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### **Midnight's Children and Sacred Games: The Significance of Lost Stories**

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ENGL 430

12/15/22

*Midnight's Children* and *Sacred Games*: The Significance of Lost Stories

If writing is a way of exploring the self, both an individual and a collective self, then reading is, too. The foundation of literature is the interaction between writer and reader, who often greet each other across broad swaths of time, of place, and of positionality. These distances may be seen as barriers to understanding, but they can also be seen as opportunities for new growth, for the construction of bridges and of pathways toward one another. Whether they function as barriers or as potential connective tissue has less to do with a familiarity with content or even contextual framework, and more to do with the openness of writer and reader alike, as well as their willingness to work toward a mutual understanding. Both Salman Rushdie in his *Midnight's Children* and Vikram Chandra in his *Sacred Games* illustrate in the form of their novels a unique understanding of this relationship. Packed with dense detail, many readers may find it difficult to tackle these two massive tomes - and yet once the process of reading has begun, the texts are difficult to put down, even for someone with little to no knowledge of Indian socio-political history. Rushdie and Chandra are able to produce this effect via their special attention toward the vast world of lost stories, of untold stories. No reader can possibly follow the threads of every life contained within their pages, but this is their very point: no one can possibly understand every piece of their own self, because we cannot separate ourselves from the lives of everyone else - as Rushdie's narrator Saleem Sinai puts it, "to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well" (Rushdie 4).

Though Rushdie and Chandra both pay special attention to lost or forgotten stories, rescuing some of them and bringing them to the surface for readers to see, the ways in which they do this are very different. Rushdie establishes his idea of truth as less a fixed reality and more an ambiguous, ever-shifting entity. Different stories and perspectives give us access to elements of the truth in different ways. Chandra, however, provides less narrative commentary, and instead tends to present varying character perspectives side by side, letting the reader work out the discrepancies themselves. It can be useful to think of *Sacred Games* not only as a temporal successor to *Midnight's Children* but as a thematic one as well. Both novels travel across vast distances of time, space, and character. The stretch of *Sacred Games* is, naturally, shifted about 20 years to the right of *Midnight's Children*, and this is felt not only in its temporality, but in its narrative voice, and in the energy of its characters. Rushdie's Saleem is an energetic narrator throughout most of the novel, drawing all other characters as well as his readership into his own irresistible orbit. Though *Sacred Games* is not bound to a singular narrator, its main protagonist, Sartaj Singh, is almost the antithesis of Saleem - reserved, resigned, and simply tired - until he gathers his strength toward the end of the novel. So, the novels follow seemingly opposite arcs, in more ways than one. Saleem loses his motivation over the course of the novel, as the grand history of his life he set out to tell slides further into ambiguity. Conversely, while Sartaj begins in a place of total ambiguity, and in a place of mental and physical exhaustion, he gathers his strength to him by the end of the novel, because he becomes gradually more open to the perspectives of others. Of course, the novel does not end in total clarity, but rather in an acceptance of life's ambiguity, and a willingness to move forward in spite and because of it. For Saleem, who at the novel's onset believes himself to be omniscient

and fully in control of his own story, the slippery nature of what is true and what is real results in exhaustion. For Sartaj, it results in a renewed sense of purpose.

