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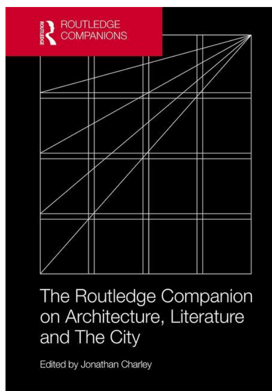

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Modernity as ambiguity in Vikram Chandra's Sacred Games

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Modernity as ambiguity in Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games*

Shari Daya

Introduction

The relationship between cities and modernity has been very well documented and explored in a wide range of disciplines across the humanities and social sciences. Not all cities are modern in every sense of the word, and modernity is certainly not found only in cities, yet such is the symbiosis between urbanism and the modern condition that at times it seems almost as if the city is simply the physical expression of modernity, or as if modernity is subsumed by urban space. As Gyan Prakash puts it:

> If modernity is a Faustian bargain to unleash human potential and subdue nature to culture, then modern cities are its most forceful and enduring expressions. The breathless intensity and the awesome power of modern life have made and remade cities across the world… The great dramas of recent centuries… were enacted on the stage of modern cities… Modern urban life… has produced new subjects, solidarities, and meanings. The cityscape… has served as the setting for dynamic encounters and experiences. A great deal of modern literature, art, and cinema would be unthinkable without the modern city. In an important sense, cities are the principal landscapes of modernity.[1]

Historical narratives of urban modernity, those derived overwhelmingly from cities in the global North, are typically accounts of ordering. The European or American metropolis that was for decades the paradigmatic modern city, is envisioned as a planned and systematic organism sitting securely within the boundary of the nation. Its politics and its social dynamics are sensible and legible. The 'principal landscapes of modernity' that Prakash invokes, therefore, have long been those of, say, Paris, Vienna, Los Angeles and Chicago. But there is a growing recognition that this normative ideal does not provide much in the way of apparatus (beyond a narrative of deficiency) for understanding the rapid, seemingly chaotic and uncontrollable urbanization of the global South – particularly Africa and Asia – in the twenty-first century. Now, at least according to some prominent Southern urban theorists, such as Ananya Roy, 'the urban future lies… in "Third World" cities like Rio de Janeiro, Mumbai, Hong Kong'.[2] Not only are cities in Africa, Asia and Latin America growing far

more rapidly than those in Europe and North America but these sites also, argue the proponents of 'Southern urbanism', present novel and distinctive problems that are not readily addressed by recourse to theoretical models developed for cities in the global North. Rather, these problems demand close attention to the particular processes at work 'on the ground'. As Oldfield points out,

> A cohort of writers, marked by strong exposure to African, South Asian and Latin American cities, press the view that extreme levels of urban poverty and under-servicing create imperatives for distinctive practical and political action that can only be achieved when there is greater understanding of the dynamics of fiscal impediments, urban need, management failure, complexity and struggle in actual cities, those conventionally thought of as in the global South.[3]

For others, the 'distinct southern positioning is less useful' (ibid.),[4] yet few would deny that important debates are being catalysed by the 'urban revolution' in evidence in previously colonised regions of the world. What urban modernity is, then, in the contemporary moment, is up for discussion, and that discussion is lively, taking place in books, such as Parnell and Oldfield's (2014) *Routledge Handbook on Cities of the Global South*, Miraftab and Kudva's (2014) *Cities of the Global South Reader*, and Edensor and Jayne's (2012) *Urban Theory Beyond the West*; in journals such as City and the International Journal of Urban and Regional Research; as well as through innumerable conferences, not least the recent Habitat III (the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development) in Quito, and its associated New Urban Agenda.

