

GAMES PEOPLE PLAY: LIFE AND LIVING IN TROUBLED TIMES*Dr. Rimika Singhvi, Asso. Prof. & Head, Dept. of English, IIS (Deemed to be Univ.), Jaipur***Abstract:**

Vikram Chandra's Sacred Games (2006) is a lofty 900-page literary showpiece that explores, with a devastating realism, the milieu of the bustling "city of dreams" - Bombay. Partly Dickensian and partly The Godfather in its purview, the book chronicles the story of the city's criminal mastermind and a lacklustre policeman, set against the backdrop of the glamour of Bollywood and the tension of Indo-Pak violence. The paper will, however, attempt to examine as to how this social novel is more than just a crime saga or detective thriller by also candidly conjuring the vulgarity - both physical and psychological - of Bombay's crowded and impoverished population as the zeitgeist. Given the fact that the novel probes into religious polarisation, corruption, prejudice, and political apathy while painting a not-so-pretty picture of the Indian society, it becomes imperative to also explore how it engages with precarious living in a fragile environment with the spectre of nuclear terrorism looming large and the heart-wrenching violence of the 1947 Partition behind us. The manner in which Chandra works out the complex political and social anxieties, that we as a nation have been experiencing since the '90s, is worthy of critical attention.

Packed with intricate details and complex characterization, the story exposes the mechanics of religious fundamentalism through references to incidents of communal aggression such as the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the bomb blasts of 1993. At the same time, it illustrates the tussle between tradition and modernity. The paper will, therefore, be an analysis of how the nexus of capitalism, lust, crime, and violence plays upon the psyche of each character - from business tycoons and politicians to slumlords and the mafia - through interweaving narratives and voices to give us a raw and unflinching portrayal of a city that reeks of crime, corruption, and conflict even as it reminds us of the resurgence of questions about precarity, vulnerability and our relationships with the 'other'.

Vikram Chandra is a noted name in the literary canon of 21st century India, with contemporaries like Shashi Tharoor, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Vikram Seth, among others. Chandra has published a total of four books, two of which are novels, a collection of short stories, and a book of non-fiction. His work thrives in multiplicity as opposed to the archetypal unified narrative, and is composed of myriad subplots and massive details that come together to create a single, larger picture of the intended themes. His two novels, Red Earth and Pouring Rain (1995) and Sacred Games (2006), exhibit the complex stratification of his storytelling method. The plots are distributed into frames and insets which allow him to look into diverse characters and add their layered narratives to build onto the main narration. Chandra's literature offers meditations on the universal themes of love, betrayal, and redemption while simultaneously delving into the social, political, and economic facets of his characters' world. His stories are rooted in the past and attach importance to the events of the bygone years in the happenings of the present.

The matrix of Chandra's Sacred Games, in essence, deals with the murky reality of Bombay as a microcosm of India. A hefty 900-page literary thriller, the book portrays a picture of modern India through the lens of a middle-aged policeman placed parallel to the life of an international crime lord. The multilayered story unfolds with darting realism to bring forth the manifold perspectives of the 'game', from local organized crime to international mafia and terrorism, from the corruption and apathy of the police to the functioning of the Indian intelligence and security agencies, from Islamic fundamentalism to the

religious polarization in the name of God, from the condition of immigrants to the business of prostitution. With graphic references to the Babri Masjid demolition incident, the bombings of 1993, the Maoist-Naxalite movement and even the 9/11 attack, the book is replete with experiences of insurgency and brutality. This literary behemoth justly mirrors a picture of India in its rampant criminality, bone-crunching violence, vulgar colloquialisms, desperate ambition, and endemic betrayal. Chandra lays bare the strident madness of Bombay in a novel fraught with contradiction and consonance. By pitting the old against the new, the book gives a truly realistic picture of the modernizing India. (Rushby) It is a work of thorough research and realism that qualifies as a social document of the times we were and continue to live in. It merges the elements of social realism with the emotional resonance of literature to be read as an important work of postcolonial fiction.