Writer and literary scholar Franco Moretti sees the study of world literature as needing two different approaches, two different directions. Scholars must work from the top down, as well as from the bottom up. To extrapolate these ideas further he employs two metaphors, that of the linguistic tree, its main limbs branching out into smaller and smaller ones until we move from broad systems to specific individual languages, and that of the wave, an all-consuming movement that forces us to move from specificity to unity, i.e. the absorption of indigenous languages into various forms of English or other western languages. These metaphors are not only useful for languages, but for literature itself - for the history of the novel, of the short story. Literary history, then, moves in two different directions simultaneously - from unity to specificity, and from specificity to unity. Moretti argues, however, that it is difficult to see both these movements at once. Some people see trees, and some people see waves. *Both* are necessary in enriching our understanding of the literature we read - and indeed the literature we do not read. It is useful to think about *Midnight's Children* and *Sacred Games* as exemplifying this bifurcation. In some ways, *Midnight's Children* moves from the top down, while *Sacred Games* moves from the bottom up. Rushdie's narrator, Saleem Sinai, centers the text for almost its entirety. Branching out from him, the reader sees other lesser characters through his supposedly all-seeing eyes. Integral to Saleem's narration is his ability to read other people's thoughts, his omniscience (though, ironically, this omniscience is incomplete). On the other end of the spectrum, Chandra's main protagonist Sartaj Singh begins in ambiguity, with far more gaps in his knowledge than bright points of clarity. Of course, some of this has to do with genre - Chandra writes a crime thriller, whereas Rushdie writes a blend of historical fiction and magical realism.

Both, though, play with the expectations of their respective genres, and are by no means bound by their conventions. So, while Saleem begins the book with a story to tell, with all the plot points supposedly already determined and tucked away in his mind, Sartaj begins the book with listlessness, with an utter lack of purpose. While Saleem descends into confusion and contradiction, Sartaj ascends into a position of renewed purpose, and renewed understanding.

This divergence is precisely because Saleem assumes he knows everything, and therefore knows nothing, whereas Sartaj is quite realistic about his lack of information, of crucial details, and spends the novel listening to people, picking up “the strands of their lives” and following along (Chandra 79). Indeed, though Rushdie is quite clear about the limits of Saleem’s knowledge, and by extension, the limits of his own, many readers of a global audience interpret Saleem as an absolute authority on India. Scholar Aijaz Ahmad criticizes this notion, commenting on “the characterization of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* in the *New York Times* as ‘a Continent finding its voice’--as if one has no voice if one does not speak in English” (Ahmad 5). Rushdie himself does not purport *Midnight’s Children* to be the ultimate authority on Indian existence. Although he writes it as a national allegory, it is purposefully imperfect, and to truly *read* it as a national allegory makes little sense, because its point is the ambiguous and unreachable nature of truth. There is no one way the nation of India functions, no one way it is experienced by Indians and by non-Indians. Here, the theory of literary scholar Fredric Jameson (critiqued by Ahmad) which posits that “‘all third-world texts are necessarily... to be read as... national allegories’”, makes little sense (Ahmad 5-6). *Midnight’s Children*, is, of course, *written* ostensibly as an allegory. Saleem claims to be one and the same with India itself. Every character, in his narration, represents something; his sister, the Brass Monkey, comes to represent Pakistan, his biological parentage of a poor Indian woman and a rich Englishman represents the

colonial roots of contemporary India. And yet, to *read* every character as *only* allegorical is to take Saleem at his word, a narrator whom readers experience as blatantly self-absorbed and ignorant even in the face of his supposed telepathy.

Professor and scholar Meenakshi Mukherjee takes similar issue with Jameson's theory, but also with English texts like *Midnight's Children* and *Sacred Games* that have even the potential of being read as national allegories. She blames not only the ignorance of non-Indian readers, but the willingness of authors like Rushdie and Chandra to pander to this ignorance in order to increase global interest in their work. For Mukherjee, "the novelist in the Indian language seems more involved with the local and the particular, compared to the national project in English which has a greater anxiety to appear 'Indian' because the target readership is diffuse and may include those who have no first-hand experience of India" (Mukherjee 200). Her concern is that English-language novels claiming to represent an Indian experience have the potential to essentialize and exoticize aspects of Indian culture. Certainly, novels written in English are far more accessible to an English-speaking audience, and so English-speaking readers are more familiar with these texts than with the regional writing Mukherjee speaks of. Therefore, these texts have more power on a global scale, and have the potential to dwarf equally or even more deserving literary achievements written in any given Indian regional language. However, to engage in an active conversation with these texts is to see that neither should ever be read as an allegory for all of India - both fight the notion that such a neatly-fitting allegory could even exist. Instead, what these texts do is posit a new way of reading literature outside one's own natural contextual environment - the idea that it is possible to read any text with empathy, with care, with intent, no matter the intended audience, no matter the content of the story itself. In an essay responding to Mukherjee's critique of his writing, Chandra asserts that

“all art is born at this crossroads of ambition and integrity, between the fierce callings of fame and the hungers of the belly and the desires of one’s children and the necessities of art and truth... whatever language we write in, we are all equally capable of cowardice and heroism” (Chandra 11).

