Mahabharata Echoes in Mumbai's Underworld: Mythic Archetypes and Diasporic Identity in Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games*

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Abstract

This paper examines how *Sacred Games*'s polyphonic structure is related to multiplicity and moral ambiguity of *Mahabharata* epic. Using a comparative mythological framework based on archetypal critique and postcolonial theory, this study argues that Sacred Games reinterprets epic archetypes in the context of Mumbai's current gang scene, making it a modern urban myth. Sartaj Singh and Ganesh Gaitonde are thought to be distorted versions of epic characters like Arjuna, Karna, and Krishna. The novel's apocalyptic timeline is similar to the reasoning behind the Kurukshetra conflict. The novel also uses epic themes to look at diasporic, postcolonial, and nationalism. This study shows how the novel changes traditional Indian mythology by putting it in a global context, turning epic memory into a way to show urban violence and diasporic identity.

Keywords: S*acred Games*, *Mahabharata*, archetypes, diaspora, Mumbai, myth, comparative literature

Introduction

The *Mahabharata,* an epic, is very important for understanding South Asian literature and culture. The epic tells the story of the dynastic war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, which ended in the terrible battle at Kurukshetra. The *Mahabharata* tells a long story and also lays out a complex moral system based on dharma, fate, family, and the end of the universe. Wendy Doniger and A.K. Ramanujan are two scholars who have said that the epic's polyphonic and recursive structure makes it easy to reinterpret over and over again. Mythological frameworks have come back in unexpected narrative settings in contemporary time.

Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games* is a long story that amalgamates crime, politics, religion, history, and philosophy to make a complicated picture of modern India. As Sharma and Sharma observe, "Vikram Chandra's Sacred Games represents modern contemporary world. It gives a realistic view of present society. The author has revealed the selfishness and shamelessness of modern men." (Sharma and Sharma) The novel is a police procedural and gangland thriller set in Mumbai. As Shukla notes,

> "The novel delineates the life of the megapolis Mumbai. This is the world in which gangsters, policemen, financers, actors and actresses, bar dancers, prostitutes and good men freely move, cross the path of one another, sometimes collide against and sometimes embrace one another" (Shukla).

It follows two stories at the same time: Sikh police inspector Sartaj Singh's investigation into the mysterious suicide of famous crime boss Ganesh Gaitonde, and Gaitonde's confession after his death about how he went from being an orphan to a crime lord. However, beneath this conventional

framework lies a profoundly mythical structure sourced from the Mahabharata, the *Ramayana*, the Puranas, and Hindu cosmology, which transforms the book into what Pankaj Mishra characterises as an effort to "retool the novel as an epic form." The intersection of this mythical framework with the novel's ongoing examination of migration, displacement, and identity has received comparatively limited critical scrutiny. Mumbai, the main setting of the novel, is more than just a backdrop; it is also Avtar Brah's idea of a "diaspora space"—a place where migrants, non-migrants, and host communities interact and where the "boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, belonging and otherness, 'us' and 'them' are challenged." The city's residents—Sikh police officers, Hindu criminals, Muslim enemies, Bangladeshi refugees, survivors of Partition, and rural migrants chasing the "big dream of Bombay"—make up an internal diaspora whose fragmented identities are navigated through, and in opposition to, inherited mythic tales. Through the story of this novel, "it is clear that all the characters of novel are indulged in crime, even the saviour are also not crime free." (Sharma and Sharma) Chandra is in a diasporic position. He was born in New Delhi in 1961 and moved to the US to go to college. He got degrees from Pomona College and Johns Hopkins University. He has since lived his life in both places, Mumbai and Berkeley, California, where he teaches creative writing at the University of California. Chandra has said in interviews that he believes "many Indians, caught between tradition and modernity in a densely populated and impoverished nation, have a less psychologically constrained self-concept and a mythic, rather than a historical, understanding of their place in the world."

To analyse the text's mythical dimensions theoretically, the theories of Frye, Jung, and Campbell have been incorporated. Concepts like Archetypes, mythical structures, Mythic displacement have been the focus of it. And to look at myth as a way for cultures to work together in a globalised world, to analyse the text through a diasporic lens, concepts of Brah, Hall, Bhabha, Appadurai have been explored and applied. Vijay Mishra's idea of the "diasporic imaginary" makes this relationship even clearer. Mishra distinguishes two categories of the Indian diaspora: the "old" diaspora, marked by exclusivism, and the "new" diaspora, linked to borders. Both categories create illusions of a "ethnically pure" nation that contradict its true condition. In *Sacred Games,* Sridhar Shukla's Hindu fundamentalist vision of a purified India exemplifies this diasporic imagination pushed to its apocalyptic limits—a yearning to return to an original purity that justifies lethal violence. Stuart Hall's influential article "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" delineates the theoretical relationship between myth and identity. Hall delineates two interpretations of cultural identity: the first is based on shared essences, while the second emphasises the recognition of "a necessary heterogeneity and diversity... hybridity." He asserts that diasporic identity is "characterised, not by essence or purity, but by the acknowledgement of an essential heterogeneity and diversity." This anti-essentialist framework is distinctly relevant to Sacred Games, where characters continuously navigate between essentialist mythic identities (Hindu don, Sikh policeman, Muslim adversary) and the complex, contingent realities of life in multicultural Mumbai.

