

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC 292

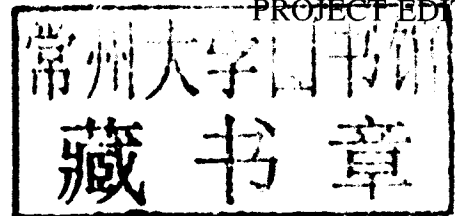
Volume 302

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers

Jeffrey W. Hunter

PROJECT EDITOR



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Preface

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
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- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Vikram Chandra

1961-

Indian-American novelist, short story and screenplay writer.

The following entry presents an overview of Chandra's career through 2009.

INTRODUCTION

Chandra is a much-celebrated writer of novels and short stories that challenge conventional ideas of form and language through their creation of competing realities: the Indian past and the Western present; ancient Bombay and modern Mumbai; Indian mysticism and Western rationalism; venerated tradition and popular culture. Chandra has said that all of his writings are patterned on the practice of Indian oral storytelling, where every tale has in it the germs of another tale. This type of layered narration, while deeply mindful of India's colonial past, also registers Chandra's recognition of the diversity of life in today's globalized world. Added to this multiplicitous narration is Chandra's own double perspective on Indian life, the product of his transnational lifestyle: he spends part of each year teaching in the United States and the other part home in Mumbai. Chandra's story-within-a-story technique, which melds opposing worldviews and viewpoints, also evidences his suspicion of totalizing discourses that lay claim to authenticity. His works have for this reason been studied for their contributions to the politics of representation as articulated in postcolonial and postmodernist literary theory. Chandra's creation of cultural slippage, where disparate histories and customs collide and mesh in sometimes imperceptible ways, is judged the hallmark of his three works of fiction. No single accounting of events emerges as the dominant narrative voice within these works. The first two, the novel *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995) and the short story collection *Love and Longing in Bombay* (1997), both won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize; a more recent work, *Sacred Games* (2006), was shortlisted for this same award.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Chandra was born in New Delhi in 1961. His mother, a successful writer of screenplays for the Indian cinema, and his father, a highly successful owner of

an export trading firm, supported the creative aspirations of Chandra and his siblings. One sister is a filmmaker in India and the other is a film critic and editor for the media group *India Today*. Most of Chandra's secondary education took place at a boarding school in the desert state of Rajasthan. He afterwards enrolled in Kenyon College in Ohio, but left there within a year to study English and creative writing at Pomona College in Los Angeles, where he would be closer to the heart of the film industry. While a student at Columbia University's film school he came across the material that was to provide him with his first published work. In his own words, "The impulse to write *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* came from a chance encounter with the autobiography of Colonel James 'Sikander' Skinner. I was going to film school at Columbia University at the time. Whenever I felt especially lonely or alien in Manhattan, I would wander about the section of the university library that contained the Indian shelves. . . . I suppose it was no coincidence that I became fascinated by Skinner's story. . . . a narrative about being suspended between cultures. . . . I also realized that this was actually a translation of an autobiography that had been written in Urdu, with large interpolations and excisions made by the translator. I thought, then, about language, about speaking in alien tongues, and being made to speak in someone else's voice and about history and memory and the preservation of the past. Is it possible for an Indian to speak truly in English? Whose language is it?" Chandra decided to pursue the history of Skinner, a nineteenth-century Anglo-Indian officer in the army of the East India Company. To that end, he dropped out of Columbia in favor of pursuing a master's degree in creative writing at Johns Hopkins University. While writing the novel and attending school, Chandra also worked as a computer consultant, an experience he says inspired him to think critically about the notion of virtual reality and its crossover creation in fiction. On the advice of novelist John Barth, his mentor at Johns Hopkins, Chandra also obtained an M.F.A., working with writer Donald Barthelme at the University of Houston. *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* was six years in production. By the time of its appearance, Chandra was teaching at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. He has since left there for the University of California at Berkeley. In addition to his fiction, Chandra coauthored an Indian feature film,

Mission Kashmir (2000). He is married to a fellow novelist, Melanie Abrams, also a member of the English Department faculty at Berkeley.

