

VIKRAM CHANDRA'S CONSTANT JOURNEY: SWALLOWING THE WORLD¹

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ABSTRACT. The purpose of this paper is to account for the challenging hybridity and in-betweenness that derives from the presence of non-Western traces in contemporary fiction written in a global language. Among the huge and ever-growing group of the so-called "new literatures in English", the focus will be placed on Vikram Chandra's novel Red Earth and Pouring Rain (1995). This Indian author, who lives between Bombay and Washington, is a real master when it comes to fictionalized oral storytelling, echoing the traditional Indian epics –the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. It is no wonder, then, that Chandra would define himself as a storyteller. The generic shaping of a text tends to voice the ontological conception of literature that an author has, as it is the case with Chandra's transcultural narrative. His work, delineated on the borders between oral rite and written fiction, displays an intersystemic dialogue in which literature becomes a space of intercultural communication, an endless journey.

What a mean economy of love and belonging it must be,
in which one love is always traded in for another, in which
a heart is so small that it can only contain one *jannat*, one heaven.

How fearsome must be this empty land where each new
connection must inevitably mean the loss of all roots, all family,
each song you may have ever sung in the past.

Vikram Chandra

... how can the human world live its difference;
how can a human being live Other-wise?

Homi Bhabha

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Much of the most innovative writing in English today comes from outside the Western world, from places such as Africa, Asia or the Caribbean, where many creative authors have adopted the former colonizing language as a *lingua franca* for communication. Centres and peripheries have been redefined, and these voices are strong contributions to the present revision of the literary canon, certainly problematized by emerging and ever-growing fields of (cross)cultural analysis, namely post-colonial theory and criticism, cultural studies or minority discourse theory, among others. Such writings are new not only in that the nation-states from which they have come are new but also in the sense that they show fresh styles and themes, revitalized creative forces coming from their native cultures. If a canon, usually related to power, is regarded as a list of authors or works which are considered to be valid and honoured to be studied, then one of the most important points about the so-called “new writings in English” is that they call into question the traditional hegemony of Western literature. Though largely marginalized or considered as “exotic”, their demonstrable interest and quality challenge conventional ways of thinking about ourselves, the others and the world around us all. Regarding literary prizes as a way of legitimating and revealing how “newness” comes into the world, it seems undeniable that for the last decades some of the most prestigious awards for literature written in English have gone to voices coming from outside Great Britain. If we look at the national British literature honor, the Booker Prize, we will notice that in recent years it has been granted to authors such as V.S. Naipaul, Nadine Gordimer, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Salman Rushdie, Thomas Keneally, J. M. Coetzee, Keri Hulme, Kazuo Ishiguro, Ben Okri, Michael Ondaatje and Arundhati Roy. The 1999 Booker Prize has gone to J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, enabling this author to be the first one to win this Prize twice, while Anita Desai has been shortlisted once more, this time for *Fasting, Feasting*. In the United States, the 2000 Pulitzer Prize has been awarded to Jhumpa Lahiri, for her *Interpreter of Maladies*. All in all, clearly something beyond marketplace is working here.

It is widely agreed that India was the first of the “new” or newly-independent nations to have a large and really established literature in English (Birch *et al* 1996: 11). The first novels –according to the Western conception of the genre– that appeared in India in the late nineteenth century were written in the vernacular languages, and the first novelists to write originally in English emerged during the thirties, a time of political struggle marked by the rise of the nationalist movement and Gandhian ideals, as Rachel Dwyer (2000: 45) notes. Regarding the beginnings of the English-written novel in India, three major writers should be named: Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan. After them, many voices have contributed to the international acknowledgement of Indian literature written in the English language. In India, however, there is an open debate dealing with the linguistic question, within the anxious walls of modern nationalism and politics. All in all, recently, Indian writers who have chosen to live in

the United States –like Vikram Seth, Pico Iyer, Bharati Mukherjee, Sashi Tharoor and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni– have launched the Indian literatures in English into fresh and emergent territories. Within this growing intercultural group of writers, Vikram Chandra is an enticing talent that proposes “yarns of yarns” to entertain audiences all over the world. Chiefly, Chandra’s fiction accounts for a transcultural project. In his works one can consider that writing is understood as a way of recovering and intercommunicating cultures, but also as an open proposal that suggests another sort of creation that goes beyond fetish dichotomies between native and foreign traces, local and universal, past and present. The past comes back in order to actualize its relevance for contemporary happenings. But the future is always a treasure that has to be taken care of and constructed day by day. The task at hand would seem to consist in striving for a “beyond”, to go beyond fossilized discursive positions, travelling from one space to another, from one temporality to another, making all of them simultaneous: to be here and there at the same time. What remains clear is that there is no return to a pristine origin, that all we have is the present, the future and our memory of the past.

