

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

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I

With two substantial books behind him and a third in the pipeline, Vikram Chandra has risen to prominence in recent years as one of the most acclaimed and critically lauded of the new generation of English-medium or "Indo-Anglian" writers. In the characteristic spirit of that literary movement, his career so far is the product of a life spent between India and the West. He was born in Delhi in 1961, into a family with a professional inclination to writing and the cinema; the family moved to Bombay in 1978. He studied in the US, at a number of universities including Columbia and Johns Hopkins (working at the latter with no less a novelist than John Barth), while also developing his computer skills; he now alternates between Washington, DC (where he teaches creative writing at George Washington University), and Bombay, or Mumbai as it is now called (where he spends half of the year), and has described himself as a "frequent flyer" between those two localities.¹ Chandra's fictions focus, with remarkable imaginative power, on an India finely balanced between modernity and tradition.

In 1995 Chandra published his first book, the highly impressive and ambitious *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, a novel which may be called an amalgam of historical epic and magic realism. It won him the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Best First Published 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 secured him an award, this time the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Best Book, Eurasia Region. A third book, as yet untitled, is on the way: according to the author's own indications, this will be a multi-generic fusion of crime novel, intelligence novel and quest novel, set in Bombay-Mumbai and centred on Inspector Sartaj, a character first introduced in one of the stories in *Love and Longing*. Meanwhile, writings by Chandra had, as of 2003, been translated into no less than eleven languages.²

Chandra sees himself as a modern storyteller in the 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 of his published books there is a storyteller who tells stories to an audience, and also an audience that talks back. *Red Earth* 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* is structured as a sequence of stories narrated in a city bar, the "Fisherman's Rest", to an audience of regulars by a retired civil servant named Subramaniam. In both books, a crucial keyword is "Listen", and, indeed, the storytelling motif is written into the fabric of Chandra's texts. The story that closes *Love and Longing*, entitled "Shanti", culminates with a creative act of storytelling that generates a marriage:

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. (251)³

On the very last page of *Red Earth*, Abhay declares that the tale-telling cannot, must not stop, 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 (617).

In Chandra's fictional world, then, 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

Chandra's narratives are, besides, also part of the great continuing story that is India. The chosen subject-matter of his fictions thus far is the subcontinent - its past but also its present, its inherent dynamic but also its relations with the wider world. As an expatriate who nonetheless spends considerable time in India, Chandra stands at a particular intersection point, one also occupied by many of his fellow Indo-Anglian writers.

The most celebrated member of that literary school is of course Salman Rushdie, and his case is in some respects 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, 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 sole literature Nobel prize obtained to date by an Indian national, in 1913), the widely-praised R.K. Narayan, and, if one stretches the definition of "Indian" a little, the British national of Indo-Trinidadian origin V.S. Naipaul, whose 2001 Nobel has now crowned a long and internationally accoladed career. However, the global recognition of a 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 Britain, the US, or Canada. Into this category fall Rushdie, Chandra, and many others: male writers such as Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry, Amitav Ghosh and the Canadian-Sri Lankan Michael Ondaatje, and female writers including Anita Desai, Gita Mehta, or Jhumpa Lahiri, whose debut publication won her the Pulitzer Prize for 2000. Those English-medium practitioners of fiction who have remained in India tend - like the domestic best-seller Shobha Dé or the author of Goan stories Nisha da Cunha - to be better known at home than internationally, the main 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.⁴

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:

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.⁵

Midnight's Children set the ground rules for future Indian writing in more ways than one. It operates within the magic-realist mode as famously exemplified by Gabriel García Márquez in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, his internationally best-selling novel of 1967, mingling conventional realism with elements of dream, fantasy and the marvellous, and drawing in the process on the story-telling 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 length and breadth of 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 Saleem, Rushdie's narrator, 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.⁶

Rushdie's own subsequent work has, as far as substantial fictions are concerned, largely continued in this mode. *Midnight's Children* and the four novels that followed it up to 1999 - *Shame*, *The Satanic Verses*, *The Moor's Last Sigh* and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* - may be read, taken together, as forming a subcontinental epic of the twentieth century. All have a chronological sweep encompassing large parts of the twentieth-century history of India (or, in *Shame*, Pakistan), typically including critical portrayals of thinly-disguised real political figures, and all place the subcontinent in its relation to the wider world (Britain, Europe, America) with which its fate is entangled. Nonetheless, and despite the undoubted impressiveness of Rushdie's totalising aspirations, the last in this series, *The Ground Beneath*

Her Feet, betrays, through both its geo-narrative sequencing (India to Britain to the US) and its somewhat uncritical embrace of transatlantic mass culture, an evident watering-down of the subcontinental dimension that once shone so powerfully in Rushdie's writing. This process has continued in his most recent novel, *Fury*, published in 2001 and set in New York, in which, even if the protagonist is of Indian origin, the presence of the subcontinent has become tenuous indeed and, coincidentally or not, many critics and readers have found a disappointing drying-up of Rushdie's old critical and creative energy, in favour of the self-referential, multi-superficial pastiche mode of a shallow sub-postmodernism.

