

BOOK PRESENTATION
by Christopher Rollason – rollason54@gmail.com

This presentation was delivered at the 34th Conference of AEDEAN (Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies), at the University of Almería (Spain) on 11 November 2010
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Entwining Narratives: Critical Explorations into Vikram Chandra's Fiction

Eds.: Sheobhushan Shukla, Christopher Rollason (AEDEAN member) and Anu Shukla
New Delhi: Sarup, 2010
ISBN 978-81-7625-995-8 - hardback, vi + 264 pp.

SUMMARY

*Vikram Chandra, born in Delhi in 1961, has risen to prominence as one of the most acclaimed of the current generation of practitioners of Indian Writing in English. He is the author of the novels *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995) and *Sacred Games* (2006), and the story collection *Love and Longing in Bombay* (1997). This volume is, to the editors' knowledge, the first work of criticism ever to be devoted exclusively to Chandra's work. It reflects the international range of scholarship on the author through ten critical essays and an interview. Taken together, the contributions point up plurality as a vital feature of a body of fiction that reflects both the innate heterogeneity of Indian culture and the complexities of postcoloniality and globalisation, while refusing all monolithic belief-systems and constantly interweaving a multiplicity of narrative voices. The articles are contributed by: Silvia Albertazzi, Andrew Teverson, Cielo Festino, Geetha Ganapathy-Doré, Dora Sales Salvador, Adalinda Gasparini, and the editors. The volume also includes an introduction outlining the state of play of Chandra criticism, an interview with Chandra conducted by Antonia Navarro-Tejero, and a full bibliography.*

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I

Vikram Chandra was born in Delhi in 1961; his family later moved to Bombay, and he was educated at English-medium schools in Ajmer (Rajasthan) and Bombay. He went to study in the US, graduating in 1984 from Pomona College, California with a BA in English with a concentration in creative writing. Chandra continued his studies at Columbia, Houston, and Johns Hopkins universities, following courses in film and creative writing (the latter with Donald Barthelme and John Barth). He now alternates between the US (where he currently teaches creative writing at the University of California at Berkeley), and Bombay/Mumbai, where he spends half of the year. In 2005 he married the American writer Melanie Abrams.

In the library at Columbia, Chandra came across the autobiography of the nineteenth-century Anglo-Indian soldier James "Sikander" Skinner. That book inspired his first novel, *Red Earth*

and Pouring Rain, a powerful and ambitious narrative which melds historical epic with magic realism. Published in 1995, it established Chandra as a novelist and won him the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book. He followed it up in 1997 with *Love and Longing in Bombay*, a collection of five interlinked short stories in a more realist vein, which also won an award, the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book (Eurasia Region). After that, it was a long but justified wait till 2006 and the epic *Sacred Games*, a 900-page metaphysical thriller exploring the Bombay underworld, which rose to number one in the Indian fiction best-seller lists, and obtained a national award, the Hutch Crossword Award for English Fiction. Chandra's recognition as a major Indian writer in English has been consecrated by his presence in two major anthologies of the genre, Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West's *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997*, and Amit Chaudhuri's *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*. The reactions of reviewers, critics and fellow writers to his three works of fiction have been in general highly positive, though there have been dissident voices from what might be called the "anti-expatriate" tendency in Indian criticism. The three books differ considerably from each other, but readers' responses to all have stressed the inclusiveness and multiplicity of their subject-matter, the author's storytelling gifts, and the subtleties and complexities of his narrative technique. His books have been or are being translated into a total of 19 languages, including Hindi and other Indian languages: in particular, all three are available in Spanish, Italian, German and Dutch.

By comparison with other contemporary Indian writers in English, there has been relatively little academic criticism published on Chandra's work. As far as full-length studies concerned we are aware of only one, as it happens from Spain: *Puentes sobre el mundo: Cultura, traducción y forma literaria en las narrativas de transculturación de José María Arguedas y Vikram Chandra* (2004) by Dora Sales Salvador, a comparative study of Chandra and the Peruvian writer Arguedas. The present volume is, as we have said, to our knowledge the first academic study to be dedicated exclusively to Chandra.