In more than one sense, nowadays we could consider the existence or formation of a “post-colonial narrative paradigm”, which could be mainly identified with these three features: a) the silencing and marginalizing of the post-colonial voice by the imperial centre; b) the abrogation of this imperial centre within the text; and c) the active appropriation of the language and culture of that centre (Ashcroft *et al* 1994: 83).² From this vantage point, language is a fundamental site of struggle for post-colonial discourses, because the colonial process involves language as a mechanism of oppression. There are several responses to the dominance of the imperial language, but clearly we could think about two main paths: rejection or subversion. For the most part, Ngugi (1981) could be an instance of the first alternative. After a period writing in English about his native Kenya, he has refused to submit to the political dominance English usage implies, fostering translation as a necessary communicative bridge among the different languages of the world. In the Indian context, Kachru (1983; 1990) shows how English has provided a neutral vehicle for communication between contesting language groups, while the writer Raja Rao voices, in a piece written in 1938 as a foreword to his novel *Kanthapura*, the challenge of the post-colonial writer to adapt the colonial language to local needs and realities: “One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own” (Rao 1989: v). Perhaps, the appropriation of a tongue is essentially a subversive strategy, for the adaptation of the standard language to the demands and requirements of the place and culture into which it has been

2. On post-colonial literatures see also the helpful studies of Boehmer (1995), Loomba (1998) and Walder (1998).

appropriated amounts to a far more subtle rejection of the political power of the colonizing language. In Salman Rushdie's words, "to conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free" (Rushdie 1982: 17). As Vikram Chandra (2000a) states, writing in English is an advantage because this is the *lingua franca* of power, business, cultural exchange, politics. And, using this language in creative writing, he has forgotten nothing, he has given up nothing.

The rewriting and rescue of the "other" History, the silenced one, which does not appear in the official historical accounts created by monolithical discourses, is a main topic in post-colonial literature criticism, sometimes related to post-modern historiographic metafiction.³ The colonized were usually the objects of someone else's story. In the aftermath of colonization, many voices felt an irresistible need to retell, to write the counterhistory, showing that the centre cannot –and should not– hold, fighting for the reinscription of their memory, silenced for too long.

Lately, however, the term and concept of "postcolonialism" is itself being sharply interrogated. In any case, I prefer to speak about *transcultural narratives*, using a terminology and conceptualization taken from Latin American criticism (Ortiz 1973; Rama 1987). The transcultural identity is not predicated upon the idea of the disappearance of independent cultural traditions, but rather on their continual and mutual development. Some features are lost, and some others are gained, producing new forms even as older ones continue to exist. Transculturation is a hybrid process that is constantly reshaping and replenishing itself. I would associate it with Bhabha's (1994) concept of in-betweenness, the powerful reassessment of the creative potentialities of the liminal spaces.

If we should define and describe Vikram Chandra's narrative in just one word, it would be *storytelling*. In the two books he has published hitherto, the novel *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995), and the collection of stories *Love and Longing in Bombay* (1997a), Chandra displays an everlasting ability as storyteller, showing his particular tribute to the Indian tradition of oral storytelling he appreciates so much. At the same time, his narrative development subsumes a deep understanding of the multiple socio-cultural life of India, past and present. He loves complicated characters that live on the borders, torn between worlds apart. Above all, though he beat Booker-Prize winner Arundhati Roy to win the Commonwealth Writer's Prize, he detaches himself from success or defeat, assuming that he does not write for competition, market and Prize-winning. Anyway, step by step Vikram is being recognized as one of the main voices of Indian literatures in English. In June 1997, he was featured in *The New Yorker* photograph of "India's leading novelists". Favourable reviews and international awards

3. On the relationship between history and fiction in the postmodernist era, see Omega (ed.) (1995).

praise his creation, which is beginning to be included within undergraduate and postgraduate literature programs at different universities around the world.

Born in New Delhi, on July 23rd, 1961, Chandra completed most of his secondary education at Mayo College, a boarding school located in Ajmer, Rajasthan, which is a desert state in the north-west of India, and the traditional home of the Rajput warrior clans. After a short stay at St. Xavier's College in Bombay, Vikram went to the United States. There, he graduated from Pomona College, in Claremont (near Los Angeles), in 1984 with a *magna cum laude* BA in English, specializing in creative writing. Then, Chandra attended the Film School at Columbia University in New York. In the Columbia library he chanced upon the autobiography of Colonel James "Sikander" Skinner, a legendary nineteenth-century soldier, half-Indian and half-British. When he read the translated version of Sikander's autobiography, originally written in Persian –the sophisticated court language of the time–, he began to consider "the large interpolations and excisions made by the translator" (personal communication, 17th September 1999). A presence that, in translation studies, has been especially noted by the so-called "Manipulation School".⁴ All in all, the deep and reflexive reading of this book became the true inspiration for Vikram's first novel, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995). He left film school halfway to begin work on the novel. But art was not unknown to Vikram, who was deeply influenced by his mother's passion for writing. Of her, Kamna Chandra, a successful screenplay writer in the Indian film industry, Vikram would state that he could not remember a time when she was not writing.

