandra's third work of fiction, *Sacred Games* (2006), confirms his status as arch-storyteller of today's India. The epic tale of Ganesh Gaitonde and Sartaj Singh has won enormous critical praise for, precisely, its yarn-spinning qualities and its intermingling of narratives and voices. The first-person tale of Gaitonde, told as if from the other side of the burning ghats, intertwines with the third-person narrative of Sartaj, as do both with the successive inset stories (which all prove to be kin, at one or other degree, to the main story). The main characters, unlike some in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, are not book-reading types, but intertextuality of the literary kind is implied in the detective conventions that Chandra follows (and subverts), as well as in the book's character as urban epic, and critics have variously suggested such presences as Charles Dickens, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Edgar Allan Poe and Raymond Chandler. There is, of course, also an immediate intertextual link within Chandra's own *oeuvre*, through Sartaj Singh as 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. Allusions and quotations to Bollywood movies and *filmi* songs are legion in this novel, and here, for scholars of intertextuality or cultural studies, the potential research field offered by Chandra's *Sacred Games* now stands open wide.

²⁹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 407.

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