Many of the contemporary debates on urban modernity revolve around Abu-Lughod's fundamental postcolonial question:

> How are we to think about those discourses [of modernity] that borrowed from Europe, were supported by Europeans, or were shaped in response to colonial definitions of the 'backwardness' of the East?[5]

In other words, a central aim of much Southern urban theory is to challenge the still prevalent assumption that some of the most visible and generally shared characteristics of Southern cities – such as informality, inequality and insufficient service provision – are by definition non-modern. The universalist tendencies of both mainstream urban theory and mainstream modernity theory are heavily, and rightly, critiqued, and researchers offer both (i) ways in which Northern cities might learn from those in the South[6] and (ii) new frameworks for theorising 'alternative' urban modernities.[7] Fundamentally, this body of literature destabilises the paradigm of modernity as a particular vision of social and spatial order modelled on Northern cities, invoking instead ideas of the improvisational, the informal, the in-between, the bottom-up, the inter-connected and the open-ended. These are just some of the adjectives and metaphors that have shaped recent influential accounts of urban modernity in the South. Focusing on the ordinary and the everyday, and specifically the myriad ways in which the majority of urban citizens make do, recent research (by such theorists as Jenny Robinson, Abdoulmaliq Simone,[8] Edgar Pieterse,[9] Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift) has transformed the discipline of urban studies.

Much of this work explicitly challenges the liberalism and neoliberalism of dominant urban theory and planning, and of mainstream urban development practice. Without dismissing or diminishing the radical politics at the heart of this work, it seems evident that

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there remains threaded through much of it a yearning for order. For some theorists the aim is to unpack the patterns and the sense in what seems to be chaos. For others the imperative is to make clear that 'another, more democratic, socially just and sustainable form of urbanization is possible, even if such possibilities are currently being suppressed through dominant institutional arrangements, practices and ideologies'.[10] Of course, these groups are not discrete; there are many overlaps between, on the one hand, the projects that seek to reveal the underlying logics of complex urban activities and, on the other hand, those that set out to imagine a new and more inclusive urban order. Indeed, Southern urbanism, insofar as it might be viewed as an emerging canon of work, is shaped to a large extent by the close reading of existing urban patterns in order to examine how concepts of inclusion, participation, democracy and rights, not least the Lefebvrian notion of 'the right to the city', might be built into our cities.

The moral and political worth of this work notwithstanding, I suggest that even this new wave of urban theory, emerging from cities that have largely been ignored or else addressed mainly as the opposite of the modern, is still missing a large part of 'what is really going on'.[11] In its politicisation and rationality, Southern urbanism still wears profoundly developmentalist and economistic lenses, and as such seldom brings into focus those realms of urban life that yield less readily to the instruments of planning and policy-making. The South African poet and critic, Stephen Watson (citing the Mexican poet Octavio Paz), remarks on this kind of blind spot when he argues that our theory,

> with its rationalistic faith, fails… to register the same dimensions and to speak meaningfully about those levels of existence which often engage the imagination of both writer and reader most profoundly. In short, it is not in resonance with what many consider to be the full truth about the nature of our life; it leaves out too many dimensions. While it champions the human being, it ignores 'half his [sic] nature, that which is expressed in communion, myths, festivals, dreams, eroticism'.[12]

City stories as urban theory

In keeping with the ethos of this volume, I want to suggest that one way to open up urban theory to more diverse perspectives, and thereby deepen our understanding of urban modernity, would be to pay as close attention to imaginative accounts of the city as to urban policies, the practices and outcomes of planning and design, and ethnographic data. But this is more than a call to regard imaginative writing as data that may simply be 'mined' for evidence to support a pre-determined argument. As Joanne Sharp argues:

> By reducing literature to just another source of 'data' on social or cultural phenomena, geographers miss the significance of literature which is its ability to disrupt or challenge conventional meaning not simply through its coverage of 'geographical' topics but also through the particular conventions of literary writing.[13]

The argument here, then, is to introduce the idea that stories are analytical in their own right. Rather than the thing to be explained, a story does some explaining. As Ben Highmore argues, what novels and other imaginative texts explain about cities is especially significant, because storytellers have in fact provided some of the most effective accounts of the city in the urban archive. As a result, cities are always-already figural. 'To privilege the metaphorics of the city is not to leave the real city behind. It is… to insist that our real