Red Earth and Pouring Rain was written over six years. During that time, Vikram supported himself on the writing programs at Johns Hopkins University and the University of Houston, working with well-known North-American contemporary writers: John Barth at Johns Hopkins, where Vikram obtained an MA, and Donald Barthelme at the University of Houston, where he received an MFA. While writing his novel, Vikram taught literature and writing, and also worked independently as a computer programmer and software and hardware consultant. His diverse clients included oil companies, non-profit organizations and the Houston Zoo. Finally, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* was published in 1995 by Penguin/India in India; Faber and Faber in the United Kingdom, and Little, Brown in the United States. Vikram Chandra's *opera prima* was received with outstanding critical acclaim. It was awarded the *David Higham Prize for Fiction* and the *Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Best First Published Book* in 1996. In his novel, Chandra takes the reader across multiple times and places, from the battle paths in nineteenth-century India to contemporary roads in the States. Sanjay, one of the main narrative voices, reincarnated as a monkey, represents the

4. As an introduction, it can be useful to consult Lefevere (1992) and Hermans (1999).

traditional *storyteller*, recovering the vital strength of oral narration. Abhay, a young Indian contemporary student, is his counterpart, the one who will finally assume the relevance of a cultural heritage that belongs to him as much as to his ancestors. Vikram's words regarding his impulse to create this novel show the project underlying its composition, meditating on the narrative manipulation carried out by the translator of Sikander's autobiography:

I thought, then, about language, about speaking in alien tongues, and being made to speak in someone's else's voice, and about history and memory and the preservation of the past. (personal communication, 17th September 1999)

Vikram's second delivery, a collection of short-stories, *Love and Longing in Bombay*, was released in 1997, edited by the same publishing houses that have previously published the novel, in India, the United Kingdom and the United States. Two of these stories had formerly appeared in the *Paris Review* and *The New Yorker*.⁵ Indeed, the story "Dharma" was awarded the Discovery Prize by the *Paris Review* in 1994. The book won the *Commonwealth Prize for the Best Book for the Eurasian Region* in 1998. This brilliant collection is a tribute to the multilayered beauty of Bombay, old and new, its peoples, its stories. As in Vikram's first work, the five stories gathered here are linked by a powerful oral storytelling frame. In a smoky Bombay bar, Subramaniam, the storyteller, a retired civil servant, is able to captivate the book's main narrator, Ranjit. This young man, as Abhay in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, evolves from his initial skepticism towards a deep appreciation of the storytelling rite. In *Love and Longing in Bombay*, Chandra leaves behind the anticolonial core and intercultural encounters of his novel and centers on present-day Indian reality and underworlds, starring Bombay, his own city, India's financial and commercial centre, depicted as the cosmopolitan and polyglot city it is, being home for him and a sort of microcosm of the whole country. As in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, Chandra aims to tell out of silence, being conscious that historical –written– accounts are constructed by those who hold the power to tell and decide what is going to be the "truth". Evolving a gleaming narrative versatility, in the five stories gathered in the collection Chandra is able to delve into the depth that exists in ordinary lives, due to his profound sensitivity to the assumption that any account has its counterpoint, one which is not usually told or known. Thus, his discourse here gives voice to ghosts, mysteries, power politics in social relations, passions, crimes, hidden sexualities, anguishes, desires, nostalgias; above all, emotions. Unfolding his richly textured and elegant gaze, the author can make us perceive and share the wide range of

5. "Dharma" in *The Paris Review* (1994: 258-282), and "Shakti" in *The New Yorker* (December 24, 1994/January 2, 1995: 108-129).

sentiments felt by the diverse characters in the stories, because in *Love and Longing in Bombay* Vikram Chandra displays generous, powerful and deep insights into the diversified human nature. He explores how personal problems intersperse with social life, searching into the inner worlds of his characters.

At the moment, Vikram Chandra spends his time shuttling between Bombay, his home, where he writes, and Washington, DC, where he teaches creative writing at George Washington University. He is working on his third book, a new novel, a detective story on cops and gangsters, initially set in Bombay. As a sort of foretaste, in a special issue of *The New Yorker* (June 23 & 30, 1997) he has already published "Eternal Don" (1997b), that will be the first chapter of this forthcoming work. Furthermore, he does not forget one of his most beloved projects: writing a film script, because cinema is a very well-known world for him, coming from a filmmaking family of producers, directors and script-writers. Filmy background is a starting point one should never forget in looking at Vikram's work.⁶