People see the epic as more than just a source of information; they see it as narrative grammar, which is an important structure that acts how characters grow. The research utilises qualitative textual analysis of the *Mahabharata* and *Sacred Games*. A close look at important events is combined with a look at character types and story elements in a comparative way. The core of the *Mahabharata* revolves around the quandary of dharma. Arjuna's inability to make a decision on the battlefield shows how moral paralysis can happen in a conflict between brothers. Krishna's advice changes the meaning of violence to something that must happen in the universe.

In *Sacred Games,* Mumbai works in a similar way. The city becomes a place where political corruption, religious extremism, and capitalist ambition all come together. Parulkar, for instance, epitomises the compromised guardian of law:

> "Parulkar was after all the commissioner for a very rich zone. It was a very wet posting and Parulkar drank deep from its burbling faunt of money. He was an avid earner but not greedy and he was very careful about the disposal of the money. The money disappeared from India

and re-appeared abroad where it sat safe and accumulated interest in hard currency." (Chandra 83)

The novel often refers to cycles, such as the repetition of history and violence, which is a reflection of the epic's cyclical time. *Sacred Games* is set at the edge of civilization's collapse, just like the *Mahabharata* is set at the beginning of Kali Yuga.

Character Archetypes and Mythic Cartography

Ganesh Gaitonde, the main character in the book, is a criminal who also represents many epic themes, He is like Ashwatthama, the *Mahabharata* warrior who was sentenced to immortality after the Kurukshetra battle. Like Ashwatthama, Gaitonde's story goes on long after his physical death, told from beyond the grave in a Vikram-Betal-style of undead storytelling.

The Reluctant Fighter Sartaj and Arjuna both have unclear morals.

> "Sartaj Singh, the weary and morally conflicted Sikh police officer, functions as a kind of Arjuna figure—called to act in a world where the lines between justice and injustice are blurred. His meditative dialogues with his inner self and his dead father resemble the discursive structure of the Bhagavad Gita, wherein Krishna imparts ethical and metaphysical wisdom to the hesitant Arjuna." (Komal)

His Sikh background adds a diasporic element; as a minority in Mumbai's Hindu-majoritarian politics, he has to navigate through feeling like he doesn't belong. Bhishma's sad loyalty is brought to mind by his father's bad legacy. Sartaj does not reach transcendence, unlike Arjuna. His bravery is more about following rules than about being divine. Ganesh Gaitonde: The Main Character on the Outside Gaitonde is a perfect example of how Karna was pushed to the side. Both are marked by shame and a need for recognition. Karna's loyalty to Duryodhana is like Gaitonde's changing loyalties in Mumbai's criminal underbelly. Sridhar Shukla's teachings recontextualise Hindu mythology and metaphysics not for spiritual emancipation but to rationalise violence against imagined national adversaries, revealing the perilous capacity of myth when "detached from ethical examination".

In *Sacred Games*, Mumbai is the perfect example of a "diaspora space." It is a place where people from the subcontinent who have been forced to leave their homes come together, interact, and create new identities. The book tells the story of how the city has changed from pre-independence India to modern times, showing how it went from being a cosmopolitan city to a divided city through the stories of its residents. The story builds its characters to give readers a deeper understanding of the city and its people and how they interact with each other. Through Sartaj, the readers see "a modern, cosmopolitan Mumbai full of politicians, movie stars, corruption, wealth, fanatics, refugees, and the weak." Through Gaitonde, the reader sees "a 1990s Bombay full of hopes and dreams, with gang fights, jazz bars, temples, and mosques." The story covers a whole generation and tells the story of "how Bombay became Mumbai,". The transition from Bombay to Mumbai represents a diasporic narrative, showcasing how a cosmopolitan region characterised by relative openness was segmented along ethno-religious lines, leading to unprecedented forms of displacement within the city. As Jose and Joseph argue, "Home is an imagined community wrought with the utopian concepts of companionship and belonging as it is portrayed in Sacred Games" (Jose and Joseph). They further note that "Homespace in Sacred Games is simultaneously a contested place, open to struggle and conflict, and an alternative place with subversive power." (Jose and Joseph)

Chandra loves how rude the street language in Bombay is, and he uses a clear, vivid vocabulary to express it. He often uses the same number of Hindi and English words without translating them. "He has evolved his own Indian English for creative purposes which reflect the Indian culture. In his novels he freely uses Hindi, Punjabi, Marathi, Tamil, Sanskrit words, sentence, expressions and proverbs and sayings." (Shukla) This linguistic hybridity exemplifies a diasporic phenomenon, illustrating Bhabha's "Third Space," where diverse cultural registers amalgamate to forge innovative, creolised modes of communication.