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experiences of cities are "caught" in networks of dense metaphorical meanings'.[14] Urban experiences are therefore not separate from stories of the city; they are better understood as 'lived figuration' – thick, dense, meaningful life through which metaphor and imagination are constantly being threaded. As Sharpe and Wallock put it: 'our perceptions of the urban landscape are inseparable from the words we use to describe them and from the activities of reading, naming and metaphorizing that make all our formulations possible'.[15]

Imaginative accounts of Lagos, Santiago, Chennai, Libreville and many other cities certainly exist, in English and in other languages, but these stories are seldom regarded as constitutive of these cities in the way of, to take the classic example, Dickens' London novels. But for cities of the global South, where developmental imperatives are so powerfully felt by almost all stakeholders, the need to diversify the available narratives and thus to mitigate what novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie terms 'the dangers of a single story' is significant. Without the pressure to solve the 'problems' faced by city policymakers, planners and residents, storytellers are among the few urban rapporteurs with an open brief. The very fact that fiction 'does not bear the responsibility of "truthful" representation'[16] enables experimentation and the exploration of alternatives, perhaps even discursive transformation. As Nussbaum argues, literary forms, by working through emotion and the moral imagination, 'call forth certain specific sorts of practical activity in the reader that can be evoked in no other way'.[17]

Not only are cities as fundamentally imagined as they are experienced, but stories themselves are inherently spatial, and imaginative accounts of cities therefore can and should be read as providing insight as much into the built and managed environment as into characters and events. Space is somewhat neglected in literary studies, typically appearing only through the lens of 'setting'. While there are important exceptions to the rule, of which some are noted below, this widespread reduction of space and place to a container for action relegates the built environment, the wilderness, the street and the domestic interior to the backdrop against which events (assumed to be the real interest of the text) can unfold.

In contrast, bringing urban space into the frame as a constitutive element of the other narrative languages of plot, character and attitude in city stories, rather than as mere background, is to re-think how we read.[18] As Charley has argued with regard to crime fiction: 'architecture and urban development not only provide the backdrop and setting through which the crime narrative unfolds, but… they become… the "objects of crime", "whose control and definition are at stake"'.[19] To appreciate these ways in which stories shape the city is therefore to develop a deliberate and concentrated focus on the narrative language of spatiality, which is precisely what he argues for and a task that Spurr[20] similarly undertakes in his reading of spaces of dwelling, of the uncanny and of mass consumption in modernist literature.

The ways in which stories about the burgeoning cities of the global South may contribute to such debates remain largely unexplored. It is to build on these emerging understandings of the texts as spatial (and space as textual) that I embark in the following section on a close reading of Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games*, a 2006 novel that is in many ways a conventional crime thriller, with a conflicted, hard-boiled detective, Sartaj Singh, as one of its protagonists. The pulse of this massive, 900-page text, however, is Mumbai (or Bombay, as most of its residents still call it). The city generates both the action and the characters, rather than being a container for the development of either. Through an explicitly spatial reading, I argue that this text manifests the city as fundamentally illegible, thereby challenging urban theory to interrogate its own enchantment with identifying and creating order. Modernity is presented in *Sacred Games* not as ordering, but as registering and living with ambiguity. This, it suggests, is the basic condition of urban modernity, one with which we must come to terms if we are to be part of the urban future.