MAJOR WORKS

All of Chandra's stories use frames and inserted narratives that develop in cyclical time. In an interview with Lakshmi Mani, Chandra in fact described the form of *Sacred Games* as a "mandala," a circular design symbolizing the universe in Hindu and Buddhist belief. Drawing on the tradition of the ancient Indian epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, Chandra writes in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, "All stories have in them the seeds of other stories. Any story, if continued long enough, becomes other stories." *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* has two main narrative threads that cross centuries and continents. In the beginning, a college student named Abhay returns home to India from the United States. Having become Americanized, he forgets custom and shoots a white monkey that has been stealing his parents' clothes and food for years. The trauma causes the monkey to recover the memory of his previous incarnation, the nineteenth-century Brahmin freedom fighter Sanjay Parasher, who, it turns out, is the best friend of Colonel James Skinner. Sanjay can only remain alive if he keeps Abhay's family entertained with stories every day. These stories then transition into Abhay's stories of his trip across the United States with two college friends. Chandra uses the novel to revise the English version of Skinner's autobiography, which had omitted and distorted portions of the material in order to preserve a Western perspective. Collectively, the multiple tales produce a sweeping saga that contrasts the globalized present and the colonial past or, more specifically, in the words of critic Dora Sales Salvador, "Aristotle's poetics and Indian aesthetics, Cartesian clarity and Indian curlicues, British rationalism and Indian mythological beliefs, Western discipline and Indian meditation, North American neocolonial power and Indian preservation of tradition in contemporary times."

The frame story of *Love and Longing in Bombay* positions a young man in a waterfront bar in Bombay. There he meets a retired civil servant, Subramaniam, who regales his new friend with a series of five tales about life in Bombay that draw their titles from Hindu concepts: "Dharma" (duty), "Shakti" (fortitude), "Kama" (love), "Artha" (economy), and "Shanti" (peace). The stories are patterned after different genres and include a love story, a ghost story, and a crime story, "Kama," in which appears one of the central

protagonists of *Sacred Games*, Inspector Sartaj Singh of the Mumbai police force. *Sacred Games* finds Sartaj involved in a case against the notorious mobster Ganesh Gaitonde. The detective locates Ganesh hiding in a nuclear fallout shelter. Ganesh is heavily under the influence of a false guru and believes in an imminent apocalypse. With the cops closing in on him, Ganesh shoots himself. Thereafter, Ganesh mysteriously speaks in the first person, describing his involvement in a complex web of crime and intrigue that juxtaposes old Bombay and Mumbai, the local and the global, the real and the fantastic. This tour de force spans 900 pages and grew out of Chandra's interest in the gang warfare that was ravaging the city of Mumbai in the mid-1990s. He learned that the local crime was part of a much larger network involving underworld and political figures across the globe. As the novel sprawled to accommodate the proliferating stories, Chandra devised a software program to help him keep track of hundreds of characters.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Critics have often studied Chandra's fiction as an example of postmodernist self-reflexivity, arguing that his books are more about the process of storytelling than the stories themselves. Maria-Sabina Alexandru, for example, called *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* a "huge metafictional experiment" conditioned in part by the response of listeners in the book to the various tales recounted. Interestingly, Chandra has included his email address on the back cover of each of his works, confirming his belief in the importance of feedback to the generation of his stories. In interviews, Chandra agrees that his fiction raises questions about the very relevance of the novel as a form adequate to capturing the diversity of postcolonial society. But he also says that his inspiration derives entirely from the Indian art of storytelling, not from any motivation to debunk conventional realism, and he balks when critics refer to his works as postcolonial or postmodernist, noting that the term *post* implies a linear view of history not substantiated by his Eastern subject matter.

