Vikram Chandra's Sacred Games: An Ecocritical Reading

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Abstract

This article gives insight into the ways in which enforcement and institutional vigilante activities portrayed in Vikram Chandra's Sacred Games foreshadow the urban thicket of garbage dump yards and slum dwellings. The text will be analyzed from an ecocritical perspective to establish aspects of slow violence and its explicit and implicit results. Chandra's plotline, regarding several entangled human tragedies against the background of refuse, urges a study of the novel through the lens of waste studies. However, he fails to address the reasons for the characters' opinion of Mumbai being uninhabitable and infamous for treating human life as expendable. The novelist also seems to normalize the issues of inequalities in waste management and justifies the anthropocentric utilitarian perception of resources. The depictions of Mumbai gang wars against a disturbingly overlooked state of dilapidated lives and misplaced ideologies mention waste as being both created and ignored. Such representation also compels a close reading of consumerism and criminal aspiration.

Keywords: ecocriticism, slow violence, socio-environmentalism, waste studies

We need to account for how the temporal dispersion of slow violence affects the way we perceive and respond to a variety of social afflictions – from domestic abuse to posttraumatic stress and, in particular, environmental calamities. A major challenge is representational: how to devise arresting stories, images, and symbols adequate to the pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effects (Nixon 3).

The matters of climate change, waste disposal, and potential environmental hazards have been the subject of discussion for several decades now; however, their gravity fails to be reflected in literary discourse, especially those produced in the third world. A partial cause could be lack of adequate representation in the academic

domain. However, Indian writers in English have consistently produced works that address these subjects (Mondal et al.; Roy; Abbas et al.). Some of these also serve as reminders of the need to help people unlearn the wrong lessons they had learned in the past. One of these is that all wrong deeds are undoable. This idea stems from the teachings of the religious scriptures that encourage human beings to overpower all kinds of resources to establish and sustain human life (Sabu and Mudaliar 184-85). This utilitarian perspective seems to have seeped into the value system of the masses – so much so that generating waste has become a practice normalized as rectifiable. For the longest time, the Western notion of India as a land of waste and refuse has been represented widely, especially via films such as A Passage to India (1984), Slumdog Millionaire (2008), Eat Pray Love (2010), and The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel (2011). These films contain several scenes of a myriad of cultural practices taking place on dusty roads, traffic disturbed by cattle walking about on busy roads, crowded tourist spots, terribly littered public places, and rural homes without proper sanitation or restroom facilities. This has led to a growing need for the country's governing bodies to school the masses in hygiene practices. Popular lifestyle magazines, editorial pieces in newspapers, and several videos and reels circulating on social media speak to people about the need to de-clutter their living and working spaces and get rid of unnecessary things (Sandlin and Wallin 98). However, the masses do not seem to understand that waste only breeds more waste. Thus, there is a need to properly address the concept of responsible de-cluttering and to not remove waste at the cost of accumulating it elsewhere.

Vikram Chandra's novel Sacred Games is a narrative of several lives entangled in the urban locales of Mumbai and its suburbs. The work has been explored previously in studies through the lenses of bioethics (Morely 30-33), postmodernist narratology (Barai 266-74), and spectrality and secularism (Herbert 941-71). The author weaves a captivating tale that unravels over several decades, during which the characters develop their own narratives. The complex storytelling overpowers the underlying depiction of waste in its many forms. Chandra's widely famous novel stands slightly apart from the abovementioned works that represent India, for it depicts India not only as a waste-producing nation but also as one that takes pride in the nostalgic aspect of waste as a part of its cultural and geographic subsistence. His writing focuses explicitly on the common man's comfort in the daily rituals of a large population in huddled spaces, almost like a well-oiled machine. For instance, the following passage describes the frustration, as well as the cherishing of the chaotic environment, experienced simultaneously by the dwellers of Mumbai:

Citizens loved to complain about the horror of the morning traffic, which surpassed itself every year, but Katekar loved the enormous bustle of millions on the move, the hurtling local trains with thick clusters of bodies hanging precariously

from the doors, the sonorous tramp and hum of the crowd inside the tall hall of Churchgate station. It made him feel alive. (Chandra 72)

