



VIKRAM CHANDRA'S LOVE AND LONGING IN BOMBAY- RE-VISITING THE WEAVE OF LIFE

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to elevate and examine the Indian English Fiction. The main focus is placed on Vikram Chandra's *Love and longing in Bombay*. *Love and Longing in Bombay* (1997), is a fine example of story-telling and fable-weaving. Set against the backdrop of a smoky Bombay bar known as the Fisherman's Rest, Chandra's five stories are recounted by Subramaniam, a retired civil servant. This enigmatic story-teller even manages to captivate the imagination of Ranjit, the novel's main narrator who is an unflinching skeptic, belonging more to contemporary Bombay than to the city's tradition and intrigue. The stories within *Love and Longing in Bombay* could be read as five distinctive tales, each floating free of the other. Chandra's *Love and longing in Bombay* 1997 is structured as a sequence of stories by a retired civil servant named Subramaniam. "Dharma" is about a retired major general's responsibility to his family's house in Khar. 'Shakti' is the story of a social climber's infiltration of Malabar society. 'Kama' explores the limits and mysterious power of sexual passion. 'Artha' is about the loss of lovers, friends and peace. 'Shanti' is the story of love and peace brought to a lonely whistle stop by a woman searching for her husband who went missing while working for Indian Airlines.



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INTRODUCTION

Not much surprising enough, Indian literature in English and its historical evolution had happened alongside the consolidation of British imperialism in India. There however exists a variety of opinion about the first definitive Indian text in English, although critics come to the agreement that history of Indian English literature dates back to at least the early 19th century. Its beginnings had received their impetus from three sources - the British government's educational reforms, the endeavour of missionaries and, the response and acceptance of English language and literature by upper-class Indians.

Indian fiction in English emerged out of almost six decades of intellectual and literary gestation that had begun in 1930's with the triumvirate of R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. It is with their advent that the actual journey of the Indian English novel begins. The early Indian novels which were merely patriotic gained a rather contemporary touch with their arrival. One of the most outstanding characteristics of Indian Writing in English is that the background is Indian and the language though foreign, has adapted to the needs of the Indians. The issues, concerns and the themes too are Indian. This has provided a distinct identity to Indian Writing in English. Though the triumvirates are instrumental in providing this distinct Indianness and identity to the writings, these concerns and issues raised in their works are different and their treatment of the issues too is different. The modern Indian writer of the Indian Novel in English has shown a capacity to accommodate a wide range of concerns.

DHARMA

Vikram Chandra's ghost story "Dharma" is set in Bombay and centers on Major Antia, who returns to sell his childhood home in Bombay after requesting to be relieved of his military command due to a phantom pain from his amputated leg that is troubling him. On his return home, he finds out that the house is haunted and Major Antia struggles to confront the ghost of his repressed past in order to exorcise the ghost from the house, so that he can sell the property. The surprise twist of this modern Indian ghost story is that Major Antia ends up confronting not the child-ghost of his dead brother Soli, but the

ghost of himself as a child. Major Antia's story begins with the mention of a pain in a missing leg. The odd thing about this phantom pain is that the leg has been missing for twenty years and has never shown a phantom pain until Major Antia's fiftieth birthday. The pain intensifies over time, denying him sleep and creates a worry in Antia that he may make a mistake at work that will jeopardize the lives of his men. So, he asks to be relieved of his command and returns to his childhood home. But, the pain continues to haunt him there.