Both Rushdie and Chandra explore characters in moments of both cowardice and heroism, never allowing a character to flatten into a one-dimensional essentialism. They are meticulous about their storytelling, and their level of detail serves as an antidote to many of Mukherjee’s anxieties regarding essentialization. Their detail is especially important with regard to non-central characters, particularly women (who historically occupy peripheral or marginal spaces), morally ambiguous characters such as the crime boss Ganesh Gaitonde or the murderer of Sartaj’s police partner, the beloved Katekar, and seemingly lost relatives, such as Saleem’s mother’s first husband, Nadir Khan, and Sartaj’s aunt, Navneet Kaur (who becomes Nausheen Khan). Both authors slip into the minds of different characters, albeit in different ways. Saleem literally slips into the minds of other characters, because he can read people’s minds; Chandra writes the story from the perspective of each character. Rushdie gives us people’s perspectives filtered through Saleem, which is more typical of a novel. Chandra gives us people’s unfiltered perspectives, slipping effortlessly into the minds of others with little warning. It is difficult to even tell from whose perspective we are seeing the story play out, because it is often signaled only by the absence of Sartaj, who often fades into the background of his own stories as well. These seamless transitions feel less like a novel and more like a different storytelling format, perhaps film (and indeed, film and cinematic language profligates the novel’s pages) or even short story.

Another of Mukherjee's concerns lies not in the essentialization of Indianness, but in the dwarfing of literature written in regional Indian languages, because they are not typically as lucrative in a global market. This is difficult to argue with, as global structures of colonialism and imperialism privilege English as a language above all others, and consequently people all over the world have access to English language novels, but not other equally important texts written in languages with less systemic power. Indeed, even within English language novels, certain ones are privileged above others. Moretti laments the fact that "...there are thirty thousand nineteenth-century British novels out there, forty, fifty, sixty thousand—no one really knows, no one has read them, no one ever will" (Moretti 55). However, this does not mean that English language novels are not also useful, and cannot contain within them Mukherjee's desire to preserve that which is often overlooked. The idea of lost stories is integral to both novels. For Saleem, it is what could have happened, what almost did happen, and what did not happen, like his switch with Shiva at their birth. Saleem was "saved" from this life of poverty and simultaneously lost what could have been his relationship with his biological parents. Saleem pays homage to this, and all other stories of what might have been or almost was. For Sartaj, it is all the things that have happened but which he does not know. He does not know why his mother does not sleep at night, why she is always awake when he calls, whatever the time. But the reader does, because Chandra tells us. He gives us a flash into the root of her life, and then the curtains close once more, and we're left to wonder if we really saw it at all. But it is our responsibility, as good readers, to remember, to apply that knowledge to present-day interactions, to allow it to shape our perceptions of future moments in the text. To pay attention to the details, just as Sartaj does, because they will guide us.



