

"Sacred Games" - A Modern Indian Dystopia

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Abstract: Some of the primary characteristics of a dystopia are a pessimistic outlook and destructive way of living. *The Sacred Games*, a series by Anurag Kashyap and Vikramaditya Motwane portrays Mumbai in the grip of gangster raj: a disturbed universe of high treason, violence and destruction. A boy bludgeons his mother and her lover with a stone while his father goes silently to jail. The series portrays the thriving underbelly of Mumbai life, especially the kingdom of Urban Waste. The role played by the authorities in pursuing clues to the "Game" played by the hidden "messenger" overlord, is what adds grit and suspense to the plot, as disaster threatens all.

Does this kind of dystopia continue the tradition of western dystopias or are there enough Indian models? Perhaps more than the writer, Vikram Chandra, the filmmakers have found correspondences that are more potent to unleash the evil, in a story that mockingly points to its Other, the "Sacred", its obverse, in not something rational and profound, but quite arbitrary and casual, a mere "Game." These are some of the questions this paper asks, while interrogating the relevance of the genre in literature and film today.

Keywords: The Sacred Games, Dystopia, Vikram Chandra, Violence, Series

"To win is to lose everything, and the game always wins" (Chandra, *Sacred Games* 42). Some of the primary characteristics of a dystopia are a pessimistic outlook and destructive way of living. *The Sacred Games*, (2018) a series by Anurag Kashyap and Vikramaditya Motwane portrays Mumbai in the grip of gangster raj: a disturbed universe of high treason, violence and destruction. A boy, possibly, bludgeons his mother and her lover with a stone while his father goes silently to jail. The series portrays the thriving underbelly of Mumbai life, especially the kingdom of Urban Waste. The role played by the authorities in pursuing clues to the "Game" played by the hidden "messenger" overlord, is what adds grit and suspense to the plot, as disaster threatens all.

The 901-page text *Sacred Games* (2007) by the author Vikram Chandra trajectories the fortunes of Sartaj Singh, the man whom readers of *Love and Longing in Bombay* (1997) recollect instantly as the romantic, handsome, male lead of a stormy, extended, sex scene in the short story "Kama." Sartaj, as we see him in *Sacred Games*, is a tough detective, but one who is used to impress old people, and women criminals and sources to wheedle out information or seek confessions. It is because of his past, his father having been the most honest policeman, and also because he is something of an "Other" because of his genteel manners, and dressing sense. Maybe it is also because of his religion, he is a turbaned Sikh, or perhaps not as given to bribery and corruption as his guru, his senior, Parulkar, who himself had been tutored by

Sartaj's father, who was a legend on the Bombay police force. Mumbai, as such, was becoming quite a favourite as a location for such novels, what with Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City* (2004) and *Shantaram* (2003) a novel by Gregory David Roberts.

Why did Chandra select him as the hero of not a sequel but a tome of a modern-day detective novel set in the criminal underworld of Mumbai? The reviewer in *Publishers Weekly* describes him as follows:

Sartaj, still handsome and impeccably turned out, is now divorced, weary and resigned to his post, complicit in the bribes and police brutality that oil the workings of his city.
(30)

In *Kirkus Reviews*, an Autumn and Winter preview by his publishers, Chandra was quoted to explain the selection. "He forced himself into the book, right from the start," says Chandra, and "He's an interesting guy--tough, a bit wistful, something of a cynical romantic, if you can imagine such a thing" (Kirkus reviews). He also suggests that there will be no Sartaj sequel, as he had had ten years with him and "that's a lot of time" (Kirkus reviews). Pitted against the semi-tragic Mafia Don Ganesh Gaitonde, Sartaj is a loner, in search for fulfilment though the company he keeps daily, cops and criminals, are very similar to Gaitonde himself.