The torch lit by Rushdie with *Midnight's Children* has, readers may conclude, found new keepers in more recent years. Vikram Seth's epic-length (and critically and commercially successful) novel of 1993, *A Suitable Boy*, embraces the multiplicity of post-independence Indian society, clustering interrelated stories around the inhabitants of an invented yet eminently representative city with an inclusiveness that parallels Rushdie's, albeit in a more classically realist mode (though Seth too abandons any Indian context even more radically than Rushdie in his follow-up novel of 1999, *An Equal Music*, which focuses on the world of western classical music and contains, on the surface at least, not a single allusion to the subcontinent). The fictional rendition of India, across swathes of the twentieth century and in relation to the wider world, has also been admirably practised by Anita Desai, in, for instance, *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), where a small-town lawyer's family produces both an unmarriageable, dysfunctional daughter and a pampered but self-effacing son sent to study in the dull suburbia of Massachusetts. The theme of cross-cultural confrontation between subcontinental traditions and a brashly hegemonic US is further underscored by Jhumpa Lahiri in her highly perceptive short-story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, also from 1999. Perhaps most daringly of all, Amitav Ghosh, in his remarkable novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), has pushed Rushdie's Indian-past-and-present model into new and uncharted territory, by incorporating elements of both native esotericism and a disturbing high-tech future.

III

It is in this more general context that readers may view 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 *Red Earth* (616); and, indeed, the whole novel consists of a series of interlinked and interlocking stories stretching across continents and centuries. With breathless virtuosity, the narratives propel 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). One of the main characters, 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 [Sikander] Skinner, which was what made me write *Red Earth*".⁷ The translation was, incidentally, into English from Persian, the language in which Skinner had expressed himself despite his British origins, thus bringing into play the multicultural complexities which are further developed in Chandra's novel.⁸ The

narrative also incorporates divine personages from the Hindu pantheon: 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; 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 hitch-hiker; Abhay, a young Indian studying in the US, brings his girlfriend Amanda home to the subcontinent, only for the relationship to collapse under her feelings of 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 related on the maidan outside Abhay's house, 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 are blended into a single story-telling circle.

The stories unfold as if endlessly: the closing words of the book, "we will start all over again" (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 oriental tradition. The novel's title itself is, as the author explains in a note, taken from a classical Tamil poem, by Cempulappeyanirar.⁹ 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".¹⁰ The figure of Hanuman, for example, obviously evokes the *Ramayana*. In addition, the British printing-press owner, Markline, speaks, in condescending Eurocentric fashion, of the conventions of classical Indian 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." (335) - and, whatever the nature of the prejudices the character is expressing here, 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 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. (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 "' (11); and later on, discovers 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.'" (123).

To some in the West, 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 writer 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
¹¹
 ...

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, *Red Earth* 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" (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*.¹² The parallel is, at all events, particularly arresting given that it is through a miraculous act of *writing* - the production of a text within the text - that Chandra, paradoxically, anchors his eminently modern fiction in the immemorial story-telling traditions of the East.

Chandra is, nonetheless, also, as we have seen, one of that generation of subcontinental émigré writers whose life and work straddle East and West; and the text of *Red Earth*, 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; she reads aloud to her patient, and 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 "English 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".¹³

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*" - *Red Earth*, 196), and, crucially for the Anglo-Indian theme, to Kipling. Abhay discovers a copy of *Kim* at Amanda's parents' house (588); and the Irishman George Thomas finds himself "taken for a Pathan" thanks to his "sunburnt skin" (125) - a detail which may recall Kimball O'Hara, Kipling's part-Indianised Irish orphan who blends effortlessly into the backstreets 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 (316). The adventures of the criminal Dr Sarthey - whom Sanjay, after following him to London, eventually discovers to be 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 of both the explicit and the hidden type, and a number of the intertextual relationships thus set up merit particular comment.

