

# Echoes Across Texts: Intertextual Weaving in Vikram Chandra's Sacred Games

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**Abstract**—This paper titled, “Echoes across Texts: Intertextual Weaving in Vikram Chandra’s Sacred Games” examines the usage of intertextuality in *Sacred Games* by situating the novel within the broader framework of modern Indian writing. It argues that Chandra’s narrative is deeply embedded in a network of textual, cinematic, and cultural references that enrich its thematic complexity and narrative texture. The novel draws upon a wide range of sources, including canonical literary works, epics and mythological stories, popular Indian films and film songs, and global narratives, creating a layered storytelling mode that reflects the fragmented realities of contemporary urban India. The incorporation of references to Hindi cinema, including iconic film songs and mainstream Bollywood movies, function both as cultural markers and as tools of characterization. These references not only ground the narrative in the lived experiences of Mumbai’s populace but also blur the boundaries between “high” literature and popular culture. Chandra weaves in elements of Indian mythology, political history, and underworld experience, thereby constructing a dense cultural tapestry that mirrors the chaos and plurality of the city itself.

**Index Terms**—Intertextuality - textual, cinematic, and cultural references - political history -fragmented realities – urban - cultural markers – characterization - narrative strategy – plurality.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Vikram Chandra is one of the most celebrated voices among contemporary generation of Indian Writers in English. He is often described as “a master storyteller and a master stylist.” One of his most distinctive strengths, in his ability to interweave seemingly unrelated stories into a richly layered and compelling narrative, eventually bringing them together in a striking and organized culmination.

Intertextuality is a chief feature of Chandra’s work. The term ‘Intertextuality’ was developed by Julia Kristeva in the 1960s. Intertextuality is the notion that no text exists in isolation. Every written text is shaped by, refers to, or echoes other previously written texts. While reading a novel, poem, readers often encounter stratum of meaning built from earlier works, cultural references, and shared knowledge. Julia Kristeva argued that every text is a “mosaic of quotations.” In simple terms, writers borrow, transform, or respond to existing ideas, stories, and styles. The key features of intertextuality are: allusion - indirect references to other works (e.g., mentioning a character like Romeo to suggest romantic love); Quotation - directly quoting lines or phrases from another text; adaptation/retelling - rewriting an existing story in a new context; Parody or pastiche - imitating another style, often humorously or critically.

Intertextuality enriches the meaning of texts since by recognizing reference the readers can uncover deeper layers, connections, and even hidden critiques. It also reflects how culture itself works—stories and ideas constantly interact and evolve.

Saussure’s structuralism posits that we understand a text, whether written or spoken, by mapping its internal network of differences rather than through a direct one-to-one relationship with the real world. Chandra opposed Saussure’s claim that signs gain their meaning through structure in a particular text. He believed that readers are always influenced by other previously produced texts while reading a new one. This is a concept of the postmodernists who believed that no text exists in quarantine and new creative works of art can only be created using surviving literary texts. Postmodern authors enjoy drawing attention to the already existing literature.

They occasionally borrow from previous texts, in order give their work layers of meaning. Further, when a text is read with regard to another text, the suppositions and effects of the other text give a different meaning to the text. It also influences the way of interpreting the original text.

Chandra borrows from the epics *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharatha*, the story repositories like *Kathasaritsagara*, *Panchatantra*, *The Arabian Nights* etc., in sculpting the narrative structure of his stories. His most famous novel *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* is divided into five different sections, namely, *Panchatantra*, *The Book of War and Ancestors*, *The Book of Learning and Desolation*, *The Book of Blood and Journeys*, *The Book of Revenge and Madness*, and *The Book of the Return*, with a common thread running through each one of them. Sanjay and Abhay interactively share the role of narrator throughout the five parts.