Chandra's characterization of Sartaj Singh and Ganesh Gaitonde allows him to explore the expansive ambit of a fast developing India in the face of its religious calamities. Sartaj Singh is a middle-aged Sikh policeman who finds himself in the midst of what turns out to be the biggest case of his life - the suicide of Bombay's coveted criminal mastermind, Ganesh Gaitonde. Sartaj, with his inexorably middle-class lifestyle of an honest policeman, scrutinizes the mechanics of the Indian society and exposes the corruption and violence entrenched deep within through his day-to-day operations. He is divorced, lonely, conscious of his growing age, and ridden with the burden of police work in an increasingly deceitful society. (Kumar 1) The novelist posits this weary policeman as a representative of the jaded reality of Bombay. With the development of the plot, he becomes the writer's tool to cautiously deflate that bubble of romanticism associated with India's dream factory.

Hunting apradh should've meant car chases, sprints through crowded streets, motion and movement and pounding background music. That's what Sartaj wanted, but what hunting actually meant was intimidating a woman and an old man in their own home. This was a tried and tested policing technique, to disrupt family life and business until the informant sang, the criminal caved, the innocent confessed. (Chandra 175)

The plot oscillates between Gaitonde's first-person narrative of his past life and a third-person narration of the present world. The detailing of Gaitonde's past career throws light on an extensive gamut of organized crime, political and police corruption, and communal discord, as the varying facets of an urban India. The story of his transformation - from a small-time smuggler to a local crime lord and eventually to an international don - presents a blotched picture of India's development story. Furthermore, Gaitonde's tale fills the story with characters and subplots to enlarge the themes inlaid in the novel. (Deb)

The meaning of 'games', as referred to in the book's title, alternates between the everyday struggles in the flutter of Bombay, its prostitution and its duplicity and the fraudulent functioning of the system and the government, while a whole different game discreetly goes on in the plotting of a gigantic sectarian war. Chandra's interesting and equally insightful selection of title justifies this brick-sized opus as an exploration of religion and its multiple faces in the background of a rapidly advancing country. The title conveys the warp and weft of the novel, hinting at a conflicting contest in the name of God.

The novel justly wraps itself within the nucleus of the contemporary times to bring forth the rickety state of life and living in a sprawling city like Bombay and sturdily asserts its relevance in today's context. More than detailing the themes of religious polarization and terrorism, Chandra is concerned with a realistic depiction of precarity permeating through this city of dreams ruled by the dictum of "paisa phenk, tamasha dekh" (Chandra 11). One has used the term "precarity" in its sense of describing a state of vulnerability ensuing from a fundamental lack of economic security.

It is a multi-stranded concept, associated with a set of terms - including precarious, precariousness, precaritization, and 'the precariat' - that make a historical argument about capitalism, pronounce a shift in class relations, and predict novel social movements and political struggles. These terms underscore the fact that temporary and informal work, in its

myriad manifestations, is the predominant mode of livelihood in the late-twentieth to early twenty-first century. (Kasmir 1-2)

Judith Butler, a philosopher and gender theorist, has laid the foundation for defining the notion of precarity and its associated terminology by distinguishing between the terms 'precariousness' and 'precarity'. While the former delineates “a generalized human condition” of helplessness derived out of mankind's reliance on each other for emotional support, precarity - on the other hand - is a more rigid concept that is limited only to the economically unsound class of people; it is experienced by marginalized, poor, and disenfranchised people who are exposed to economic insecurity, injury, violence, and forced migration. The precariat, on the other hand, is the social class living in a state of precarity, endowed with the creative ability to work but without employment and stability. Butler's seminal work on the notion of precarity and precariousness is considered to be a cornerstone in the body of literary studies.

Keeping these categorizations in mind, we find that *Sacred Games* deftly underlines the precarious lives of those living in Bombay - be it the Bangladeshi refugees residing in Bengali Bura or the host of aspiring actresses like Jojo Mascarenas. The book emerges as a powerful representation of not only poverty and marginalisation in India but also a concrete portrait of crime, political tension, and terrorism. It ponders over the question of power and representation to make authoritative statements on the precarity of living in the society and the growth of the subaltern.