Red Earth contains a fascinating trace of a writer who has himself been seen as the modern high priest of intertextuality, namely the celebrated Argentinian fabulist, short-story writer and essayist 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 his adversary Dr Sarthey from India to England, passing through endless vicissitudes on the way:

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 (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 "The Immortal". Chandra has, in fact, clearly documented his avowed

"affection" for a writer whom he even refers to as "Borges-bhai", in his *Boston Review* essay - where, connecting with another intertextual link, he praises Borges as "the writer who loved the *Thousand and One Nights* so much that he wrote an essay about its various translations".¹⁴ In "The Immortal", 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.¹⁵

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 sensation 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 (whose Lord Jim 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 and more".¹⁶ 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* is what appears to be 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 *Red Earth* (in one of the American sequences, a character called Tom confesses: "I read Poe behind the gym" - 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 the state of Virginia in 1827, which also includes an inset narrative that flashes back to an episode in the conquest of Bengal by 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 on Hastings by Thomas Macaulay, published in 1841.

In Chandra's novel, George Thomas, in the course of his wanderings, enters the warrior-land of Rajputana, 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 ..." (126). This is the same Cheit or Cheyte Singh as appears in Poe's tale, at a slightly earlier stage of his career. 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".¹⁷

The parallels between Poe's and Chandra's texts go beyond this single 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 distant hypnosis, by his physician, a Dr Templeton, who had actually served as an officer under Hastings and had lived through all 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 - specifically, to his celebrated coeval, Salman Rushdie. Like Chandra, Rushdie has drawn quite visibly on the *Thousand and One Nights* for his fictions of the contemporary subcontinent. 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 his fable *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* transparently evokes the famous story-cycle in the names Haroun and 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 the heritage by overtly recalling the likes of Lewis Carroll and - again - Edgar Allan Poe.¹⁸

There are also audible echoes in the substance of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Both novels are modern epics of the subcontinent, 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 ("the war hero"¹⁹) and Sikander ("bravest of the brave" - 440) are both confident, outgoing men of action, with whom Saleem and Sanjay are contrasted as more introverted, insecure figures. Both pairs are linked by strange 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"²⁰); Sikander and Sanjay are linked by the manner of their birth, both of them conceived from miraculous, glowing laddoos initiatically eaten by their mothers (153-154). The shadow of part-European origins hovers over Sikander, for, the miracle of his

birth apart, his father is an English soldier, John Hercules Skinner; while, similarly, 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 *Midnight's Children* who manage to keep their magic powers intact.

In addition, Chandra's narrative strategy in some respects contrasts markedly with Rushdie's. Both writers - Chandra in *Red Earth*, and Rushdie in his various major novels - describe a wide historical and geographical arc, linking the contemporary subcontinent to the epoch of European domination, and also to the Western world outside. Both include, in their dramatis personae, invented characters alongside historical figures, though Rushdie chooses more rather celebrated figures than Chandra - the Gandhis in *Midnight's Children*, Nehru in *The Moor's Last Sigh* - but also keeping them more in the background, with the notable exception of *Shame*, whose main characters are thinly disguised versions of the Bhuttos and Zia-ul-Haq.

Despite these parallels in content, Rushdie's narrative technique is - however experimental in other ways - to a large extent quite linear. *Midnight's Children* starts its family history around the turn of the century under the Raj, and gradually ushers the reader, in approximately chronological fashion and allowing for flashbacks, fast-forwards and narratorial comments, up to today's subcontinent and the time of writing. A similar strategy is employed in most of Rushdie's other novels, though an exception should be made for *The Satanic Verses*, a novel structurally rather more similar to *Red Earth* in its disorienting alternations of time and place, but which has, for extraneous reasons which I scarcely need mention, rarely been examined from the point of view of narrative construction. Chandra's method in *Red Earth* contrasts with that typically employed by Rushdie, as being visibly and consciously non-linear, confronting East and West, past and present, in a patchwork of multiple narratives that refuses any notion of straightforward linear development.

There is no doubt, however, that 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 the fictions of the world:

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.²¹

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 surely drawing on that same age-old ocean of story, "not dead but alive".

At a crucial moment in *Red Earth*, with the listeners still 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". (419).

The reference behind the "death threats" needs no glossing: 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 hard-liners, it is a sacred figure, Hanuman, who insists: "Go on ... Don't be afraid of what you have to tell ... Tell the story" (420). Even when, at the very end, a listener is tragically injured by a gratuitous terrorist bomb, the story-telling 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".

Chandra's novel offers no final answers to the clash of cultures: all that is certain is that the story-telling never stops. *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* magisterially employs the multiple resources of the magic-realist genre to construct a dynamically epic vision of India's past and present.

