

‘A Tangled Net of Links’: Review of Vikram Chandra’s *Sacred Games*

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By its very length and weight, not to mention its well-publicised USD 1 m publishers’ advance, *Sacred Games*, Vikram Chandra’s third work of fiction, seemed even before its release well on course to contend for the title of the Great Indian Novel. Its author has already been definitively established as a major practitioner of Indian Writing in English by his two previous books, the epic magic-realist novel *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995) and the short-story collection *Love and Longing in Bombay* (1997). Now, Chandra affirms his credentials as Indian novelist with his longest and most ambitious work so far, a book whose Indianness is placed beyond all doubt by a number of factors: its location in Mumbai/Bombay (the two toponyms are used interchangeably), albeit fanning out to elsewhere in India (the Punjab, Bihar) and to Thailand, Singapore and Germany; its intensive concentration on eminently Indian institutions and counter-institutions, above all the police and the underworld; and its highly specific deployment of an Indian English which, while fully comprehensible to the international reader, is in many ways as Indian as it is English. Here it may be added that this novel’s Hindi and Marathi translations are already on the way.

In its length and complexity, *Sacred Games* might be compared as aspirant Great Indian Novel to Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy*. Certainly, it seems based on the assumption that fiction can bring out the latent interrelations in society, that all is linked to all – the world and India are an ‘enormous network of connections’ (550), ‘a tangled net of links’ (740). However, the canvas is narrower than in Seth’s novel, with one city at the tale’s heart and the narrative concentrated mainly on the law-enforcement machinery and the mafia apparatus that doubles it. The two central characters are policeman and gangster: Sartaj Singh, the police inspector of Punjabi Sikh extraction already familiar to Chandra’s readers from one of the *Love and Longing* stories; and his opposite number Ganesh Gaitonde, the feared mafia don. The narrative register may be described as classical realist, allowing for one key exception that is structural in nature: the main story alternates between the third-person account of Sartaj’s investigations and the first-person tale of Gaitonde himself, told from beyond the grave as if by the gangster’s spectre (he is dead soon after the novel begins). Allowing, however, for that one non-realist device, suggesting both the autochthonous Indian ghost-story tradition and the conventions of the Anglo-American/European Gothic genre, the tale is told using, on the one hand, the standard conventions of narrative realism, and, on the other, those of the detective/thriller genre, albeit appropriated for specifically Indian ends. At the same time, a broader Indian frame of reference is supplied by the presence, inserted at strategic moments in the book, of four additional chapters designated as ‘insets’, containing a total of nine extra stories, all linked to the main tale (e.g. the pre-Partition life of Sartaj’s mother, or the narrative of a Bihari student turned Naxalite). These inset stories point up this novel’s ambition of offering a wider perspective on India than might be achieved by narrating Bombay alone.

*Sacred Games* activates the conventions of the thriller genre only to deconstruct them. Almost from the outset, the reader, like Sartaj, knows that Gaitonde has killed himself in his bunker in the suburb of Kailashpada, having phoned the inspector and, in effect, invited him to take cognisance of his last moments. Dead by his side is found Jojo Mascarenas, a well-known Bombay madame. The enigma thus concerns not what happened but why; and yet all Sartaj's best efforts to solve the puzzle, even with the assistance of Anjali Mathur, a hyper-brilliant JNU woman graduate and rising star in India's intelligence apparatus, come to naught. Or: they come to naught for Sartaj, but not for the reader. For, thanks to the novel's device of alternating narrations, the reader – but not Sartaj – in the end comes to know how and why Gaitonde eliminated both himself and Jojo. The detective conventions are thus, at one and the same time, both flouted and fulfilled.