The crime thriller novel genre itself has this essential loneliness about it: the detective being the *döppelgänger* of the reader in quest for fulfilment of some kind. Here Sartaj seems to have met the most unequal match who he finds at the last hour of his life, and thus starts the problem of the novel: it brings together the sacred and the profane, crime and mythology, murder and exaltation to weave a long story of what must have happened, told in the voice of the dead Ganesh Gaitonde. Sartaj is not the first-person narrator, never: it is Ganesh who tells the story as if he were alive. What better beginning of a dystopian tale than a dead narrator speaking to a lost listener?

The Detective as Hero

According to Shoshana Felman, the detective "works to exhort the *secret* of the text" (176) and in this case it must be said that the reader finds an analogue of himself/herself in the detective, the good-looking, well-dressed, middle-class, somewhat urbane, and English-speaking youngish man, whom it is easy to identify with. However, it is Sartaj who sets the tone for the dystopic tone of the novel and the series. Apart from his personal anguish and loneliness, there is no way he is ever to be rewarded, he knows that the success of his boss is going to be his undoing, and that he himself will never be rewarded for finding Gaitonde in the first place! It seems that his pessimistic outlook has become so ingrained in him that it seems to be his only reality. This forms the dystopic basis for both the novel and the series. The long shots, the close-ups and the fade outs show how the taciturn Sartaj is resigned to his fate right from the beginning but like clockwork springs onto action when summoned. Is he the robotic species of the New Age? The series and the novel show him to have the spark of humanity still, and core values. But does that affect the general sense of bleakness at the heart of the story, or rather, its narration?

Tzvetan Todorov postulates that there are two stories in the detective fiction: the story of the crime and the tale of its detection (44, cited in Martin 166). Between the story of the crime and the overlaid narrative of its detection lies a long wait during which the reader lives his readerly existence: an existence full of waiting. The thrill of reading a classic detective novel is largely the thrill of a foreseeable future, as much as the unravelling of a past, which is usually the longest, of future expectation, a constant looking forward to an almost perfect, “a Utopian moment of absolute knowledge” (44, cited in Martin 176), a reconciliation of good and evil. This promise is not lived up to in the novel under study, nor the series, which is why the dystopic elements predominate. The long nine-hundred-page wait, and the eight-part series defy the audience expectation is what this paper asserts. There is still talk of a sequel therefore. Both of the texts assert the ways in which the new kind of detective novel focuses on the breakdown of expectation by putting together new binaries: high and popular culture, expectation and its failure, fulfilment versus unsatisfied hunger for a solution.

The highly teleological western genre of detective fiction comes across the boulder of spirituality, religion and its manifestations in the non-west, in this novel, and series. Thus, it seems to crumble at the possibility of failure to reach the suitably climactic end. Despite the averting of a nuclear threat, the unearthing of the conspiracy and the criminals being apprehended, the end is a deferral: Sartaj waits. It seems to start the beginning of another story. This is possibly the influence of the open-ended Indian mythical narratives, in the case of the series, taken from the Mahabharata, and the references to Hindu mythology, and the cyclical tales of crime and passion lacing the Bollywood charts from the 1970s, if not earlier.

At the heart the novel/series is the story of Ganesh Gaitonde, a very attractive personality as his friends and lovers aver, whose first-person narration distracts the reader who is used to the first-person voice of the detective. As opposed to Sartaj, the gangster appears to be more sympathetic, intuitive, and a very hard worker who has risen from the ranks. One cannot but admire his phenomenal unsupported rise to power over city, district, country and the international crime scene. The sheer trajectory of his rise compares much more favourably as opposed to the unassuming Sartaj and his even more low-key father, a retired policeman, now expired. The way he patronises, creates and falls in love with Zoya Mistry, the movie star; and through her and her supplier Jojo, how he infiltrates Bollywood is really admirable. He learns English by himself; later works for Indian intelligence; survives the constant threats from his Muslim rival, Suleiman Isa; and finally seeks, from the jail and after, religious guidance through life from Guru Shridhar Shukla. This speaks of a far higher intelligence than any of the other characters, except perhaps Anjali Mathur, whom he does not meet. Sartaj's search for Gaitonde's movements and motivations are never fulfilled, till he reaches out to the higher authorities who observe irregularities in Gaitonde's case. Till then, Sartaj is able to only understand and guide the reader through partial truths. This constant running after evidence and the dense narrative bolstering the historicity of the criminal world, is something the reader expects to happen in a more logical and causative manner. Through the piles of murder, blackmail, gang rivalry and neighborhood quarrels, Sartaj and the readers with him, are tired and defeated. Anjali Mathur saves the scenario in both the texts, though even what she offers does not reach the public, and there is never any clear disclosure about where the Guruji