Chandra speaks of policeman Katekar's perception of the city, known for its hustle and bustle while thriving as a home to millions. He seems to be in complete synchronization with his environment, conveniently ignoring the health and safety hazards that meet his eye in the scenes of routine functionality. The policeman also seems to be embracing the quiet resignation of a common person to their surroundings, especially when there are a million other matters to occupy their attention, such as the gender, caste, and linguistic discriminations they face as Indians. Katekar is also visibly relieved to submit himself to the scenes of relative peace and calm, as opposed to the gruesome tasks he carries out as a policeman. Katekar's fondness for such a deranged state of being in the city also points to his involuntary subscription to a "methodological nationalism" (Wimmer and Schiller 302) that most enforcement personnel are conditioned into imbibing. 'Methodological nationalism' is an individual's belief that the immediate socio-political conditions prevalent in their nation/state, mirror those of the modern world. The concept could also explain his circumscription of events to a limited geographic scale and attaining a sense of gratification in policing a specific section of the region – in this case, Mumbai. The policing also extends to the characters' inward faith in holding on to the past while living in the present. Katekar and other policemen constantly speak of their childhood, youth, and the many influences they have had while growing up, including Bollywood movies. While living in Mumbai, globally known as home to the biggest slum in Asia, these men and women are incessantly reminded of their past and hence associate dirt and refuse with nostalgia. Susan Signe Morrison, in her book, The Literature of Waste, writes that "[m]emory and waste are integrally tied to one another" (63). Most of the main characters in the novel are shown as having a long history with Mumbai, having been raised in the city, and having spent the longer part of their lives in familiar streets. Both Katekar and Gaitonde, despite being rivals, share a love for the city and everything associated with it. Even the sight of too many humans crammed into a single vehicle fails to alarm a man responsible for preserving law, order, and the safety of the masses.

Another excerpt from the novel illustrates the barbaric practice of forcing manual scavengers into the act of cleaning waste from the streets after an orchestrated burning down of a particular basti (slum) days before an election. The representation is a little short of normalizing manual scavenging. It is also deeply troubling that Chandra, belonging to the educated and elite section of society and possessing a powerful indigenous voice, speaks of such a demeaning practice without the slightest hint of perturbation. Though activism for social equality has brought the situation of these workers to the attention of the masses severally, the

caste-based employment of the backward sections of society in these tasks remains the root cause of the persistence of manual scavenging in India (Wankhede 1-2). Chandra depicts the scene of Gaitonde's plan and execution of a systematic eviction in the dark of the night and continues to the description of the next morning, which implicitly represents crime and cleanup of the resulting collateral damage:

Finally there were too many dead bodies even for the very supreme top, and the reeling roar of the approaching chaos too deafening, and so it stopped. The city cringed and shook itself and began to clean up the debris, bulldozers swept up the emptied grounds and dug foundations, bodies were lifted from the gutters, from the rubbish heaps, and traffic churned through the lanes again. (Chandra 394)

The novelist describes the grotesque scenes that greet the survivors the next day and the internal monologues in the perpetrators' minds through the voice of Gaitonde, who dwells upon the "elegant way to burn a basti" and how "[r]iots are useful in all kinds of ways, to all kinds of people" (Chandra 393-94). Here, the author seems to normalize the death of the poor. He also unwittingly remarks upon the overexploited method of evicting poor people from coveted pieces of land by the rich. There also seem to be insightful pointers on the criminals earning money from such "petty" jobs, the rich attaining property through illicit means and the manual scavengers finding work in the aftermath of the riots (Chandra 394). Mohammed Rafi Arefin writes in his article how those employed to work with waste "are revealing important ways to understand life in cities" ("The Dirty Details"). He addresses the need to treat them "respectfully and carefully" and emphasizes the need for visibility of stories that portray waste and those who "deal with it" so that it "ensures those who work with our most intimate discarded things are safe from ridicule or retribution" (Arefin).

Chandra also appears to be keen on sketching the narrative against a grungy and sooty Mumbai background. In the novel, there is constant mention of vehicles stuck in traffic and dirt enveloping the bodies of people who are out and about in the city. Pollution has been another prominent subject addressed in contemporary environmentalist writings. With an increase in the number of urban fictional narratives produced across the globe, the matter of pollution features in almost every event within the plot of Sacred Games. Morrison compares the city to a body that hides its defenseless parts and "sets itself up against the country, home to dungy fields and garbaged landfills out of view" (75). Chandra's mention of the character of Anjali Mathur being frustrated over her aging and damaged body presents the author's vision of the human body against a backdrop of rising environmental dread – in addition to the issues of terrorism and poverty – that looms above Mumbai:

What an easy moderate age had made of her, all the early revolutionary fervor corroded away by – by what? – long hours, bills, this jangling traffic, the poisonous pollution that left films of black on her face and arms. And by

professional defeats, a divorce and the abrupt amputation of love, a bone-deep realization that the future was not a limitless meadow, but only a narrow valley bounded by night. (Chandra 362)