The lives of characters other than the central figures of Sartaj and Saleem demonstrate this notion of lost stories, particularly the stories of women. In the hands of these authors, the meaningless becomes meaningful. For example, in *Sacred Games*, Sartaj is unable to make progress in his case, the investigation of crime boss Ganesh Gaitonde's death, until he meets Mary, the sister of a woman found dead alongside Gaitonde. It is only through Mary, a hair stylist, and her friend Jana, also a hair stylist, that he learns of the connection between Gaitonde and film star Zoya Mirza. The work of a hair stylist, especially in comparison to a police detective, is often socially represented as inferior, or even as meaningless. And yet, Chandra hinges the very arc of his novel on the investigative skills not of the trained policemen, but of these two seemingly insignificant women. They notice what Sartaj did not, Zoya's face in one of Gaitonde's photographs, prior to a series of plastic surgeries that transformed her from Jamila and into Zoya. In fact, Mary's work as a hair stylist is paralleled to Sartaj's in other ways as well. When Sartaj listens to someone speak in relation to an investigation, he always responds with the exact right amount of enthusiasm or lack thereof in order to keep the person talking. Chandra uses very similar language when discussing Mary at work, who feigns interest in a customer's conversation. A rich patron of hers, Comilla, gossips with Mary about an affair someone else is having, and then "Mary made a properly shocked face, and whispered with exactly the right touch of titillation, 'And then?'" (Chandra 366). Chandra, then, challenges readers to subvert their expectations of inferiority and instead treat Mary as a full character, capable of the same important work as Sartaj. *Sacred Games*, in this way, could have been told from Mary's perspective, only Chandra chose (in some ways, arbitrarily!) to present it from Sartaj's.

Indeed, Chandra presents femme characters in general with particular care. The chapter "Money", about a third of the way into the novel, is entirely devoted to the perspectives of

women. The chapter functions as a series of vignettes, giving us first a glimpse into Shalini's life, Katekar's widower, then into Anjali's investigation, the intelligence agent working with Sartaj, and finally into the life of Mary Mascerenas, whose perspective we see at other points in the novel as well. Sartaj plays an active role only in Mary's vignette, while remaining unmentioned in Anjali's and being referred to only once in Shalini's, when she refers to him as a "killer" (Chandra 354). By contrast, Saleem Sinai might not make a physical appearance in every chapter of the book, as much of it takes place before his birth or on the other side of the world, but his narrative voice is always there, interrupting, commenting, telling the reader what to think of a given situation. The chapter "Money" in *Sacred Games* tells us little we don't already factually know. In other words, the novel itself could function without it, and yet Chandra places it in a pivotal moment in the text, just after the death of Katekar. Chandra does not give Sartaj's response, but rather Shalini's, whose life has been changed not just in grief, but in structure. The Shalini Chandra presents is practical and savvy. She grieves for Katekar, but she spends most of her time working, looking after her children. We see less of her inner self, and more of the simple movements she goes about in her daily life. That Chandra interrupts the larger plot of the novel, the plot of chasing criminals and potential bombs and terrible violence, to discuss simply and without judgment the life of a widowed mother and her children, exemplifies the kind of storytelling Chandra tends to do overall. He does not privilege certain events over others, and constantly disrupts the narrative to force the reader to consider the world from a different perspective, which often has (seemingly) little to do with the larger plot. Chandra makes a concerted effort to keep these stories from fading into the background, from being dwarfed by Sartaj and Gaitonde's narratives. Indeed, much of his argument throughout the book revolves

around the importance of webs, the idea that to strike one string is to cause reverberations throughout many people's lives.

Chandra does not stop with Shalini's perspective. Katekar's murder happens very quickly, and the reader learns that his murderer also dies moments after. We learn nothing about the murderer, though, until nearly the very end of the book, when Chandra writes another inset. The majority of this chapter, titled "Two Deaths, in Cities Far From Home", follows the life of a poor boy named Aadil, who eventually becomes a highly educated man. No one in his village has gone to college before, but his love for reading, writing and study drives him to pursue this dream. His family has no money, and when he asks the richer people in town for money, they give him next to nothing. Still, he makes it to the city and attends college for a while, scraping together enough money in whatever ways he can. Eventually, though, it is too much for him, and he returns home utterly exhausted - "how could you read, and concentrate on what you were reading, when your stomach twitched and ached from hunger?" (Chandra 894). It is a terribly poignant moment, and the reader's sympathies lie completely with Aadil. Even Sartaj would have felt something for him, Sartaj who, a hundred pages prior, admits to feeling "a huge lump in his throat when he read newspaper stories about poor boys who had studied by the light of streetlamps and made it through the IAS exams" (Chandra 785). But Aadil is not simply a murderer, shaped by his difficult experiences in childhood and youth. He is also passionate, and maintains a strong sense of morality. When he returns home, and works again in the fields with his father, he is eventually recruited by the Naxals, a Maoist group in conflict with the Indian government. He delves into the cause, and soon rises through the ranks, as his education and intelligence are both extremely respected. He gives himself over to it, and finds himself murdering many people for the sake of the conflict, mostly police officers. He does not enjoy the