disappeared. A large part of the text is rumination: like most postmodern novels, memory supplies the missing action right up to the end, and memory is how the action even begins. Even at the point of death, the gangster-police duo ruminates on the meaning of life and death, like the best of friends. The police-officer/detective is no longer shown as the one with agency, in his limited aspiration, he is the one searching till the end, and failing each time. So much of the story is revealed to the reader, unbeknownst to him!

The tale of the mysterious deaths of the two characters is laid aside for deeper mysteries: money crossing borders, false terrorist organisations, a guru, new handlers, new location and a deeper, labyrinthine past which creates far greater dangers to the nation. These weigh far more than what a very average, almost puny detective officer, with whom the reader actually identifies with, started off solving. This deferral of interest, this throwing the detective officer aside for a smarter, more tech savvy, female, officer of the RAW is the new aspect of dystopic fiction that one needs to look out for. It tells us that crime is no longer the linear, psychosocial case-focused matter anymore: it encompasses contemporary geopolitics through cartels motivated by religious fundamentalism, traverses international locations as easily as Bollywood, and overrules one's expectations of causality. There is practically no logical explanation for Guruji's plan of creating a nuclear arsenal and blowing up Mumbai. And, the fact that Sartaj never really knows why Gaitonde died along with his favourite "friend" Jojo, is like a debasement of the detective hero in this genre. Things are by far more complicated to know: Sartaj the detective, is too ahistorical to be attuned to more than the immediate present in offering a satisfactory solution to the murder mystery than all the rest taken together.

Slick New Style

Each of the serialised episodes take names familiar from the world of Hindu mythology. The first episode is titled "Aswatthama," a character whose story is intimately linked with betrayal. from the Sanskrit epic Mahabharata. "Halahala," another episode, is synonymous with a deadly poison. "Atapi-Vatapi" were a pair of tricksters among demons. "Brahmahatya" means killing of a Brahmin, one of the highest crimes according to the Hindu shastras. The episode "Yayati" was named after a king cursed with premature old age. Somehow the nomenclature, the sexual fantasies played out by mythological dressing of one of the molls, point out to deeper, darker, self-reflexive critique of the dominant ideology in India today.

While reading the novel, the chapters after the opening double death, lead us on to the journeys of many lives, many histories and many "slices of life." Poised on the brink of nuclear escalation, and an actual bomb being assembled, details of which are not discussed and revealed till the penultimate chapter, the novel rambles on through history and religion, government policies and rise of political parties, subcontinental arms-drug mafia and a wealth of other details. Many questions arise in the mind: Are we poised for good days to come or are we only witness to a darker, bleaker, gloomier countdown to an Apocalyptic future? What is the State's role in the playing out of the secretiveness of the theme? Whose deep dark secrets are being so carefully hidden by the powers that be? Disappointment inheres in the very structure of the solution, the inevitable. According to Martin, postponement of the end disappoints the reader and the wait becomes an endless one with deferrals, historical fact-

checking and endless mysteries seemingly unrelated to the first death. The most interesting part of the novel is probably the use of *Bambaiya* Hindi “the anglophone writer’s new engagement with the street life of Bombay” (Beliappa 350). This is one feature that becomes irrelevant in the series which is in fact in Hindi, largely *Bambaiya*.