Still, Chandra admits to a colonial consciousness and puts forth his interlocking narratives as a method of addressing cultural dissonance vis-à-vis the officially sanctioned European view of the Eastern world. He explained in an interview with Alexandru: "I could, if I wanted, have told the story of James Skinner in a completely different way, right? On July 21st, whatever, whatever, this character is born and then you tell a kind of Victorian novel about it. . . . I wanted to tell another truth. One that was as important as any historical truth. . . . I think that the problem with the

argument about realism is that it condemns to silence all sorts of people who don't want to speak in the language of history, in the language of the individual or whatever you're trying to hold forth as the only way of looking the world." By the same token, Chandra regards as parochial the considerable number of American readers and reviewers who have complained that his books are difficult to read because of their inclusion of a wide range of untranslated foreign words, including Punjab, Mumbai slang, Sanskrit, and Hindustani. At the other end of the spectrum, some Indian readers have charged that Chandra's books lack Indian authenticity because they are written in English from an American perspective. Chandra has dismissed these nationalistic arguments as having no place in a globalized world where different cultures are constantly interacting. Critic Dora Sales Salvador, in her discussion of *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, concluded that Chandra had achieved his goal of creating a pluralistic perspective: "Vikram Chandra delves into an open debate on form and representation . . . In the novel, the interaction of the two main oral-framed narrative branches, the epic past and the post-modern present, subsume a meeting of languages, styles, values, identities, forms and textures. . . . Chandra does not anchor his view on simple dichotomies or straight polarizations. He explores the possibilities of liminality, in the complex but encouraging threshold between discourses, cultural systems, poetics, worldviews."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Red Earth and Pouring Rain (novel) 1995
Love and Longing in Bombay (short stories) 1997
Mission Kashmir (film) [story coauthored with Vidhu Vinod Chopra, Abhijit Joshi, and Suketu Mehta] 2000
Sacred Games (novel) 2006

CRITICISM

Vikram Chandra and Peat L. O'Neil (interview date January-February 1998)

SOURCE: Chandra, Vikram, and Peat L. O'Neil. "Nurturing the Vision: An Interview with Vikram Chandra." *Bloomsbury Review* 18, no. 1 (January-February 1998): 9-10.

[In this interview with Peat L. O'Neil, Chandra speaks primarily about the writing process and what it takes to become a successful writer. With respect to his own work, Chandra explains his fascination with film and with the story-within-a-story framework.]

Vikram Chandra is the author of *Love and Longing in Bombay*, a collection of short stories published by Little, Brown in March 1997. *Love and Longing* [*Love and Longing in Bombay*] was just short-listed for the Guardian Fiction Prize. It was in the *New York Times Book Review*'s "Notable Books of 1997." The first story in the collection, "Dharma," was given the Discovery Prize by the *Paris Review* in 1995. His first book, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995), was published by Penguin/India in India, by Faber and Faber in the UK, and by Little, Brown in the United States. It was released in paperback in 1997. In 1996, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* won the David Higham Prize and the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Published Book.

Chandra was born in New Delhi in 1961. Most of his secondary education took place at Mayo College, a boarding school in Rajasthan, a desert state in northwest India, the traditional home of the Rajput warrior clans. In 1984, he graduated from Pomona College near Los Angeles, with a magna cum laude B.A. in English and a concentration in creative writing.

He was pursuing film studies at Columbia University in New York when the genesis of *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* occurred in the Columbia library. By chance, he happened upon the autobiography of Colonel James "Sikander" Skinner, a legendary 19th-century soldier, half Indian and half British. Chandra left film school to begin work on the novel. While writing [*Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, Chandra thought literature and writing, and also worked as an independent computer programmer and consultant. His clients included oil companies, nonprofit organizations, and the Houston Zoo. He has worked with John Barth at Johns Hopkins and with Donald Barthelme at the University of Houston, and he obtained an M.A. at Johns Hopkins and an MFA at the University of Houston.

Chandra lives part of the year in Washington, D.C., where he is an assistant professor of creative writing at George Washington University. With his friend Jenny Bent, a literary agent, Chandra has started a monthly "salon" in D.C. for writers, painters, actors, and artists of all types. The group gets together in a bar for readings or performances, followed by lots of eating, drinking, and conversation. Chandra also spends part of the year in India and has organized a salon in Bombay with another friend, filmmaker Anuradha Tandon. In Bombay, the artists' and writers' gatherings—a great success—are called an *adda*, which has a slightly seedy ring to it, something like "hangout" or "den." A villain in an Indian movie usually has an *adda*.