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The illegibility of urban space

> A party of Municipal men were working on a hole in the road. They weren't actually working, they were standing around the hole looking at it, and apparently waiting for something to happen. Meanwhile, a vast funnel of traffic pressed up against the bottleneck. Sartaj was somewhere towards the front, on his motorcycle. He was hemmed in by a BEST bus and two autos, and there was nowhere for anyone to go, so they all waited companionably. The bus was crammed full of office-goers, and the autos were taking college students to their classes. Young boys were working the stalled traffic, selling magazines and water and gaudy Chinese statues of a laughing man with his hands above his head. A pair of maimed beggars went from car to car, tapping their stumps on the windscreens. There were two radios playing somewhere close, mixing channels. Sartaj drank it all in, incredulous that he had missed all this while he had been away, and that he was glad to be back. Even this particular stench of exhaust and burning and heated tar, even this was delectable. I must be mad, he thought. And he remembered Katekar, who had been crazy in the same way, who had complained endlessly but had confessed to yearning for the city when he went to his in-laws' village. 'Once the air of this place touches you,' Katekar had said, 'you are useless for anywhere else.' And he had twirled his finger at his forehead, and laughed, his shoulders shaking.[21]

In this penultimate scene of the novel, *Sacred Games* provides a snapshot of modern Mumbai. The city is hectic and unruly, frustrating and compelling in equal measure. It is, as Ranjani Mazumdar suggests, 'the quintessentially modern city of India, the country's commercial display window',[22] in which all kinds of urban activities unfold simultaneously and in close proximity to each other. Many written accounts of the city begin by laying out facts and statistics that are nearly impossible for the human mind to grasp in any meaningful way. They often start with the size of the population: 18.5 million people in the last (2011) census, which equates to around one third of the entire population of South Africa. They often mention the scale of the city's socio-economic inequality: about 10% of Mumbaikars earn less than Rs 20 per day, which is the price of a cheap meal for one purchased from a street vendor.

Related to the economic inequality is a highly skewed distribution of living space. Bombay has some of the most expensive property in the world, and at the same time is home to one of the world's biggest slums, Dharavi, made famous by Danny Boyle's 2009 film *Slumdog Millionaire*. More than 50% of the city's population, over 9 million people, live in slums, but slums take up only about 6% of the city's land.[23] That land is squeezed by the city's physical geography: the city is on a narrow peninsula, but sprawls over 169 square miles and is steadily heading north and west, deeper into its home state of Maharashtra. So although the sea prevents development on two sides and rivers do the same on a third, with mangrove swamps in between, Bombay still manages to be one of the fastest-growing cities in the world.

Culturally, economically, demographically, sensually, Bombay is an excessive city. It embodies a truth about cities, and about urbanism, more generally, that has been well documented in recent urban theory. Geographers and other urban scholars tell us that cities are experienced as unwieldy, unruly.[24] They are dense, they are intense, they are complex, they are ordinary.[25] They are places of enchantment[26] and places of abjection. They are globalised. They are networks.[27] They are spaces of flows.[28] They are assemblages.[29] These proliferating adjectives and metaphors indicate the capacity of cities always to exceed our attempts to capture them. Where urban theory, including Southern urbanism, longs for order, *Sacred Games* suggests that both the city and its urban subjects are entities that fundamentally exceed a

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human ability to read them. The novel consistently resists any easy or rational mode of making sense either of spaces or people. To take an example from early on in the story, Detective Sartaj Singh is lying on his sofa looking out of the window at the city:

> He remembered playing cricket on a Dadar street, the fast pok of the tennis ball and the faces of friends, and the feeling that he could hold the whole city in his heart, from Colaba to Bandra. Now it was too vast, escaped from him, each family adding to the next until there was that cool and endless glow, impossible to know, or escape. Had it really existed, that small empty street, clean for the children's cricket games and dabba-ispies and tikkar-billa, or had he stolen it from some grainy black-and-white footage?