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 as Indian microcosm. Chandra, be it noted, does *not* use, in either title or text, the now-official Marathi name 'Mumbai', which, he believes, reflects a narrow-minded communalism that denies the city's vibrant cosmopolitanism in the name of regional particularism and Hindu chauvinism. There is, of course, an established and considerable tradition of Indo-Anglian writing centred on the city Chandra calls 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".²² 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 1991 novel of "Bollywood" *Starry Nights*, and in Rohinton Mistry's *Tales From Firozsha Baag* (1987), a well-regarded short-story collection which anticipates Chandra by homing in on closely-observed lives in the metropolis.

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 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 past history and magic realism aside, to offer 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 *Boston Review* article, 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". The modern facet is particularly notable in "Kama" and "Artha", the two longest stories in the collection. "Kama", the story which introduces Inspector Sartaj, concerns an unsolved murder case: 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. "Artha", narrated within the main narrator's frame-narrative by a young computer programmer of Muslim origin, presents another unresolved mystery, this time 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.

In these two stories, Bombay becomes a twentieth-century, Asian manifestation of the modern metropolis as pictured by Walter Benjamin in his seminal work 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.

Also noteworthy in this volume's vision of Indian modernity is the dimension of information technology. Chandra himself has a computer background, with consulting and programming experience, and he highlights India's increasingly dynamic role in the forefront of the IT revolution in the setting chosen for "Artha", namely "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" (164). This cutting-edge technological presence in today's India has also been powerfully foregrounded by Amitav Ghosh in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, but is notably - and disappointingly - underplayed in the recent work of Rushdie, who in his last three novels, despite their contemporary themes, touches on the computer/Internet phenomenon only in cursory and superficial fashion, and with minimal reference to its implantation in India. Today, Vikram Chandra appears, indeed, to have his writer's hand much more firmly on the pulse of modern India than his more globally celebrated compatriot.

Love and Longing in Bombay has been well-received, not only by critics but also by Chandra's fellow-writers. Rushdie included the story "Shakti" in the anthology of modern Indian writing which he co-edited for Vintage with Elizabeth West in 1997: in his introduction to the anthology, Rushdie evokes what he sees as Chandra's "flamboyant manner".²⁴ The novelist Amit Chaudhuri, by contrast, in his own rival anthology published by Picador in 2001, sees *Love and Longing* as written in a more sedate and disciplined register than *Red Earth*, and praises the author accordingly: "His first novel, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* ... is a postmodern extravaganza ... In ... *Love and Longing in Bombay*, Chandra abandoned this panoply of event and colour for what is a difficult form, the long short story, and was transformed from being a very ambitious novelist into a very good writer indeed".²⁵ Chandra's presence in both anthologies may be taken as testimony to his growing status, not least among his peers.

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 "authentic India". This adverse view of expatriates and exiles is often compounded by a dislike of the magic-realist mode and an expressed preference for traditional realism *à la* Narayan. For every critic like Dharanidhar Sahu, the enthusiastic author of an essay on magic realism who hails the genre as combining the "time-tested art of story-telling" with "post-modernist sophistication",²⁶ there will be another on the watch, waiting to denounce the "un-Indianness" of the non-resident 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, he believes, denies "everything that makes the novel an art form".²⁷ The circumstance that both Sahu and Mishra are novelists themselves adds a pungent urgency to this continuing debate.

Vikram Chandra has not escaped the strictures of the authenticists, and in the *Boston Review* essay cited above he recounts a telling incident. On 12 April 1999, Chandra says, Dr Meenakshi Mukherjee, the noted Delhi 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 expatriate 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 mere orientalist stereotypes and clichés for the superficial delectation of ill-informed Western readers. In her view (I again 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 brilliant 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".²⁸ Meenakshi Mukherjee's position against Chandra has, meanwhile, been effectively endorsed by another critic, Uma Parameswaran of the University of Winnipeg in Canada, in an article of 2001 in which she claims that Mukherjee's words have been "misconstrued" and "taken out of context" by Chandra. Parameswaran takes up the position expressed in 1969 by a British critic sympathetic to the authenticity argument, the late David McCutcheon, who argued that an Indian writing in English "knows he is writing for non-Indians, which can only make his Indianness self-conscious";²⁹ she sees Chandra, rather bizarrely, as typifying diaspora writers' presumed "focusing on negative Indian stereotypes" (surely his visible debt to the epic and story-telling traditions should be sufficient refutation of such a charge?).

Against this kind of authenticist line, Chandra, in his *Boston Review* essay, 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 is interesting enough to quote at some 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.³⁰

Those who support the "diasporic" rather than the "authenticist" model will probably 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 the émigré writer, who can never belong fully to either his home country or his land of adoption, is all but forced, as a kind of global nomad, 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 Desai, Ghosh, Lahiri and the earlier Rushdie. As Edward Said has 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".³¹ Those critics who insist that exponents of a particular literature should 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.