In "Dharma", we are introduced to Major General Jehangir Antia or Jago Antia, a man "Famous for his stare, for the cold blackness of his anger, for his tactical skill and his ability to read ground, his whole career from the gold medal at Kharak vasla to the combat and medals in Leh and NEFA" (1997:5), but with a missing leg. He was forced to save his life through a terrible act of self-mutilation:

SHAKTHI

Subramaniam's second story is titled "Shakti", the basic premise of which seems to be, "That the beginning and end of everything is a marriage" (1997:33). Shakti tells us about a love story, between the son and the daughter of two powerful business families, which in the end are able to overcome the conflicts, due to appearances, power and money that only love seems to make disappear. The story is a telling portrait of the gossipy nouveau-riche of Bombay society. It is about a social climber Shiela Bijlani, "the daughter of a common chemist-type shopkeeper growing up amongst potions and medicines" (1997:33), who infiltrates the Malabar high society. Chandra's narrative explores the intricacies, hypocrisies and intrigues of a life behind the façade of glamour and glitz. But he is very astute in painting an equally stark picture of the seamier side of the glittery city with its chawls and brawls. The house in which Shiela lives is a 'White two-storied mansion' with paintings of M.F. Hussain on its walls. The Kholi in which Ganga, the counterpart of high society lives, is in lane that is "narrow, and whoever walked by had to brush close to the door. Across the lane, there was a narrow gutter which flooded in the rains, and behind that more shacks of wood, cloth, cardboard, and tin." (1997:49), but "like all parents", Shiela "never really believed" that her



son “would fall in love” bitchiness and drollery, Chandra probes deep into the psyche of his characters in *Shakti*”, and lays bare the longing for love in a child that can turn even the best-laid plans of an astute mother topsy-turvey, and along with it, the social order too. And after the grand wedding of Sanjeev and Roxanne, and “a curious moment of silence” in it, we are whisked back to the present, as Subramaniam comments “I think of that moment silence whenever I realize how much changed because of that marriage” (1997:74) “*Shakti*” thus refers to the strength inherent in a women who we believe, has the power to make a difference if she really puts her heart in it.

KAMA

The central and third story “*Kama*” is a bleak descent into the heart of darkness of Bombay corruption. Chandra portrays the main character, Sartaj Singh in a realistic way. In the best of these stories, ‘*Kama*’ a dandified police inspector, his marriage disintegrating, has the task of investigating the murder of a seemingly respectable and happily married man. There is an obvious suspect, an alcoholic drifter, who is found wearing the deadman’s “Rolex” watch and who is arrested, then dies in custody. But like the Bombay slums through which the inspector travels, the labyrinthine investigation weaves through innumerable malodorous back alleys and cul-de-sacs before coming up with a far more bizarre solution. Such an intricate story might have been devised by H.R.F. Keating, creator of the splendid inspector Ghote.

Kama means desire. “*Kama*” is an erotic tale of desire and manipulation, Sartaj Singh, a police investigator discovers in himself a heart as Carnal as that of the victim whose case he follows. His search becomes inconclusive as he sees his own potential for violence. “*Kama*”, dives deep into the intricacies of the life in the city of Bombay and exposes the hypocrisy of the so-called sophisticated people. Sartaj is sincere, honest and dedicated to his work. The Police Inspector investigates into the murder case of Chetanbhai Ghan Shyam Patel, gets drawn into the ‘spiralling layers of corruption and deceit’ prevalent in the society. The murder is a mystery. The deceased person, Chetanbhai is known to be misanthropist and to be true to the society. But his

death is an uncleared mystery “Chetanbhai was then a man who liked people to know the make of watch that he was wearing and its exact and precisely calculated value” (p. 81). Kaimal, Chetanbhai’s neighbour who is about sixty, tells the investing officer. “Mr Patel was a very helping kind of man” (p. 88).

Chandra explores the divorce situation characteristic of a sophisticated and too civilized culture of people in the cosmopolitan city, Bombay. As the irony of fate would have it, he also reflects upon his discontented married life that ultimately terminates in divorce. When the police officer receives the divorce papers he succumbs to shock:

ARTHA

The fourth story “*Artha*” is about two gay men, Iqbal and Rajesh, and their lives in crowded Bombay. Both live with their parents who have no clue about their sons’ orientations. One of them struggles hard to make money so that they can afford some private living space; till then they had to be contented with meeting in crowded buses and parks. Again there is another story within this story, that of a woman who employs Iqbal. One enjoys this story most because it brings out the contradictions in India quite well. Two people, who cannot declare their orientations, one woman who is struggling hard to set her business, another woman who is quite orthodox and discriminates on the basis of religious affiliations, all interacting together and achieving some kind of balance.