The theme of survival in the works of Vikram Chandra, particularly in *Sacred Games* and *Love and Longing in Bombay*, is a complex, multi-layered exploration of physical, moral, and psychological endurance within the chaotic, high-stakes landscape of modern urban India. This theme of survival is taken from *The Arabian Nights*. In *Sacred Games*, Mumbai acts as a "character" where survival is a daily battle against crime, poverty, and political corruption. The character Sartaj Singh, an honest policeman, must navigate a corrupt police department, forming a complex picture of moral survival in a broken system. In *Love and Longing in Bombay*, characters often survive emotional trauma—such as loss and betrayal—by telling stories and engaging in the "voluntary dream" of creativity. In the story "Dharma," Major General Jago Antia survives his past by confronting the "ghosts" (both literal and metaphorical) of his military career and personal life, highlighting survival as a process of accepting trauma and duty. Chandra's characters often find that to survive is to be in a constant state of transition, shifting between tradition and modernity, and negotiating between their personal ethics and the realities of their environment.

The story within stories is a prevalent method found in the Indian convention. This style is used efficiently by Chandra. He accepts this and says his novel is "quite remarkably out of fashion. I mean its form

comes from the stories of the *Mahabharatha* and the *Ramayana* which my mother and aunts tell me when I was small. This type of spiraling narrative, with its juxtapositions and unexpected meetings, is an ancient Indian form" (qtd.in Rollason 152).

Reference to other works of literature is another technique Chandra uses with efficacy. In the text of *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, there is an explicit allusion to *Moby Dick*, *The Far Pavilions*, *Kim* and *A Passage to India*. The line from the text "Mrs. Christiansen has started on *Moby Dick*" makes reader aware of that novel (*Red Earth and Pouring Rain* 216). Amanda in her parents' house checks out some books written about India. She told Abhay that she read something about him, "she held up the book: it was *The Far Pavilions*. I could hardly see past the golden descent of her chest, but there was another book on the left of her, *Kim*, and one on the right, *A Passage to India*" (*Red Earth and Pouring Rain* 638). Through the character of Sorkar, an assistant to Markline in the printing press Chandra brought Shakespeare to the scene. He uses his quotations easily from *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. Sanjay realised "Sorkar stole industriously and hugely from the Englishman" (*Red Earth and Pouring Rain* 347) when the latter asked Sanjay to give him a word, he says,

'Power'

'A greater power than we can contradict Hath buried our intents'

'Time shall unfold what plaited cunning hides;  
Who cover strengths, at last honour them abides'  
(*Red Earth and Pouring Rain* 347)

In the same way Sanjay comes to know about Aristotle's *Poetics* from his master Markline who in a raised voice told him "Study it carefully... this book is the origin of all that is good in literature. This slim volume is worth whole libraries of the so-called great books of India" (*Red Earth and Pouring Rain* 366). There is a reference to Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Sanjay after going to London finds Dr Sarthey as 'Jack the Ripper' murdering the innocents through his evil powers.

Chandra promotes the heritage of ancient India, throughout *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* by drawing on the literary traditions and techniques prevailing in India. He has used the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* insentiently in his fiction. He promotes the ancient heritage of India through the story of

Sanjay and pictures the modern Indian life through Abhay, an NRI who went abroad to continue his higher studies. Both east and west overlap in both the stories and each takes the colour of the other as the title signifies fresh red earth mingling with the pouring rain to become one.

Chandra's title *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* is taken from A. K. Ramanujan's *The Interior Landscape: Love Poems from the Classical Tamil Anthology*. In the novel the affair between a prostitute and Hercules is mentioned through these lines, from the Kurunthogai (Verse 40), an ancient Tamil Sangam poem titled "What He Said", translated by A.K. Ramanujan "What could my mother be to yours? What kin is my father to yours anyway? And how did you and I meet ever? But in love our hearts have mingled like red earth and pouring rain" (*Red Earth and Pouring Rain* 256). The poet draws the image of "red earth and pouring rain" picturing the first monsoon rain falling on the red earth to mingle with the parched soil forming damp clay.