II

The ten critical essays in the volume are placed approximately in chronological order of the works discussed. Starting, then, with Chandra's first novel, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, Silvia Albertazzi ("To tell a story is to affirm life": Death and Storytelling in Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*) reads Chandra as a modern-day avatar of the traditional storyteller, helping his audience face the primordial fact of mortality. Andrew Teverson ("Leaving the Past Behind, Letting the Future Alone: Vikram Chandra's Uses of History in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*") offers a close analysis of Chandra's use of historical source material, reading the novel as an interrogation of monolithic and univocal notions of history and a plea for pluralism. Christopher Rollason, in "The Tale-teller and the Text: Storytelling in Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* and *Love and Longing in Bombay*", takes up the storyteller motif for Chandra's first two books, stressing *Red Earth*'s rich vein of intertextuality through such presences as Poe, Borges and the *Thousand and One Nights*. A second essay by Rollason, "On the Spanish Translation of Vikram Chandra's *Love and Longing in Bombay*: Problems and Strategies of Translating a Transcultural Text", examines, with reference to Chandra's second book and its Spanish translation (by Esther Monzó Nebot and Dora Sales Salvador), the challenges and difficulties involved in transposing a postcolonial text into the matrix of a different culture. Cielo Festino ("A Story from Vikram Chandra's *Love and Longing in Bombay*: 'Kama' - Detecting in Bombay") takes one of Chandra's short stories and shows how it both activates and subverts detective conventions in the context of a pluralist and anti-communalist vision.

The remaining articles focus on *Sacred Games*. Geetha Ganapathy-Doré, in “Supermodernity’s Meganarratives: A Comparative Study of Vikram Chandra’s *Sacred Games*, Gregory David Roberts’ *Shantaram* and Suketu Mehta’s *Maximum City*”, compares Chandra’s novel with two well-known recent non-fiction books also set in Bombay/Mumbai, finding in all three a hyperrealist and disorienting vision of modernity. Dora Sales Salvador (“‘Only Life Itself’: Noir Fiction and Beyond in Vikram Chandra’s *Sacred Games*”) offers a reading of the novel that highlights the motifs of connectedness and pluralism and Chandra’s refusal of one-dimensional solutions. Adalinda Gasparini (“Farewell, Father Oedipus: Freedom and Uncertainty in Vikram Chandra’s *Sacred Games*”) develops the notion of literature, and notably postcolonial literature, as therapy, showing how *Sacred Games*, with its multiple ways of seeing, may be read as a post-Freudian deconstruction of inherited Oedipal character structures. Sheobhushan Shukla, in “The Other as the Subject in Vikram Chandra’s *Sacred Games*”, considers the novel as a successful, non-exoticised and genuinely autochthonous instance of Indian Writing in English; and, finally, Anu Shukla, in “Uses and Abuses of Indian English in *Sacred Games*”, examines a range of aspects of the Indianisation of English in Chandra’s book.

The volume also includes: an introduction by the editors outlining the state of play of Chandra criticism; an interview with the novelist conducted by Antonia Navarro-Tejero at Berkeley in 2005; and a bibliography of writings by and on Chandra. The bibliography is to our knowledge the most extensive compiled to date, and includes, *inter alia*, all known published translations.

Chandra’s multifaceted writing eludes rigid categories and cannot be reduced to simplistic formulas. However, from their multiple perspectives the studies collected in this volume do tend to emphasise the notion of *plurality* as a vital component of his work – signifying both the innate heterogeneity of Indian culture and the complexities of postcoloniality and globalisation, the refusal of monolithic belief-systems be they colonialist, communalist or nationalist, and, above all, the constant interweaving of a multiplicity of narrative voices. We invite our readers, then, to enter Vikram Chandra’s world through the medium of this volume, echoing his own words in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*:

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 future¹.

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¹ Chandra, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, Faber edn., 617.