The story sets off with a first-person account of Gaitonde's life, beginning with him buying some land in the slums of Gopalmath. With the acquisition of this land, Gaitonde takes his first steps into the business of crime with his own company of a few boys and advisors in Paritosh Shah and Kanta Bai. It is from this point that violence becomes explicit in the story to which Chandra adds a Godfather-like flavour. Gaitonde contemplates, “I knew a war was coming. It was inevitable” and launches himself into the extensive world of organized crime rampant in the small sections of Bombay. Sartaj is concurrently shown to investigate a murder case in Bengali Bura, the residence of the Bangladeshi immigrants. The depiction of the *kholis* in Gopalmath placed parallel to the labyrinth of Bengali Bura throws light upon the precarity thriving underneath the glamour of the city. The early chapters of the novel contain significant accounts of the slum-dwellers and refugees underscoring their precarious existence without the cushion of economic stability and security. From impoverished localities to sordid crowds to the deafening cacophony of dreams, Chandra's focus, to a large extent, is on bringing out the dirt lingering in the underbelly of this bustling metropolis.

Particularly important is the subplot involving Aadil and the three boys who worked for him, viz. Shamsul, Faraj, and Bazil. Their narrative starts off with an ordinary murder case in Bengali Bura but takes an impressive turn in the end wherein Chandra astutely details the mechanism of exploiting precarity to reap crime and insurgent terrorism. Aadil, a victim of social exclusion sourced out of his economic vulnerability and a member of the precariat, is steered into the direction of Naxalism by a couple of Naxals who capitalize on his anger at the wealthy landowners. His character serves as a tool for highlighting how precarity preys on educated individuals and fuels rebel movements like Maoism. His story exemplifies subaltern narratives that challenge precarity and presents a model of resistance adopted by the poor. Moreover, by placing his character in the small province of Rajpur in Bihar, Chandra added a pan-India dimension to the precarity discussed particularly within the purview of a hectic metropolis of Bombay.

On the flip side, the story exposes the power of money and corruption that feeds crime in the Indian society: “...there were men like Ganesh Gaitonde and Suleiman Isa, who had begun with petty thefts and had gone on to own fleets of Opel Vectras and Honda Accords.” (Chandra 187) Gaitonde's rise from a slum lord to an Al Capone-like gangster is a clear testament of the deceit rooted in the country's system, whether it is the corrupt cops or the spineless political leaders. It is evident in the way Gaitonde buys off cops to kill his enemies and rigs the election for his political pals. A host of characters - like Parulkar, Samant, Bhosle, Trivedi, Jojo, Zoya Mirza, the warden at Gaitonde's jail, and more - stand as testament to the pervasive

corruption that the city was immersed in. (Mishra) With Gaitonde's increasing money and power, his contacts and dealings also rise. This is where he bags an important deal and ventures to live abroad for purposes of security. His international business deal, however, turns out to be the preparation ground for a massive terrorist mission.

Terrorism assumes a pivotal position in the thematic framework of the novel. More significant is how Chandra tethers religion to terrorism. The story takes place against the background of Hindu-Muslim rivalry that goes back to the appalling brutality of the country's Partition. The detailed subplot about Prabhjot Kaur, Sartaj's mother, her girlhood in Pakistan and her family's struggles and privation during the ghastly partition of 1947, constitutes a scathing account of this religious hostility. Decades later, in the modern city of Bombay, Gaitonde establishes himself as the Hindu don after killing his Muslim confidant, Chotta Badriya, and instigates a forthright communal war against his Muslim counterpart, Suleiman Isa. Religious polarisation begets mayhem and murder across the city and the story subsequently turns into "a parable of our times, a cautionary tale on the significance of preserving the country's secular fabric even as bad actors from within the system plot to tear it apart". Chandra shows this battle between the criminal gangs to present the dichotomy that characterizes organized religion in India, both as a unifying force and as a divisive destroyer. (Pathak) Visual references of the Babri Masjid-demolition and the ensuing riots intensify the feelings of religious animosity within the criminal fraternity.

The conflict between the two crime lords in the slums of Bombay takes a giant leap to reach an international pedestal where criminal violence turns into extreme terrorism. The game now moves outside the kholis of Bombay and enters into a bigger, more complex world of people and violence.

There had been one small war, my inevitable war with Suleiman Isa, the war between our companies. This combat had been long, it was eternal. Now its connections to a larger war were becoming apparent. The game was many-tendrilled, webbed and seductive and infinitely dangerous. (Chandra 327)

Gaitonde finds himself liaisoning with an international sadhu, Shridhar Shukla alias 'Guruji'. The mysterious nature of Gaitonde's business of importing consignments of weapons and related apparatus for this god-man is revealed to be the making of a catastrophic nuclear attack on Bombay. Guruji's scheme is to attack Bombay which would be blamed on his own counterfeit Muslim terrorist group - Hizbuddeen - to ultimately have India in a state of terminal war with Pakistan. Laden with Hindu philosophy and lessons in spiritual wisdom, Guru Ji's chief role is as the dispenser of violence from underneath his mask of a peaceful god-man. "Life feeds on life, Ganesh. And the beginning of life is violence." (Chandra 473) This idea of pralay, as he terms it, sums up his sadistic plan to wipe out innocent people's lives to feed his personal hatred against the Muslims.