“*Artha*” has a triple, Chinese-box narrative structure. Here the narrator, Subramaniam is told the story by a stranger on the Rajdhani train, when he was travelling from Delhi to Bombay. *Artha* is also about gangsters and the underworld. The main characters in the story are two – Sandhya and protagonist, Iqbal Akbar. The story combines a similar unresolved mystery with the more contemporary themes of the IT industry and gender preference. The story ‘*Artha*’ a more conceptual within a story, is about a young computer specialist whose contempt for art as a language changes when his friend disappears. There are other minors character Anubhav (Sandhya’s lover), Latif (Sandhya’s son), Vasant (Sandhya’s ex-husband), Ratmani (a builder), Rajesh (Iqbal’s friend, the missing postal



clerk) and a few others. Rajesh and Iqbal meet Anubhav in Sandhya's house. Sandhya is madly in love with Anubhav. He is a painter who always talks in metaphors. "The long canvas had coloured in at the top, a wish of red and yellow and black. In the painting, in the background, there was a poster for Deewar that one, you know, Amitabh Bachchan with the Coolie's rope around his neck and legs wide apart" (p. 170).

SHANTI

The final story, "Shanti" has the railway platform as the backdrop where a drama between two young hearts, Shanti and Shiv is played out. Shanti is in search of her missing husband and the boy is enamored by this lady. It has a happy ending but that is not quite the essence of the story. This story is written in a different vein. It is here that the teller enters into the tale and the story gets a personal touch. Subramaniam, the teller of the stories, invites the narrator Rajiv Sharma to his house to listen how he meets Shanti and marries her. Here are very few characters but they are convincing as human beings. Frankie Furtado, the assistant station master at Lehar, puts Mrs. Shanti Chauhan, a second class passenger, in first class because she is very beautiful; there are two characters Anuradha, Shiv's sister and Rajan, station master and her sister's husband.

Shanti visits Lehar every two or three months. The assistant station master only watches and he respects her when she comes to the station to provide her 1st Class waiting room and a cup of tea. When the young, Shiv sees her at first sight in the waiting room, he falls in love with her in his heart

CONCLUSION

The five stories are linked by the two characters: Shiv Subramaniam, who tells the stories, and Ranjit Sharma, who relays them to the reader. The imputed language – i.e., the language in which the tales 'would have been' told were the characters 'real' – of the stories narrated by Subramaniam is not an Indian language but English, allowing for snatches of dialogue, phrase or song imputedly in other languages. It is the job of the frame-narrator Ranjit, acting as stand-in for the author, to transmit the stories to the reader, again in English. In *Love and Longing in Bombay*, Vikram Chandra has adopted a new technique of story-telling: the five stories in this

collection are told by the same person and are interlocked with a dozen of shorter narratives, fused together as it were, by a 'story-within-the-story' technique. One reads these stories to see Bombay inside out. Violence, crime, activities in the underworld, club-culture, witch-hunting—all the negative qualities that dehumanize the modern man are highlighted in these stories with consummate skill. What seems to be more important in this collection of stories, is the use of Indian words by way of code mixing, that successfully recreates, the characters in our own situation.

The five stories are all thought provoking stories, yet they are also stylish mysteries. Chandra's style is reminiscent of the nineteenth-century short story in his elegant plots and his interests in ghosts (in "Dharma"), high society (in "Shakti"), detectives (in "Kama") and gangsters (in "Artha"). But *Love and Longing in Bombay* is very much set in Bombay and in the twentieth century—the nostalgic poise of the prose is blended with the sweep and chaos of modern Indian city life.

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