Vikram Chandra's prose praises traditional oral storytelling in the era of electronic communication, without denying the advantages the web may provide. In his works, we can really notice how oral forms of literature operate as distinct pre-texts in written works that have adopted the English language with a main communicative purpose. As our immediate reality becomes increasingly intertwined with global technology, this intercultural fiction seeks other ways of communication, in the art of oral storytelling, the voices of popular culture, deeply human. Storytelling survives in modern India, but the narrative also shows itself to be flexible, able to assimilate new elements and change accordingly, interacting with the Western art. Thus, by far, Indian oral tradition of storytelling is the matrix of Chandra's narrative project, both living and fictional. Stylistically charming, Vikram is a virtuoso creator of vivid descriptions that enliven smells, tastes, thoughts, feelings, how voices sound, how silences appear... In spite of the technical complexity of framing interconnected stories, his prose carefully introduces the reader into a calm, flashing, yet ever-changing narrative flow, constantly showing an ongoing dialogue between old and new forms. Hopefully, certain traditions survive in our paradoxical (post)modern times, and Vikram's fiction helps memory to be restored to its true abode.

Regarding the diverse literary influences that Vikram Chandra acknowledges as being relevant for his fiction and his aesthetic conceptions, we will perceive a clear

6. Rachel Dwyer (2000: 105) enhances the fact that Vikram Chandra belongs to a new generation of Indian writers who has a great affection for Hindi cinema, considering it as a cultural expression of emotion rather than as object of parody. For Dwyer, this younger crop holds a more complex understanding and acceptance of popular culture.

multicultural hue. Being asked about his “literary parents”, he named, first and above all, the great Indian epics, the *Mahabharata*, compiled by Vyasa, and the *Ramayana*, compiled by Valmiki. Then he mentioned Indian writers such as R.K. Narayan, Khushwant Singh, Anita Desai and Salman Rushdie. Victorian writers, including Anthony Trollope and William Makepeace Thackeray; North-Americans, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and the “noir writers”, Dashiell Hammett, Elmore Leonard and Jim Thompson, among others (personal communication, 4th October 1997). A diversified and heterogeneous group meeting in the author’s literary imagination, showing an approach between tradition and modernity, which are not contradictory terms for Vikram. Although his literature belongs to the contemporary period, and indeed he employs certain present-day narrative resources, the seed of his prose lies in oral popular transmission, the texture of the Indian epics, past memories reshaped and replenished in present times. For him, “tradition survives in odd and unexpected ways” (personal communication, 4th October 1997).

Apart from writing, teaching and lecturing, Vikram Chandra carries out many other activities that also echo his ideas about the creative process. In 1998, together with the literary agent Jenny Bent, he set up a living forum in Washington DC, named *Adda*. This Hindi word could be translated in many different ways, mainly as “stand” or “base”, “meeting place”, or “resort”. Local writers, published or unpublished, gather at this literary space, located at U Street’s Chi-Cha Lounge. However, the origins of *Adda* should be traced back to Bombay. There, in July 1997, Vikram created a first *Adda* with his filmmaker friend Anuradha Tandon, who runs it now. Indian *Adda* includes literary readings, dancing, music and theatre. These forums chiefly intend to foster interaction and conversation between artists and audience, something that Vikram enhances himself.

Not in vain, the accessibility that Vikram Chandra shows to his readers-listeners, through the e-mail channel, is intimately and transculturally related to his attachment to the oral tradition. For Vikram, audience has a very high relevance, being an active participant in the storytelling process, as Sanjay’s audience in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* and Subramaniam’s in *Love and Longing in Bombay*. Vikram also has his own. As he works, as he writes, he shows the pages he produces to a small group of people, his close audience: his mother, his sisters, a couple of friends. Out there, readers over the world, unknown, but extremely important for the storyteller, who would like to listen to their responses. With some of them, Vikram maintains an open conversation, a real interaction that becomes a “turn of the screw” regarding what author-reader relationships have been up until now in the “Gutenberg Galaxy”. Distinctively, Vikram Chandra entwines his cosmopolitan side with his Indian essence, rooted into oral culture. He is critical regarding the lack of contact between author and reader and finds it particularly annoying when the modern writer is thought of as a distant mysterious figure. No

wonder then he fosters the concept of storytelling, where one can listen to the author's voice, short-circuiting distances. Not many writers and publishers encourage such direct interaction, but Vikram finds it stimulating to communicate with his readers. So, if the current technology lets him speak more personally to the listeners, he takes the chance.

Talking with Vikram about the complex question of identity, in relation to the acculturation and transculturation processes, I suggested that his use of English as literary language and of the novel genre as body of creation was carried out from an interactional and resistant Indian identity, enhanced in his fiction. His own response is highly clarifying:

Enhancing the identity, exactly. If you don't assume a unified, singular self in the first place, then there is no question of acculturation. There is an old cliché in India, which describes the Indian self like an onion, that is made up of layers and layers. If you are an investigative type, and insist that you will take apart this construction to find the "core", you can peel and peel away, but you will never find the centre, only emptiness. *One might argue that this is like a knot of stories; it is in their knotiness that they become something.* If you add something to this tangle, yes, you change the tangle, but you don't make it something "other". That is impossible. It remains the same knot. Only different.... (personal communication, 7th November 1997) (emphasis added)