killings, he simply gets used to them. However, he does not get used to cruelty. One day, while visiting one of the Naxal camps, he comes upon a woman who has been tortured so terribly she looks “neither human nor animal” (Chandra 909). His reaction is visceral, and he abandons his position that same day. In this way, Chandra paints Aadil as a human being capable of many emotions, of grief, sorrow and empathy as well as anger and resentment. Just like all of Chandra’s characters, he contains multitudes, and it is only after he establishes this that, in the final pages of Aadil’s story, he kills Katekar. It is not a malicious act, but an instinctive one. Despite the grief that wrenched the reader in the moment of Katekar’s death, Chandra forces the reader to experience it again, this time feeling sympathy for both victim and murderer.

Chandra’s exploration of lost stories does not bend reality or explore temporarily in the way that Rushdie does in *Midnight’s Children*. For Saleem, because of his proclaimed omniscience, nothing in the real world is truly lost to him. What is lost, what he laments, is the possibility of how things might have been. This question hovers constantly in the corner of Saleem’s mind, and consequently, in the corner of the reader’s mind. If Saleem’s mother, Amina Sinai, had not been sick that one day, and her father the doctor had not determined that she had not yet lost her virginity to her first husband, Nadir Khan, would she have stayed with him? Would she have been happier, for not having to learn to love her new husband piece by piece? These questions are not fleshed out, they simply exist quietly in the background of every scene where Amina speaks on the phone with a man Saleem cannot identify - when he witnesses his mother’s naked body as he hides in the washing-chest. Saleem, ultimately, does not have the energy to flesh out these questions. Very near the end of the novel, just after the moment when he first meets Padma, his paramour who listens to him tell his entire story, he witnesses a man defecate outside his window. Rather than spinning some fantastic story of this man’s connection

to Saleem's history, Saleem simply lets the moment pass. He declares himself "disconnected, unplugged, with only epitaphs left to write" (Rushdie 527). Why is it that this Saleem has so little motivation, so little animation? At the end of *Sacred Games*, Sartaj begins a new day of work with renewed vigor: "He patted his cheeks, and ran a forefinger and thumb along his moustache. He was sure it was magnificent. He was ready. He went in and began another day" (Chandra 947). Though the realities he faces throughout the novel are arguably just as difficult as Saleem's, he ends the novel younger than he began; Saleem ends the novel much older. This results partly from Saleem's blatant narcissism. He is exhausted from spinning every single thing that occurs into the world into something that relates to him, something that he somehow affects or is affected by. Sartaj, by contrast, yields much of his airtime to the voices of others. He does make assumptions about people - his immediate negative feelings toward Kamala Pandey certainly cheapened her unfairly. But overall, his method of storytelling is entirely different from Saleem's. He observes the world around him, and attempts to glean as much meaning as he can from it. He does not apply knowledge he supposes himself to have onto situations he does not understand. He takes in meaning from the world, rather than attempting to ascribe false meanings simply for the sake of finding meaning.

In albeit different ways, both texts pay homage to "lost stories", to those stories which are overlooked and ignored, especially due to systemic oppression and abuse (women and poor characters in particular). Rushdie does this indirectly, by establishing the folly of Saleem's self-centered nature and his inability to look outside himself for much of the novel. Chandra does this more directly, by showing the ways in which characters can be listened to, the ways in which their voices can be uplifted, even when the protagonist, and by extension the readers themselves, see them at first as unimportant.

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