Currently, he's working on a new novel, one that features Sartaj Singh, the police inspector from "Kama" in *Love and Longing in Bombay*. The story, "Eternal Don," which was published this summer in the *New Yorker* fiction issue, is actually the first chapter of this new book. In June 1997, Chandra was featured in the *New Yorker* photograph of "India's leading novelists."

[The Bloomsbury Review]: *You're a professor at George Washington University now. Is that working out?*

[Chandra]: It works pretty well. I'm here during the school year, and I spend the rest of the year in Bombay. So it's about six months here and six months there. A little unsettling, but nicely so.

How's Red Earth and Pouring Rain doing?

Very well, actually. It won a couple of prizes, and although one doesn't write for prizes, it's certainly nice to receive them. Also, I was invited to the Adelaide Writers Festival, which was my first festival gig. And it was a pleasure to loll about in the sunlight, drink beer, and listen to E. Annie Proulx, Malcolm Bradbury, and Sue Grafton.

What is Love and Longing in Bombay about?

It starts with a young man in Bombay who is lonely and is being taken to a bar by one of his friends. In this bar he meets a retired civil servant named Subramaniam, who is a storyteller. We listen to five of Subramaniam's stories, a couple of which are pretty long—novella-length, actually. There's a ghost story, a detective story, a drawing-room warfare story. The whole thing became a meditation about form, really. I was trying to work within forms I feel a real affection for, forms that have given me immeasurable pleasure over the years. That's the advantage of being an idol-worshipper: You can see truth and divinity in the surfaces, and caressing them becomes an act of worship.

The last story that Subramaniam tells is set at the end of the Second World War, in a time of terrible turbulence and violence. Two people—each with their own losses, somehow damaged—meet in a railway station and tell each other stories. Of course they fall in love. So Subramaniam seems to be interested in the ways that stories change the storytellers, in the physical transformation that comes about when you tell a story. I should say that it's not straightforward—sometimes the most healing stories are those of horror.

So the storyteller is a principal character in these stories, just as the storyteller is central in Red Earth [Red Earth and Pouring Rain]. Are you telling these stories, or is the storyteller?

[Laughs.] Yes, I do often have the sense that the story creates itself, that it is visited upon the writer. The form of the story is half found, half shaped. You apply your craft, shape what is given to you, but there is that rhythm that the story wants to settle into. Organic form, I suppose you could call it.

Do you think of these stories as potential screenplays?

No, I don't. Narratives tend to come to me as prose fiction or screenplays. I have done some screenplay work in Bombay and I'm working on a screenplay now, but these stories had a shape that belonged in prose. And they belong together, really. The narrative frame—the guy in the waterfront bar—unifies them thematically. The story-within-story structure is hard to reproduce in film.

Do you know where you are going before you write?

Yes, I often have an image of the end. I mean, literally an image, a cinematic shot really, with a camera angle, lighting, and sometimes a kick-ass crane-dolly move. But usually I don't know what happens between where I am in the story and this ending image. I discover that as I write, and I don't outline. Working with the story-within-story format can have its own surprises. You think you're 10 pages away from the end, and then you discover that a character wants to tell a story. And maybe a character in that inset story wants to tell a story. And the end you thought was 10 pages away turns out to be still distant at 40.

You're a great admirer of Anthony Trollope, who wrote thousands of words every day. How do you create?

For me it seems to go in cycles. When I'm working well, I can do about 400 words a day. The productive time can last for a few weeks, and then suddenly the well is dry. Then I have to go away for a week, two weeks, maybe more—read as much as I can, watch a lot of movies. Then the fields are ready for cutting again. I admire people like Trollope, who sat down every morning and produced his dozens of pages without any nonsense about inspiration. But I can't do it. I've tried to be disciplined and sit every morning in front of the computer, but I just end up feeling foolish. In the end, you have to trust your own rhythms.

So Trollope was an important influence?