This being so, according to Vikram, multiple knotting and entwining is the identity core of India, that has always been multicultural. In this sense, Salman Rushdie also states that what defines Indian cultural tradition is eclecticism, mixture, interacting, in front of the fantasy of purity: "[...] the very essence of Indian culture is that we possess a mixed tradition, a *mélange* of elements as disparate as ancient Mughal and contemporary Coca-Cola American" (Rushdie 1983: 67). Indeed, the comparison that Vikram draws between Indian identity and a knot of stories is highly relevant regarding the narrative structure of *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, as we shall see. Identity lies in knottiness. Culture, after all, could be considered as a huge tangle to which one can add threads and threads, to make it grow and multiply. And it is precisely in its multiple roots where we find the constant possibility to open change and interaction, because, mainly, the adding of new threads enriches the bond. Chandra takes inspiration from everywhere, and believes that what results is Indian in its very eclecticism. With affection, he quotes the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges (1932) in order to state that the acceptance of external influences –named as "pollution" by some critics– does not imply the loss of one's own flavour. One is not "less Indian" for looking at the whole world in search of inspiration; the local and the global are not a real dichotomy and can dwell in the same place.⁷ So, Vikram defines

7. Even a strong defender of ethnic cultural values such as Ngugi (1993: 25-29) echoes this unease about the tendency to see the universal and the local in absolute opposition to each other.

himself as an Indian cosmopolitan writer, regional as well, considering that part of the western suburbs of Bombay is his region, his locality. As Borges, Vikram Chandra (2000a) speaks against ideological restrictions imposed on writers. Art, above all, should breathe in free air. To illustrate this point, if there is a clear voice that speaks about the necessary freedom of identity for the transcultural subjects, that voice belongs to Frantz Fanon,⁸ far too aware of the dangers of the fixity and fetishism of identities:

I do not have the duty to be this or that... One duty only: that of not renouncing my freedom through my choices. [...] There are in every part of the world men who search. I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny. [...] *In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself.* (Fanon 1986: 229) (emphasis added)

In what follows, I will concentrate on Vikram Chandra's first work, the novel *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995), which is composed of hundreds of interwoven told, retold, copied, translated, interspersed stories. Its several characters and narrators (storytellers) are representative of a huge range of times, spaces, races, nationalities, religions, age and gender. Moreover, they come from the animal, human and divine orders. The essence of this big tapestry can be already observed in the novel's title, which is taken from a Tamil poem dating back to the third century A.D., translated into English by A.K. Ramanujan; a poem that appears in the text itself, disguised as a song:

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.
(Chandra 1995: 233) (emphasis added)

Through the force of these simple, deep and emotional words, Chandra speaks about the possibility of coming together by means of the power of love, assuming that culture is not only red earth or pouring rain, but the *and* between them, their knotting, their mixture, the clay we are all made of. This feeling is not naïve, taking into account that the master theory of aesthetics in Hindu thought is the emotional and creative theory of *rasa*⁹. Art is a cultural expression of emotion, considering that emotion is also a

8. Greatly admired by cultural critics such as Homi Bhabha (1994) and Gayatri Spivak (1993).

9. Elusive concept that could be widely translated as "emotion, sentiment". For an account of the classical *rasa* theory, particularly as formulated by the eleventh-century Kashmiri theorist Abhinavagupta, see Gerow (1974). We can find a recent and comparative account in Sharma (1996).

discourse practice. Thus, emotional discourses are pragmatic acts and communicative performances. All in all, I believe that Vikram Chandra's narrative project as a whole could be considered as an enquiry into *rasa* configuration, exploring the very boundaries and conditions of life itself.

Storytelling defines *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, where fiction intermingles with both history and myth, embracing diverse interpretations of the past history of India, as well as a contemporary road trip criss-crossing the United States. Abhay, home in India after attending college in California, is the link between these separate worlds. Disturbed and alienated, he shoots and seriously wounds an old white-faced monkey that has been stealing food and clothes from his parent's garden for years. As a result of the wound, the monkey recovers his human consciousness, and reveals to be the heart and mind reincarnation of a nineteenth-century brahmin poet named Sanjay. Deprived of his human voice, the monkey, Sanjay, actually typewrites in order to communicate. Three praised Hindu deities arrive on the scene, Yama (king of the dead), Hanuman (ape-god protector of poets) and Ganesha (elephant-god of wisdom), and a vital contract is signed: Sanjay will stay alive only if he is able to entertain an audience with his storytelling, interwoven with that of Abhay and his parents, Ashok and Mrinalini Misra, retired teachers. All their voices, together with those of the many characters that walk about the book, shape Chandra's multifaceted story of stories, spiralling across centuries, countries, cultures, feelings. As a sort of literary zapping, the slipping interrelation between tellings is used as both a creative and critical practice, a strategy for communicating meaning across cultural boundaries. The interaction of the two main oral-framed narrative branches, Sanjay's epic past and Abhay's postmodern road-movie present, subsume a meeting of languages, styles, values, identities. Chandra's book cultural ethos and worldview show overtly his disgust in front of Western logic, with its tribute to self-interest and reason. This attitude is epitomized at one point by the criticism to Aristotle's *Poetics*, and, more specifically, to its insistence on emotional sameness, its clean and straight stipulations, so different from Indian discoursivization, where "narratives entwine and break into each other" (Chandra 1995: 335). Indeed, this constant debate is a deep subtext within the story: the interactional contrast between Aristotle's poetics and Indian aesthetics, Cartesian clarity and Indian curlicues, British rationalism and Indian mythological beliefs, Western discipline and Indian meditation.