Chandra's text contains the fascinating trace of Jorge Luis Borges. After Lord Yama's gift of longevity, he travels to England to meet his foe Sarthey passing through endless vicissitudes on the way:

In the Punjab, on the banks of 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 Hear; in Basra he was given a place on the deck of the 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 really nothing but easy. (*Red Earth and Pouring Rain* 592-93)

This arduous journey that explains his miraculous longevity is reflected in Borge's tale of the marvellous, "The immortal" where the narrator after plunging into the magic river lost his mortality. The narrator's recount of his wanderings is similar to that of Sanjay:

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 the courtyard of jail in Samarkand I played a great deal of chess. In Bikaner I professed the science of astrology and also in Bohemia 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. (Borges 146-47)

In the end Sanjay dies to be reincarnated, while Borges' soldier becomes an ordinary mortal once more.

Another episode that contains Raja Cheit Singh of Benaras in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* is a reference to Edgar Allen Poe's "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains". Poe talks about the conquest of Bengal by the British East India Company under Warren Hastings and the revolt of Cheyte Singh, Rajah of Benaras followed by the imprisonment in his own palace. Whereas in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* he is shown as if he is in a hurry employed Thomas as part of cavalry escort.

Chandra's second novel *Sacred Games* follows a comparable intertextual strategy. His earlier short story collection *Love and Longing in Bombay* is echoed throughout *Sacred Games*. There is also an immediate inter textual link within Chandra's own works through Sartaj Singh as recurring character, with story "Kama" from *Love and Longing in Bombay*.

Most striking, though is an intertextuality of a different kind, with the literary novel rubbing shoulders with Indian mass culture. Allusion and quotations to Bollywood movies and film songs are legion in this novel. Most striking is the way the literary novel "rubs shoulders" with the idioms, motifs, and emotional registers of Bollywood. In *Sacred Games*, for instance, references to popular Hindi cinema are not merely decorative but constitutive of character and milieu. The gangster Ganesh Gaitonde frequently frames his life through the lens of filmic archetypes, echoing the rise-and-fall trajectories of iconic screen antiheroes. His dialogues often carry the cadence of cinematic monologues, recalling the stylized intensity associated with actors like Amitabh Bachchan in 1970s "angry young man" roles.

In Vikram Chandra's works intertextuality does not remain confined to canonical literary traditions; it rather expands energetically into the vivacious realm

of Indian mass culture, creating a layered narrative texture that is both cultured and available. Chandra floods his narratives with allusions to film songs, which function as emotional shorthand and cultural memory. A passing reference to a melancholic playback number can evoke nostalgia, loss, or longing more efficiently than extended description, relying on the reader's familiarity with shared cultural texts. In *Love and Longing in Bombay*, too, the influence of popular cinema is palpable: stories unfold with a heightened sense of drama, coincidence, and sentiment that mirrors the structure of Hindi films. Characters often interpret their own experiences through cinematic tropes—romantic love is imagined through song sequences, while betrayal and revenge echo familiar plotlines from mainstream movies.

This intertextual interplay creates a dialogic space where “high” literature and “popular” culture intersect, challenging rigid hierarchies between them. Chandra's use of Bollywood references is not ironic detachment but an acknowledgment of its deep imprint on urban Indian consciousness. The novel becomes a cultural palimpsest, where literary narrative, cinematic memory, and everyday experience coexist. By embedding film dialogues, song lyrics, and cinematic imagery into his prose, Chandra constructs a richly hybrid textual world—one in which meaning emerges through the constant interplay of texts, genres, and cultural registers.

## II. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, intertextuality emerges as a living dialogue between literary tradition and popular culture in the works of Vikram Chandra with his narratives revealing how stories are never isolated, but shaped by echoes of cinema, music, and collective memory. By weaving these diverse strands together, he dissolves boundaries between the “high” and the “popular.”

The narrative stands as a testament to storytelling as an ever-evolving web of interconnected texts. Through this interplay of diverse textual forms, *Sacred Games* demonstrates how intertextuality operates as a narrative strategy that deepens meaning, creates resonance across cultural domains, and challenges hierarchical distinctions between different forms of storytelling. Ultimately, the novel

exemplifies how modern Indian fiction engages dynamically with both indigenous and global influences to articulate complex identities and histories.

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