Chandra pertinently brings out varying intensities of religious hatred and communal violence - in Prabhjot Kaur's personal animus against Muslims; in Gaitonde's ruthless killing of Muslims; and, in Shridhar Shukla's unyielding mission to wage a war against the Muslim nation. It is Chandra's maximalist approach that allows him to capture every bit of this jarring reality, peeling off hundreds of pages to explore and expound the truths through this pluralist narrative. His extensive research finds place in this 1000-page lengthy account of the city that stands relevant even in today's current socio-political scenario.

The theme of precarity is manifested in the likes of such characters as Jojo and Jamila Khan as well who arrive in Bombay with dreams of making it to the big screen and willingly engage in prostitution for realizing their ambitions. The story shows how the scourge of prostitution is entwined into the shady business of crime. Jojo plays an important role as Gaitonde's closest friend. The fundamental lack of a strong female voice in the male-dominated world of ganglords is compensated by the opinionated character of Jojo. Her role is to underline the issue of gender marginalization to add to this narrative of precarity. In the climax of the story, she becomes an agent of betrayal and goes to underscore the capriciousness of human relationships. Betrayal, however, permeates throughout the plot and is visible in

multiple instances, such as, Bada Badriya's secret deal with Suleiman Isa, Mary's relationship with her sister, and Guru Ji's sudden disappearance. Gaitonde himself admits and accepts the deception that life is composed of when he says "...to be born is to be deceived, that nothing is given to us without something larger being taken away" (Chandra 321).

Chandra's astute understanding of human nature and psyche is evident in the way he skilfully peoples the novel with a diverse multitude of characters to present a laborious study of human relationships. He creates a massive network of acquaintances in Gaitonde's life to underscore the true face of human relationships through it. In addition to this lengthy discourse on the fragility of relations, precariousness is evident in Gaitonde himself when he repetitively comes to question and, consequently, to assert his selfhood during the course of the action. His "existential longings" make up a large chunk of the second half of the novel. (Spanberg) Precariousness can also be understood as an experience that all humans are predisposed to, irrespective of their socio-political condition; it is concerned with the existential thoughts about the self thereby bringing an individual's hopelessness and susceptibility to the fore. Multiple characters add to the larger ongoing premise of precariousness.

The portrayal of Bombay in *Sacred Games* runs in tandem with Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City* (2004) with its insider's view of the dazzling city's rather gloomy reality. Mehta and Chandra, in their varying works of non-fiction and fiction, are both preoccupied with the same objective to convey the essence of the colossal world of Bombay. The city abounds in dichotomies and staggering contradictions of squalor and beauty, chaos and meaning, exhilaration and exhaustion, wealth and poverty, corruption and honesty, deceit and morality, life and death. It thrives on monstrous disparities of repulsion and embrace with Gaitonde and Sartaj as Chandra's vessels to depict these binaries. (Thakur) Loaded with details and narratives, the two equally massive books open the door to the inner sanctums of the city and delve into the stories of the countless people who come in search of a better life and end up with nothing. The book detours from the main plot to narrate the burning down of a slum to ashes, the rise of a Bollywood superstar, the evolution of a Maoist, the blackmail in an adulterous affair, the frustrations of a policeman, and the development of a love story; everything is important. This multi-vocal narrative weaves all its voices into a single fabric of Bombay only to present the tattered condition of the country.

This gargantuan novel thus locates itself in the heart of India's city of dreams. On the face of it, the work appears to be a thriller about a police investigation of a possible terrorist attack. But, a deeper reading will perhaps reveal *Sacred Games* as a biting critique of the zeitgeist as it echoes the deep-rooted corruption entrenched in the system, the callousness of the government, the battle of religion, and the intricate nexus of crime, capitalism, and terrorism. Chandra, a Bombay born and bred writer, exposes the grime settled on the city's underbelly with all its gory details.

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