All in all, Sanjay is the one who returns from the past, reincarnated as a monkey, in order to tell the history of India through the story of his own life and his brother's, Sikander, a soldier, at the tail-end of the Moghul Empire (1526-1857) and the Indian Mutiny (1857-59). Being conscious of the power of narrative in order to shape historical discourses, his voice, one among many others, will mainly entwine with that of Abhay, and Abhay's parents, Ashok and Mrinalini. Paradoxically, Sanjay returns to restore

precisely what he lacks: voice. Devoid of his human speech, he actually typewrites his story, in English, the tongue he paid so much to master. Each time Sanjay gives birth to a story he scores a victory against time. Thus, symbolically, Chandra's text is a vehicle of timelessness by reconstructing the past through the present and pointing to the future. Moreover, Sanjay represents the tragic and painful learning of a foreign language, the colonizer's tongue and its written transmission. For him typewriting means, in fact, transcribing voice, with all its hues, tones, accents. For him storytelling is life itself.

Abhay's narrative accounts for his experiences as an Indian student in the States, introducing the contemporary view of a cosmopolitan migrant, torn between Indian and American cultural values. Noticing that his memory is fragmentary, feeling as if he were in a film and were expected to react somehow (Chandra 1995: 57), perhaps Abhay also feels that his life is a sort of broken mirror, "some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost" (Rushdie 1982: 11). Coming back home from abroad, Abhay becomes aware of the cultural features of his homeland, those traces that shape himself. He (re)learns to know his own culture, essentially multiple. Above all, he rediscovers the importance of storytelling as a daily ritual, part of life. In Abhay's confusing existence, Sanjay's return and lesson is a legacy of endurance and coherence.

In spite of the fact that his life and work straddle East and West, Chandra knows where his roots are, in the substratum of the ritual tradition of oral storytelling, stories being written only in order to be preserved, forever passed on from one generation to the next. Full of cultural and historical references, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* comes out to be an endless tale, an intertextual matrix, a whole circle, a quest, a homecoming. It is actually a symbolic knot of stories, voices, places and times woven together, a big tapestry where each story, each stitch, has its value. It frontally resists the possibility of being summarized in just a few lines. It demands to be disentangled, slowly, carefully, thread by thread.

All in all, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* is, in many respects, a book of and about storytelling. Structurally it is divided into five books.¹⁰ As in *The Thousand and One Nights*, and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), oral narration is a vital activity that contains the real meaning of existence. Somehow, in Rushdie's novel, Saleem tries to delay his death—though he is conscious of his inevitable desintegration—by accumulating a great number of stories, revealing a fragmentary reality and history. In Chandra's text, however, what really matters is the interweaving of stories and voices, the interlaced whole they finally create. The importance of the narrative frame is enhanced by Hanuman at the beginning: "Be wily, be twisty, be elaborate" (Chandra 1995: 24). According to this advice, Sanjay creates a fictional stage where Sandeep is

10. At this point, we should remember the main referents for Chandra's writing: the *Ramayana*, composed of seven books, and the *Mahabharata*, which includes eighteen books. See Dimock *et al.* (1974).

the storyteller that tells the story of Sanjay and Sikander to a group of *sadhus*, holy men. At the same time, Sandeep states that this story was passed on him by an old woman he met on the Himalayas. Thus, what we have is narrative embedding down to many levels, the rich story-within-a-story device: Sanjay's voice is "heard" within the frame created by Sandeep (created by Sanjay). Moreover, there is a constant zapping between Sanjay's past story and Abhay's present account. What all the voices in the text want to convey is storytelling's survival. In this sense, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* could be considered as one of the "narratives of transmission" described by Bernard Duyfhuizen (1992: 19-20): "The narrative of transmission is both a metaphor for processes of continuance in literature and life, and a metonymy—a constituent part of that process." Above all, telling stories is also the art of keeping on telling them.