Chandra's novel might, indeed, be read as almost an anti-detective story, if we consider that effectively Sartaj and Gaitonde never really meet. They beyond all doubt double each other, like Porfiry and Raskolnikov in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, or Conan Doyle's Holmes and Moriarty, or Dupin and D- in Poe's 'The Purloined Letter'. Edgar Allan Poe is of course known as the father of the Western detective story; and yet there is perhaps a still apter comparison than with his recognised performances in that genre. Poe also wrote 'The Man of the Crowd', a disturbing tale in which the narrator pursues, across London, an enigmatic old man who appears to be his spiritual double yet with whom he never exchanges a word. In *Sacred Games*, Sartaj is in numerous ways doubled by Gaitonde. Objectively, both policeman and gangster, their actions determined by their respective systems, resort as a matter of routine to extortion, intimidation and physical violence. These parallels are underlined in the text by, for instance, both at different moments posing as an import-export businessman (567, 583). Sartaj is as if sucked into the pursuit of his own second self, and the similarity is underscored by the two being involved, if in different ways, with the sisters Jojo and Mary Mascarenas – Gaitonde with Jojo as a madame, the divorced Sartaj more directly with Mary as his lover, in a relationship that arises out of his investigation of her sister's death. However, as in Poe's 'The Man of the Crowd', the two do not truly meet. Sartaj 'meets' Gaitonde as duty policeman at a darshan of the latter's spiritual master, Guru-ji, but while Ganesh knows who the Sikh officer is, the reverse is not the case; in their final confrontation at the bunker, they interact only through the loudspeaker Gaitonde has installed on the outside. It is, ultimately, only the reader who can fully connect them.

The same reader may, of course, legitimately interrogate the nature of Gaitonde's and Sartaj's India. This is an India of institutions signified with endless English-language acronyms, many inherited from the British; of a corrupt but unpredictable Bollywood where Gaitonde can happily bankroll a film which nonetheless proves a commercial flop; of the Internet and mobile phones; and of a spirituality that by turns appears as authentic and deceptive. The figure of Guru-ji, a magnetic spiritual master, wheelchair-bound yet able to enthrall thousands, with a network of ashrams all over India, dominates much of the book. Under the influence of Guru-ji's end-of-time philosophy ('In Kaliyug, there are no simple acts' – 553), Ganesh mutates from secular don into an exponent of Hindutva, only to discover that the spiritual movement is a cover for the politically motivated fomenting of fake Islamist movements and, even worse, trafficking in nuclear materials. He turns against his master to the point of intimidating and eliminating the guru's own key followers. In the end, this whole ramifying web of relations, this nexus in which, Sartaj himself at one point thinks, 'these

pieces somehow made a whole' (529), leads to nothing – to the vacuity of a double death in a bunker and a mystery that is not even solved by those who would penetrate it.

Neither institutional nor spiritual India comes out too happily from Chandra's narrative, nor does the modernity of 'shining India' appear necessarily to hold much promise. As in other Indian-English novels of 2006 - Manju Kapur's *Home* or Sunny Singh's *With Krishna's Eyes* - a harsh and atavistic traditionalism seems to hold most of the cards. However, and as in those novels too, there are still grounds for hope, written into the texture of the narrative. The evolving relationship between Sartaj and Mary raises the possibility of a better future, by contrast with the sterility that prevails between Ganesh and Jojo. Sartaj himself, though forced by the system to practise cruelty, displays a degree of integrity lacking in his opposite number, as if the institutions could yet be redeemable.

Above all, Chandra's pages pulsate with the vitality of Bombay, the irrepressible energy of its inhabitants and the liveliness of their language. The tale he tells includes many of the dark aspects of life, yet is told at all moments with the fullest panoply of creative resources. *Sacred Games* is written in English, certainly, but in an English strewn with Indian words and expressions, in a conscious and fecund readaptation of the old colonial language to the complex realities of an independent and emergent India. There is no glossary in the book itself, but the author offers his non-Indian readers an on-line Selective Glossary explaining terms in ten Indian languages (Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, Punjabi, Urdu, Sanskrit, Konkani, Bengali, Kashmiri and Malayalam) plus English and Arabic, and still others ascribed to a hybrid 'Bombay slang'. Even in Kaliyug, *Sacred Games* may well be telling us, it is through language and its endless creativity that we can start to make sense of the harsh and violent world around us, be it in India or elsewhere, in order, let it be hoped, to change it for the better, and so finally to rearrange the 'tangled net of links' that Vikram Chandra's epic novel so magisterially exposes.

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