He's recently become an important influence. My friend and agent, Eric Simonoff, is a fervent Trollopian, and had been trying for years to get me to read Trollope. I thought of Trollope as a hearty, beef-and-ale kind of British novelist. I was really ill with a fever in Houston and I just wanted a big book. I got

hold of *Can You Forgive Her?* and I was awake till 4 in the morning, eyes popping from the fever, completely enthralled. He's a wonderful, complicated storyteller, and I very much like his notion that a writer is a shoemaker, a craftsman. His reputation has suffered, of course, because of this. Tony Trollope, civil servant, with his workmanlike approach to the business of writing, doesn't go down very well with the legions of inspired artists.

There's also a hunting-and-shooting story writer you admire—someone you mentioned in that workshop you led at George Washington University.

That would be Jim Corbett. Corbett was born in 1875, in a village in the foothills of the Himalayas. He grew up in the Terai jungles, and became famous first as a big-game hunter, and then as a preservationist. He was often called in to hunt down the man-eating tigers and leopards that were preying on the villagers. He wrote a series of books, accounts of his hunts. The narratives are written like detective stories, always starting with a torn dead body among the bushes. Then Corbett is called in—the outside expert. What follows is a duel between Corbett and the big cat, and the prose is clear and cool and beautiful. He obviously doesn't think of himself as a writer, he just wants to tell you a hunting yarn, but he makes your pulse race. And there is this extraordinary sympathy he has for the animals he has to hunt and kill, which finally leads him to participate in the establishment of the first national park in India. The park is now named after him. I've been going up there in the winters, trying to see a tiger before they disappear.

Red Earth is rich with the history of the subcontinent. Did you absorb the history before you started writing? Was it part of your life before the book?

James "Sikander" Skinner, who is at the center of the book, was a legendary cavalry commander in 19th-century India. I'd heard of him vaguely, but when I started working on the book, I did a lot of research, most of it very pleasurable. Delving into some arcane aspect of last-century Indian life felt like archeological work, and there were lots of little treasures to be found.

How did you get started on Red Earth?

I was going to film school at Columbia University in New York. I liked to wander about the library there, in the stacks. One afternoon a couple of volumes caught my eye. They were on a high shelf, leather-bound, with gold lettering on the back. I got them down, and they turned out to be the translated memoirs of Sikander Skinner. Skinner, who was half Indian, half English, had dictated his memoirs in Persian. They

had been translated by an English friend of his, a man named Fraser. So you had Skinner speaking through Fraser, translated, and Fraser jumps in quite often, acting as mediator and master of ceremonies. I started thinking about what it is to be translated, whether it is possible to speak in another language, how a language is owned, learned, made one's own.

How long did you work with the material?

I knew soon that I had to do something with this book, with Skinner's life. I was obsessed. So I dropped out of film school and went to Johns Hopkins, where I started writing the book. The form of the book, this stories-within-stories structure, came to me fairly early. And very soon I knew that my plan of finishing in a year was absurd. At the end of the year, John Barth asked, "Well, what are you going to do?" I didn't really know, and he suggested that I go down to Houston. So I went off to Texas. It took, finally, about six years to go from beginning to end. Then I went back and cut and reshaped.

Would the cut material be useful in anything else?

No, I don't think so. Certain images and events might come back in other work, in a very transmuted form, but I feel like I'm finished with that material.

What happened with film studies?

I never made it back to film school. I did work on a feature in India, as a script associate. My mother, Kamna, is a screenwriter. She's written a number of very successful films. My sister, Tanuja, is also a screenwriter, and she's about to direct her first feature. My other sister, Anupama, writes film criticism and media coverage for a magazine called *India Today*, and she's married to a film director.

You have said that commercial Indian films have influenced your writing.

Yes. I love the form. I mean, the traditional form for Indian movies, which mixes gritty realism and melodrama with songs. So you can have a gangster movie, with *bhai log* [wise guys] bumping each other off every other scene, and at some point the action will stop and the hero will sing a song. Or a war movie, which will stop the doomed trek of the lost platoon for a musical interlude. Now, this makes no sense to the Western eye, which is trained to read musical comedies but finds a hard-hitting war musical incomprehensible. The classical Indian theater treated song as an integral part of the narrative, and *nautanki*, the popular form, depends heavily on song-and-dance numbers. It's something that is very, very old, and when it's done well, it soars.