Chandra defines his book as one long story made up by many open-ended strands. Its form, the way in which stories change and dive into each other, comes out from the flux of the traditional Indian epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, the first stories he remembers absorbing, which his mother and aunts used to tell him when he was a child. This type of spiralling narrative, full of juxtapositions and unexpected meetings, is an ancient traditional Indian form. There, storytelling displays a circling structure that consciously avoids linearity, and refuses any notion of straightforwardness. Usually, storytellers do not create out of nothing. Somehow, they begin from familiar forms, genres, patterns, structures, narrative schemata. So, Chandra, emotionally attached to the Indian epics, follows this traditional form to tell modern versions of everyday life, to reflect the possibility of its survival in a translational sphere, in spite of the spread of the individualistic Westernized way of life. His literary movement is centrifugal, going from the inside towards the outside, from his own cultural forms to the internationalized ones. As I have already stated, the whole text is a symbol of the entanglement and knotting of cultures in our contemporary world. Its entwined texture may be confusing, dizzy, like jet-lag, like zapping, as puzzling as the experience of crossing cultures may be. The only way to get over it is learning to acknowledge, translate and understand our multicultural and multilingual reality.

The novel also reflects the hard tension between the vernacular and English voices during colonial times, together with the clash between oral and written transmission. Literacy already existed in India before the Europeans' arrival. What the West brought to India was printing technology. In *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, Sanjay and Sikander are sent to Calcutta to become apprentices on the Markline Orient Press. There, by chance, Sanjay has to work on the printing of a book written by an English missionary,¹¹

11. The book, written by Reverend Francis M.A. Sarthey, is descriptively entitled *The Manners, Customs, and Rituals of the Natives of Hindostan: Being Chiefly an Account of the Journeys of a Christian Through the Lands of the Hindoo, and his Appeal to all Concerned Believers*. The significance of travel writing as a subjective production of empire has been wisely put forward by Mary Louise Pratt (1992).

who gives a false account of the death by immolation of Janvi, Sikander's mother. Facing this manipulation, Sanjay feels insulted and gets a slightly modified duplication of the font used to print the book. So, he inserts a subversive message, in Hindi, into the alien field of the English book: "This book destroys completely. This book is the true murderer" (Chandra 1995: 354). When Markline tries to find the font, Sanjay literally swallows all the metal letters, which later on, will be dropped out of his body, against oppression. Step by step, in the course of his life Sanjay learns the power of transmission, and the real value of speaking, thus: "As the years passed, Sanjay wrote less and less; the act of putting words on paper became more and more a lie, an oppressive betrayal of life itself, and therefore one day he found himself unable to write at all" (Chandra 1995: 454). In his human life, Sanjay acknowledges that although English is a necessary vehicle for communicating, it cannot contain his most beloved words, it is not his own:

Sanjay moved his head, shut his eye, tried to speak, but found his throat blocked tightly by something as hard as metal; he did not know what it was he wanted to say but knew he couldn't say it, what was possible to say he couldn't say in English, how in English can one say roses, doomed love, chaste passion, my father my mother, their love which never spoke, pride, honour, what a man can live for and what a woman should die for, how in English can one say the cows' slow distant tinkle at sunset, the green weight of the trees after monsoon, dust of winnowing and women's songs, elegant shadow of a minar creeping across white marble, the patient goodness of people met at wayside, the enfolding trust of aunts and uncles and cousins, winter bonfires and fresh chapattis, in English all this, the true shape and contour of a nation's heart, all this is left unsaid and unspeakable and invisible, and so all Sanjay could say after all was: "Not". (Chandra 1995: 344)

After a hard fight against the British in the wake of the Mutiny, Sanjay is on the verge of dying. But he needs to hold on to life, to gain immortality, mainly because he still has to fulfill his *dharma*. Yama asks him for what is most holy and precious to him. Then, Sanjay opens his mouth, tears his tongue out by the roots and offers it to Yama. In this way, literally and symbolically, Sanjay sacrifices his mother tongue in order to speak English, to be able to communicate with the colonizers on an equal basis. So, when afterwards he travels to London, he speaks English *without tongue*, painfully acknowledging that: "Vernacular is not a matter of tongue alone, a man had to die and leave behind his native earth to speak a new language" (Chandra 1995: 553).

In my view, in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* one could consider that Sanjay and Abhay both exemplify and redefine the notion of "twice born", that has been critically used to describe the dualistic heritage that holds the discursive framework of the Indian