Anjali Mathur comes across as a competent and tenacious policewoman who faces several upheavals in the course of her career. She is a deftly armed individual who lives "always between threat and counter-threat, from aggression to response" but, concurrently, finds such life "suffocating" (Chandra 360). In the chosen passage, environmental shifts seem to be one of her major concerns; Mathur cannot help but think of a life devoid of pollution and violence. Ursula Heise, in her book, Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global , writes about how "climate change poses a challenge for narrative and lyrical forms that have conventionally focused above all on individuals, families, or nations, since it requires the articulation of connections between events at vastly different scales" (205). Chandra impressively rises to meet this challenge with his novel. He neatly ensconces the characters' thoughts and actions with issues he subtly discusses in his work. When faced with the terrorizing possibility of an impending nuclear attack on the nation, Mathur's character seems to be dwelling upon the relative, however brief, respite, which she finds in her corroding body's familiarity. Even amidst registering the intimidating event developments in her investigation and search for Gaitonde, Mathur seems to find a connection between the visible damage to her body, the lives of millions at stake, and the drastic environmental changes. Chandra also seems to portray her as the "ecocosmopolitan environmentalist" (Heise 210), dwelling on the similarities between the local ecological details and the global content in watching the city and her career grow in urban planning and networking while being mindful of the repercussions of anthropocentric wastefulness and its contribution to the global crises. Mathur's dermatological concerns can also be parallel to Chandra's reference to Gaitonde unabashedly, mentioning his hemorrhoids in conversations with Jojo Mascarenas (Chandra 484, 851).

Research also confirms that it is the population that inhabits the urban areas of the globe that stands to lose the most due to the perilous climatic change. For instance, a study on gendered vulnerability to climate change found that men, owing primarily to education and better exposure to global developments, are more aware of the shielding measures to adopt while dealing with and preventing the repercussions of climatic changes (Daoud). However, from a socio-environmentalist perspective, women can be found to be more vulnerable to environmental degradation than men. In his book, Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor, Rob Nixon writes about "an environmental violence that is low in immediate drama but high in long-term consequences" (131). He emphasizes the susceptibility of women being more than that of men in sustaining any impairment due to a dismissal of the need to augment the "concept of security." He states that it is the

"local forms of slow violence – deforestation and the denuding of vegetation" (Nixon 131), which force women to take stock of their lives, regardless of their location being urban or rural. Whether it is Anjali Mathur ruminating over her degenerating physicality or Jojo Mascarenas listening to the discomfort of Gaitonde's gastrointestinal diseases, it appears to be women who are more perceptive and empathetic to the uncertainty faced over climate and lifestyle changes.

Chandra speaks of the unfeasibility of ownership as desired by the many policemen who lead the lives of ordinary men in a domestic sense but extraordinary on the work front – which explains the bravado that they display in solving crimes, patrolling the streets of the city, and dealing with suspicious activities. However, even while engaged in a massive chase and detection of explosives, the policemen constantly marvel at the wealth amassed by individuals who strike it big in life and still retain the rustic charisma of the underdogs that they are. In the excerpt below, Sartaj and Katekar discuss the circumstances that forced a young man to commit several crimes to attain goals that seem petty when compared to the severity of his deeds. The men then compare the tragic developments of the case with those of others whom they currently chase:

What he had dreamed of was not impossible, 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. And there were boys and girls who had come from dusty villages and now looked down at you from the hoardings, beautiful and unreal. It could happen. It did happen, and that's why people kept trying. It did happen. That was the dream, the big dream of Bombay. (Chandra 226)

Chandra also seems to hint at the middle class's tendency to imitate the upper class and attain a semblance of extravagance. The novel includes multiple remarks of the police officers trying severally to find contentment in their respective lives and daydreaming of the ultimate blissful life replete with all the known comforts such as a huge bungalow, an expensive vehicle, and the kind of respect that only money can buy. Chandra also seems to offer his very subtle opinion of people who become wealthy overnight by a sudden stroke of fortune. The excerpt also seems to feature the rise of models and movie actors to stardom, especially if they come from the smaller towns and remote villages of India. Chandra's tone borders on scorn and his vocabulary openly conveys derision. Notably, this narrative thread in Chandra's novel seems to echo Morrison's reading of The Great Gatsby. Morrison notes Gatsby's obsession with collecting valuables to fill up his home. Morrison notes Gatsby's obsession with collecting valuables to fill up his home. This act may be viewed as a sort of overcompensation for being born poor, an attempt to climb the social ladder, and a means to cope with unrequited love (63-64). She explains the accumulation of waste as resulting from collecting objects