The debate over Indo-Anglian literature will no doubt continue to occupy readers and critics, and Vikram Chandra's work is already positioned close to the centre of that debate. In 1997, a short extract from his forthcoming novel, telling a tale of the Bombay underworld, appeared in the *New Yorker* under the title "Siege in Kailashpada"; the same text was republished in 2001 in the Amit Chaudhuri anthology mentioned above. On the evidence of this foretaste, and of Chandra's public declarations so far,³² the new novel, when it comes out, seems set to combine the detailed contemporary focus of *Love and Longing in Bombay* with something of the epic sweep of *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*.

As a final point for now on the "tradition or modernity" conflict, we may note that it has been Vikram Chandra's conscious choice from the beginning - one in which few fellow writers of fiction have so far followed him - to include his personal email address in his published books. This commitment to electronic communication with the reader has, as of 2003, been reinforced by the creation of an official Vikram Chandra website, at www.vikramchandra.com. As the traditional oral storyteller engaged gladly in discussion of his tales with his listeners, so today, in a vanguard gesture encapsulating the spirit of the Internet age, the novelist willingly invites feedback, not only from critics or academics or journalists or other writers, but from the ordinary reader. The wheel of history comes full circle: the storytelling never stops.

NOTE:

The present text (as published in Warangal in 2002, with minor revisions as of July 2003) is the result of the combination, updating and revision of two previously published articles of mine on Vikram Chandra. The first, "Entwining Narratives: Intertextuality in Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*", appeared in *Post-Independence Indian English Fiction*, ed. Rajeshwar Mittapalli and Alessandro Monti, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, 150-163. The second, "Vikram Chandra: narrativa tradizionale nell'era informatica" ["Vikram Chandra: Traditional Narrative in the Information Age"], was published in Italian in *Scrivere = Incontrare: Migrazione, multiculturalità, scrittura*, ed. Matteo Baraldi and Maria Chiara Gnocchi, Macerata (Italy): Quodlibet, 2001, 63-78.

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Vikram Chandra's official site, with a biography and bibliography, is at:
<www.vikramchandra.com>.

Vikram Chandra's work has been studied in detail by Dora Sales Salvador, of the Universidad Jaume I of Castellón (Comunidad Valenciana, Spain). In 2003, she became the first person to receive a Ph.D. for a thesis on Chandra (her thesis is a comparative study of Chandra and the Peruvian writer José María Arguedas). She has also published a number of articles on his work. One of them, "Vikram Chandra's Constant Journey: Swallowing the World", (*JES - Journal of English Studies*. Special issue: New voices in literature, Vol. 2, Logroño, Spain: Universidad de La Rioja, 2000, 93-111) can be found online at: <<http://www.unirioja.es/Publicaciones/ej/jes/jes02/art07.pdf>>. Dora Sales is also the co-translator, with Esther Monzó, of the Spanish version of *Love and Longing in Bombay*.

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¹ See Chandra, "Frequent Flyer" (81).

² See website "Raising Voices".

³ 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 rather than in the notes.

⁴ Walsh 257-258.

⁵ Desai, interview with Lalita Pandit 163.

⁶ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 463.

⁷ Chandra, Albertazzi interview 73 [As this interview was published in Italian, I have re-translated my quotations from it back into English].

⁸ See Chandra, "Frequent Flyer" 83; "Discussione finale" 125.

⁹ Quoted, *Red Earth* 233.

¹⁰ Chandra, Albertazzi interview 72.

¹¹ Dawood (trans.), *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights* 272.

¹² Chandra, "The Cult of Authenticity".

¹³ Ondaatje, *The English Patient* 61, 222, 93, 188, 243.

¹⁴ Chandra, "The Cult of Authenticity".

¹⁵ Borges, "The Immortal" 146-147.

¹⁶ Bloom 471.

¹⁷ Poe, "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" 147.

¹⁸ Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh* 238, 360.

¹⁹ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 411.

²⁰ *ibid.* 200.

²¹ Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* 72.

²² Khilnani 136-137.

²³ Benjamin 43.

²⁴ Rushdie, introduction to Rushdie and West (eds.), *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing* xviii.

²⁵ Chaudhuri 563.

²⁶ Sahu *passim*.

²⁷ Mishra *passim*.

²⁸ Mehta 99.

²⁹ Parameswaran *passim*; David McCutcheon, "Indian Writing in English", *The Miscellany* 29, October 1969 (quoted in Parameswaran, 13n).

³⁰ Chandra, "The Cult of Authenticity".

³¹ Said 407.

³² See Chandra, "Frequent Flyer" (85-86).