writer in English.¹² Taken from Hinduism, the concept of “twice born” has explicit class and caste meanings. The males from the top three castes in the Hindu system (*Brahman* –ritual mediator between the divine and the human–; *Kshatriya* –warrior– and *Vaishya* –merchant–) are considered “twice born”, that is, are eligible to experience the “second birth”, when they are ceremonially initiated into their responsibilities as Hindus, mainly into learning the Veda. After his “first death”, confronted with Yama, Sanjay is “born again”, being able to speak English. Somehow, his identity is created anew through his journey to London. There, he shows both a split subjectivity and a renewed self. He migrates across cultures, languages, spaces, times, even from the human to the animal order, by virtue of his later reincarnation. Nonetheless, though his self seems to be fragmented, divided and inherently unstable, his true inner nature, and his *dharma*, remain the same. Mainly because his travel to London is indeed a journey into himself. Regarding Abhay, at one point we learn that, indeed, as Sanjay, he also belongs to a Hindu family. His grandfather wants him to have his *upnayana* ceremony and become one of the twice born. But being at school he is resistant to the caste system, and later he leaves for the States. Then his grandfather dies, and his existential dizziness begins to grow up. Thus, in more than one sense, his return to India and his encounter with Sanjay and his storytelling involve the dissipation of that confusion, implying his absolute re-attachment to his culture, his meaning, his place in the world, his own *dharma*. All in all, symbolically, after his homecoming and learning, one could argue that Abhay is also a “twice born”.

Altogether, I see the whole novel as a constant journey, a quest, a rite of passage, for both Sanjay and Abhay. During his human life, Sanjay travelled endlessly in search of his ultimate cultural and personal identity. He even had to fulfill his *karma* and returned as a monkey to end his trip at home, in India, after all. Abhay represents the contemporary hybrid and migrant experience, shuttling between the United States and India. Finally, at home, he learns to assume his legacy: “I will tell you a story that will grow up like a lotus vine, that will twist in on itself and expand ceaselessly, till all of you are a part of it, and the gods come to listen, till we are all talking in a musical hubbub that contains the past, every moment of the present, and all the future” (Chandra 1995: 617). Both voyages are journeys of (re)discovering, learning and return. Looking back at the main influences that Chandra himself assumes regarding the writing of his novel, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, we notice that the quest motif is the undercurrent of many stories included in both Indian epics, where indeed the chief event is a journey and a quest, the sum of successive encounters and mixings.

12. On that score, it would be worth revising Mukherjee’s (1971) study of “twice-born” Indian novel in English.

Red Earth and Pouring Rain is a novel about migrancy, foreigners in India, Indians abroad. And it is also much more. Indeed, it is much more than a novel, in the sense of the literary genre.¹³ In this cultural narrative knot, Chandra unifies and unravels the threads that tell the (hi)story of India, past, present and future. He witnesses the plurality that exists in the world and transcribes that polyphony into his writing. According to Salman Rushdie (1982: 19), the truest eye may now belong to the migrant's "double vision", which is clearly depicted in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*. Another transcultural writer, Michael Ondaatje, opens his novel *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987) with a quote by John Berger, a statement I would apply to Chandra's novel: "Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one". Because there are not unique truths, worldviews and tellings. Because there is always an "other".

In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem Sinai, Rushdie's paradigmatic narrator, declares that "to understand just one life, you have to swallow the world" (Rushdie 1981: 109). Vikram Chandra (2000a) assumes this statement, and he recommends that Indian contemporary writers should give up nothing, and swallow everything, going beyond post-colonial rage, beyond any myth of pure identity, though this does not mean to forget the past, to forget who you are. Living as he does in the United States for some months each year, Chandra has access to another tradition, the cultural and political history of the phenomenon of migration,¹⁴ displacement and emotional remembering. He uses the language of the mainstream to redefine and describe the nature of the reality he lives day after day. Travelling back and forth, his writing reveals, through India, either colonial or independent, the transcendence of human values and their universal significance. A sort of distance from his homeland seems to be essential for him. Sometimes, being too close to what one loves, the place that constitutes the focus of one's life and work, there is no perspective. Thus, retreating, one may actually find a broad viewpoint, richer, comprehensive, acute. Though it seems paradoxical, distance can make the heart fonder and the gaze closer.

Anywhere, anyhow, anytime, Vikram Chandra will be spinning out a yarn, imagining stories and exploring ways of telling them, through his sensuous style, through his multiple voices, bridging the home and the world, in his constant journey. The incessant negotiation of difference is complex, but it is time to celebrate cultural diversity and human intercultural communication, without fear. Identity is interaction, meeting, dialogue, exchange. Identity is an endless travel in which one should "be free.

13. As Vikram Chandra himself has debated in his (yet unpublished) paper "Finding a Form" (2000b), delivered in his lectures at different Spanish Universities (Zaragoza, Lleida, Aut3noma de Barcelona and Castell3n), during his visit to Spain, promoted by The British Council in Spain, 18th-26th November 2000.

14. Indeed, Gayatri Spivak's (1993) substantive concern has been largely with the difference between the postcolonial and the migrant.

Give up nothing, and swallow everything” (Chandra 2000a; 197). This opinion may be utopian, as much as Ngugi’s following words. But, sometimes, utopia, as dream, may come true:

The wealth of a common global culture will then be expressed in the particularities of our different languages and cultures very much like a universal garden of many-coloured flowers. The “floweriness” of the different flowers is expressed in their very diversity. But there is cross-fertilisation between them. And what is more, they all contain in themselves the seeds of a new tomorrow. (Ngugi 1993: 24)

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