The series however, much more cohesive and determined to unravel an essentially dystopic plot, explores mainly the subplot entitled in the chapter “The Game,” a psychological exploration of Anjali Mathur’s careful unravelling of the facts. In the novel it comes towards the middle, when she tries to unravel K.D. Yadav’s memory, he who was the initial handler of Ganesh Gaitonde, to extract further information from him. Anjali Mathur brilliantly explores this trail of linkages between counterfeit money and the international nuclear terrorism racket sponsored by the religio-political ideology and funding of the Guru-ji, who does not become such a powerful figure in the series. The character of Anjali Mathur, quite well-delineated in both, is eliminated half-way through, by the film maker in the series.

Writing and Adapting: Possible Lineages

It seems that while working on the book, Chandra met with many of the Mumbai Mafia bosses. "The bosses of the bigger 'companies'--as the gangs are called in Mumbai--actually do function like corporate executives, in that they are keenly aware of their public profiles, and are as eager to spin you as you are to interview them," says Chandra. "Usually the dons tried to come off as misjudged realists, people who were trying to make their way in a harsh world as best as they could, and help the poor and suffering along the way" (Kirkus Reviews).

It is not surprising the book has several intertextual echoes and multiple references to the world of Bollywood, its music, its actors, its films, its working, and its linkages with the mafia. The series also exploits the same by virtue of the lineages of the director and producer who are known for their gangster and mafia-related oeuvre.

Gaitonde, forever the ambitious and power hungry, ruthless criminal, is modelled on so many before him, but he is a Hindu gangster, exploited for his being a Hindu by the corrupt ideologue, Guruji, though he himself was initially unbiased and secular. The typical lineage of Mumbai films like *Deewaar* and *Parinda* on the psyche of the Mumbai gangster is even mentioned in the novel. Gaitonde is also the gangster with the Robin Hood heart, looking after people who have sought his protection, and his boys and their families, another Bollywood and gangster stereotype. Both the novel and the series open with a face-off between Sartaj, the good policeman, with whom the reader identifies, and the evil gangster, Gaitonde, who continues to talk to Sartaj from his self-created bunker. “Chandra connects them as he connects all the big themes of the subcontinent: the animosity of caste and religion, the poverty, the prostitution and mainly, the criminal elite, who organize themselves on the model of corporations and control their fiefdoms from outside the country” (Ermelino).

Neither easy to read nor to forget, Chandra's blockbuster resembles--and was perhaps influenced by--Mark Smith's NBA-nominated *The Death of the Detective* (1974). Both books have a curious blend of the world of the rich and famous implicated with a thriving underworld

and a detective in search of a criminal mastermind. Moreover, both novels “remind us again that we're all connected, all both innocent and guilty, all both authors of our own stories and characters enmeshed in their convoluted, compelling, echoing patterns” (Allen). “There is a curious symbiosis between the underworld and the movies...Hindi film-makers are fascinated by the lives of the gangsters and draw upon them for material. The gangsters, from the shooters on the ground to the don-in-exile at the top, watch Hindi movies keenly and model themselves, their dialogue, the way they carry themselves, on their screen equivalents” (Mehta 954).

The Endings

The novel ends therefore on a traffic jam, and with possibilities of “another day”, just as it had continued with Gaitonde’s narration about “what happened next and what happened next” (Chandra *Sacred Games* 49). It does not end as a detective story merely, and Chandra takes us beyond the tale to the city. “Solving the crime is important, but he also hands us the keys to the city and reveals its sordid mysteries” (Bromley 28).

As this paper is going to print, the television series is now revived. *The Sacred Games*, Series Two, will probably satisfy many viewers, as the first series had left out a wealth of details from both the lives, of Sartaj and Gaitonde. The presence of Guruji definitely complicates matters. So, now it weaves a more compact though dystopic tale of intrigue, criminality, sexual fantasy and loneliness at the heart of the city, both in its citizens and their protectors’ lives.

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