"that substitute for meaning" in an otherwise "meaningless life" (63). The same theory could apply to the description of the gangsters' lives mentioned in the novel. Sartaj seems to be reflecting upon the many opportunities that Mumbai offers to the ordinary people of the country, many of whom travel from other states to the city in hopes of carving a fortune that they can brag about to their people back home. Morrison's notion of accumulating artifacts being as unhealthy as generating waste seems to be nothing more than a matter of class performativity to Ganesh Gaitonde and Suleiman Isa. Katekar, too, thinks of the things he wishes to attain in life for himself and his family, who uncomplainingly support him in his career as an ever-occupied policeman. Unlike Sartaj – who seeks, among many other things, to mend his broken relationships that, in his frame of reference, have resulted from his lack of affluence (Chandra 784) – Katekar comes across as a more materialistic individual pursuing monetary gain. Thus, at this point in the narrative, the characters appear to be dreaming of a tangible but elusive life of happiness, oblivious to the epiphanic display of waste around them.

The allegoric waste that Chandra seems to bring in is the psychological discord prevalent within the families of policemen. These families live as a unit without the presence of a family member delayed at the workplace and then, if they lose their lives in a confrontation, without the individual altogether. While speaking of Shalini's attempts at supporting her family in their return to a life of normalcy after the death of her husband, Katekar, the author insinuates that a household comprises all sorts of waste – material, bodily and emotional. He portrays the mistress of the house as a woman who grapples with the constant question of children caught in the crossfire of right and wrong. For example, Mohit puts up an opaque act and his inexplicable fascination with the men who go on adventures: "But Mohit was still slipping, leaving his work undone while he sped through life on some secret mission. He hid himself behind his bed, in a nook filled with comics with lurid covers featuring moustachioed, pistol-clutching adventurers. He drew rifles in the margins of his notebooks, and muscular heroes firing enormous, blazing guns" (Chandra 350). Here, Chandra seems to imply that death often brings with it a string of emotions that are neither known nor experienced prior to tragedy. Morrison, speaking of death and its residue, writes that it is only the past that seems to be "tangibly happy" and, hence, things begin to go haywire when we cannot forget the past. She sees memory "as a topless garbage heap," which "can only drive us beyond the brink" (58). In dealing with the pain of loss, Shalini Katekar seems to attempt to gauge her children's emotional fallout in order to help her younger child out of a self-dug pit of past memories. These recollections seem to find manifestations in comic books that detail adventures of men who apparently have much in common with the image of his father that he carries in his mind. In a study conducted by Fradkin, Weschenfelder, and Yunes regarding the psychological

effects of comic books upon children who are emotionally vulnerable due to a case of abandoning or orphaning, similar findings have been recorded regarding the power of resource accumulation. The study found that the common troubles of superheroes and the children make the latter seek validation in these works of art. Doing so also builds in them the "resilience" required to rebuild their lives after it falls apart due to a sudden tragic event (Fradkin et al. 413). The resources collected by Mohit include comic books that will eventually be nothing more than the trash that the child may dispose of himself. It could also be said that the comic books are to Mohit, what cars and other possessions are to Gaitonde and Isa.

Another interesting factor in the novel is the Indians' aggrandizement of the lack of pollution in foreign countries. Upon his return from a visit to his daughter in the USA, Parulkar is complimented by Sartaj upon regaining vitality in his vacation period. Parulkar revels in Sartaj's lack of means to travel to a place abroad and his own superiority in the matter by replying thus: "It is the clean air over there. A morning walk, over there, revives you really. You cannot imagine" (Chandra 412). So confident is Parulkar of Sartaj leading his life in an unclean environment and complete ignorance of Western progressive pleasures that he makes little attempt to mask his condescension.

What seems to slip into oblivion is the fact that the Global North sees the Global South as nothing more than garbage dump yards. Nixon begins his book by recollecting a statement made by Lawrence Summers, former president of the World Bank, in which he suggests that the bank construct an arrangement by which the trash and industrial waste from the wealthy nations may be "exported" to the poor nations for the simple reason that these countries are already polluted, and their environments filled with toxic substances. Nixon points out the deeply problematic rationalization of Summers' "poison-redistribution ethic," the Western notion of "aesthetically unsightly waste," and developing nations as "out of sight continent[s]" (1-2). The fact remains that waste is a troubling issue that seems to have no solution unless a pragmatic awareness is disseminated across the globe and cooperation of all countries, rich and poor, is ensured in the matters of over-consumption, commercialization of consumerism as the answer to human misery and a general lack of compassion for the planet.

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