As per Campbell's concept, Gaitonde's story follows the monomyth's pattern of separation (orphan origins), initiation (criminal rise through violence and treachery), and return (attempted apotheosis through Sridhar Shukla's cosmic vision). But the journey is paradoxically out of sync: there is no point in retrieving anything or rebuilding a community. The constant self-narration through mythic frameworks shows what Mishra calls the main purpose of the diasporic imaginary: to create an idealised identity through fantasies of origin and destiny that make up for the deep dislocation of real life. Gaitonde's engagement with Sridhar Shukla represents the pivotal moment at which personal myth making converges with the diasporic imagination. This messianic hallucination is the most dangerous part of the diasporic imagination—the desire for an idealised homeland that has reached its apocalyptic end, where the idea of cosmic regeneration (pralaya followed by satya yuga) justifies nuclear terrorism.

Diasporic Identity and the Multivocal Epic

Sartaj, being "one of the rare Sikhs in the Mumbai police force," is always in a state of what Bhabha calls "cultural in-betweenness." His turban and beard clearly mark him as an outsider in the mostly Hindu force.

Hall's second paradigm of cultural identity, which says that identity is both "becoming" and "being," helps us understand Sartaj's journey. His identity is always changing because of the city's conflicting mythological and social stories. The novel's ending, where Sartaj is tired while the nuclear bomb is neutralised offscreen, doesn't show that heroism has failed; instead, it shows that heroism has changed to mean being willing to do the right thing even when you're not sure what will happen.

Sridhar Shukla's apocalyptic initiative exemplifies the ultimate effort to confront diasporic uncertainty via mythic totalisation. His vision of a "purified, Hindu-fundamentalist future," achieved through nuclear annihilation, would provoke a civilisational conflict, reminiscent of the Kalki avatar's promise to eliminate malevolence at the end of the Kali Yuga and restore dharmic order. Chandra breaks down this eschatology and shows that it is "a political tool for justifying mass murder." Sridhar Shukla's teachings exemplify what Mishra would consider the most malevolent manifestation of the diasporic imaginary: an obsession with a "ethnically pure" homeland so intense that it justifies the obliteration of tangible, hybrid, and multifaceted realities.

However, Chandra shows through Sridhar Shukla's terrible path that the mythic structure of leela can be twisted into a reason for nihilistic destruction when it is not linked to moral responsibility.

Chandra's identity as a diasporic author, an Indian-American moving between Mumbai and Berkeley, is an important part of the novel's mythic-diasporic structure. His global viewpoint enables a dual perspective that is both acquainted with and critical of the legendary frameworks he utilises. Chandra exemplifies what Rushdie termed "stereoscopic vision" of the exile—the ability to view the homeland from both internal and external vantage points, in contrast to writers solely situated in India. The novel's polyphonic structure—its rejection of a singular authoritative voice, its proliferation of perspectives, and its resistance to moral resolution—reflects, at the formal level, the exact essence of diasporic subjectivity that it explores at the content level. Sacred Games, like the Mahabharata, has the conflicting views of Gaitonde and Sartaj, the dislocated and the dislocating, the mythmaker and the myth-breaker, without favouring any one view. The *Mahabharata* includes the *Bhagavad Gita*, the stories of Karna and Eklavya, the gambling scenes, and the forest exiles, but it doesn't try to make sense of their contradictions in a moral way. This structural polyphony acts as a mythological archetype—the epic as a form broad enough to include all of a civilization's ideas about itself—and as a diasporic practice, which means not turning complex, hybrid, and changing identities into a single story of belonging. *Sacred Games* is part of a larger tradition of postcolonial Indian writing that includes Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. These books try to break down and rebuild basic myths in order to find justice. Chandra's distinctive contribution lies in his claim that the mythic and the diasporic are not separate analytical categories, but rather

interrelated dimensions of postcolonial experience. In Sacred Games, myth not only reflects diaspora but also creates, contests, and, within the framework of Sridhar Shukla's apocalyptic mission, threatens its annihilation.

Conclusion

Sacred Games is an important piece of literature that shows how mythic themes and diasporic identities are connected in postcolonial Mumbai. The novel demonstrates the inseparable connection between myth and diaspora in the Indian postcolonial imagination through its *Mahabharata*-like polyphonic structure, ironically recontextualised character archetypes, and continuous exploration of the interplay between sacred narratives and marginalised communities within Mumbai's gang landscape. Gaitonde's self-mythologization, Sartaj's hybrid dharmic quest, and Sridhar Shukla's eschatological terrorism collectively illustrate the spectrum of alternatives that emerge when traditional archetypes encounter contemporary displacement: innovative self-creation, moral negotiation, and disastrous totalisation, Chandra pushes for a new way of thinking about both myth and diaspora as fluid, contentious, and deeply connected parts of postcolonial identity by redefining the sacred as a place to explore instead of a place to find comfort and by showing the diasporic city as the modern Kurukshetra where conflicting mythic stories compete for dominance.

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