This inability to render legible either in memory or in present experience the huge, complex city of Bombay, is a consistent theme all the way through *Sacred Games*. The text seems to suggest, in fact, that the impossibility of reading the city and its subjects is fundamental to the modern urban condition. In another early scene in the novel, we are presented with the metaphor of a suburb as a kind of turbine of capitalism, endlessly churning as it generates the material of modernity itself, but simultaneously evading capture by the human imagination. This suburb, Navnagar, to which Sartaj and his partner, Katekar, have travelled to investigate a murder, is described thus:

> the endless… roofs of Navnagar made a vast serried crescent, horizon to horizon, under the falling sun. The tableau impressed Sartaj as always with its gory reddish gigantism and melodrama, with the pressing energy of its very being, it was incomprehensible that such a thing should exist, this Navnagar. And yet here it was, astride Sartaj and towering, crimson-mouthed and real. He turned away… Much of what Katekar and everyone else ate came from or through Navnagar, and other nagars like it. Navnagar made clothes and plastic and paper and shoes, it was the engine that pumped the city into life.[30]

Navnagar in this passage is 'incomprehensible'; its very existence is a mystery. It is impressive, but it is 'gory', threatening to devour or to engulf the human individual. Like the Hindu goddess Kali[31], typically depicted standing or dancing on the prone figure of Shiva, her consort, with her bright red tongue protruding, the suburb is 'towering, crimson-mouthed and real'. Navnagar is also symbolic of all the nagars – the suburbs – that are ungraspable, and yet are the very sites from which the modern city is forged.

On the urban scale, then, *Sacred Games* analyses the city as a space that cannot be apprehended either rationally or imaginatively. But surely, as we penetrate to the micro-scale, to the human scale, things should begin to make sense? Surely it is on the street, in the ordering of houses and businesses, and the rhythms of everyday life, that urban space becomes legible? The novel suggests not. In fact, it is on this scale that the city becomes most mysterious.

One particular small space in the text is emblematic of this illegibility, even unknowability, and it is a central site in the life of the novel's second protagonist, the gangster Ganesh Gaitonde, whose career trajectory in fact provides the novel's narrative arc. The space is a 'bunker', described as:

> a precise cube, white with green windows, on a large plot of land in Kailashpada, which was on the still-developing northern edge of Zone 13 [and incidentally, two roads away from the police station where Sartaj works every day]. Here, among the

> heavy machinery still grasping at swamp, edging Bombay out farther and wider, Sartaj had come to arrest the great Ganesh Gaitonde, gangster, boss of the G-Company and wily and eternal survivor.

Sartaj, tipped off as to Gaitonde's location, arrives at the bunker to end the latter's criminal career once and for all. The two have a long, strange conversation over the intercom, at the end of which Gaitonde fatally shoots himself. The remainder of the novel is a detailed, mostly retrospective exploration of the mystery of Gaitonde's character and career, with the bunker serving as a kind of pivot-point to the story. In this early scene, the defining characteristic of the bunker – its impenetrability – is described with complete clarity. The bunker is a completely closed, completely unreadable space. It is all surface and no depth. The police officers are flummoxed by it. What looks like a ventilator just has concrete behind it. There are no windows. Katekar asks Sartaj:

> 'What is this place, sir?'
>
> 'I don't know,' Sartaj said. It was somehow deeply satisfying that even Katekar, Mumbai native and practitioner of a very superior Bhuleshwar-bred cynicism, was startled by an impregnable white cube suddenly grown in Kailashpada, with a black, swivel-mounted Sony video camera above the door. 'I don't know.'

The fact that Bombay's spaces cannot fully be apprehended – not by Sartaj and nor by Gaitonde (and not even by Katekar, Bombay-born and bred) – does not disrupt the fact that the city is unquestionably home. Each of these characters is defined by the place, and particularly by its excesses (of people, action, emotion). The extent to which the city is a part of his being becomes clear for Gaitonde after he has spent some time away from Bombay, in a kind of exile with a few of his men, on a yacht anchored off the Thai coast. He reflects:

> After a year away from Mumbai I still got attacks of yearning, I craved the spittle-strewn streets of that great whore of a city, while waking up I felt that pungent prickling of auto-exhaust and burning rubbish at the back of my nostrils, I heard that swelling rumble of traffic heard from a high hotel rooftop, that far sound that made you feel like a king. When you were far away from the jammed jumble of cars, and the thickets of slums, and the long loops of rail, and the swarms of people, and the radio music in the bazaars, you could ache for the city. There were some afternoons when it felt like I was dying a little. Under the foreign sky I could feel my soul crumbling away, piece by piece.[32]

Through its characters who thus cannot understand yet love the city, *Sacred Games* forces us to confront the difference between knowing and belonging. This ambiguity adds an important dimension to understanding urban inclusion. Even if the city at every scale resists our reading of it, *Sacred Games* suggests, the intangible routes of feeling and emotion will always provide a way in.

The strangeness of urban subjects

The illegibility of the city, as well as the ambiguities of human existence within it, extend inwards from the scale of the urban to that of corporeal space. In other words, the theme of feeling unable to make sense of things, moves from urban space to urban subjects along a continuum. Narrator and protagonists are unable to grasp the city or their love for it and

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similarly, characters are always distanced from each other in some way, unable genuinely to recognise the other person (or even themselves).

Almost every major relationship in *Sacred Games* is characterised by the impossibility of fully knowing those closest to us. This is perhaps most obviously illustrated when Gaitonde has plastic surgery that alters his face so completely that even the men closest to him do not recognise him. They literally can no longer read who he is simply by looking at his face. When the bandages first come off, he is delighted: 'I was a different man… I looked nothing like the Ganesh Gaitonde that had been. I was the Ganesh Gaitonde that I wanted to be. I was myself'.[33] Later, 'I walked past boys who had worked for me for years, and none of them recognized me'. And ultimately, Gaitonde realises that he doesn't know himself either.

> What had I become? I had become someone else, something else. As I tried to grasp how exactly I had changed, a burrowing little worm of doubt moved through my belly, and up around my heart.[34]

The same theme of corporeal illegibility is expressed through the character of Sartaj, the detective. Despite being incredibly skilled in judging people and reading non-verbal cues, Sartaj not only cannot figure out what Gaitonde is about, as we have seen, but nor can he read himself, or his loved ones. Travelling with his mother on a train towards the end of the novel, Sartaj talks to her about her life, and suddenly realises that she has been more than a wife and mother all along:

> It was strange… to imagine that Ma's salwar-kameez and red paranda had been a kind of uniform, that maybe her assiduous care of his and Papa's health and cleanliness and nutrition had not been natural, but somehow cultivated and consciously sacrificed. So this familiar figure resting next to him had led her own private life in all the homes they had shared, she had her own history of every birthday, every journey. Again, Sartaj had that unsettling feeling that this woman, his own mother, Prabjhot Kaur, was also someone he did not know. It wrenched his heart, just slightly, but out of that hurt came a new affection for this stranger he had lived with all these years.[35]

Immediately following this scene is one in which Sartaj and Mary, his girlfriend, apply rejuvenating mud masks to each other's faces. At first he can read her – he takes in 'the shallow rimples in her lips, the curve of her eyelashes'. But quickly her body becomes illegible.

> There was a moment of astonishment when he saw her whole, because she was Mary but not quite Mary… the features were those he knew well but the face was still and opaque and unknown. 'You don't look like yourself,' he said… It was disquieting somehow, this abstraction of Mary into something else, something impersonal, so he glanced away, over her shoulder.[36]

What he sees over Mary's shoulder is himself, in the mirror nailed to his cupboard door: 'There was a stranger there, a man equally unknown,' and suddenly Sartaj, like Gaitonde earlier, realises the extent to which he does not know himself either.

As with urban space, so with corporeal space – *Sacred Games* denies its characters or us as readers full access to the condition of urban modernity as it is navigated and experienced in everyday life. There are many more examples in the novel of the persistent mystery of the city of Bombay, and of characters who remain strange to themselves and to others

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despite deep intimacy. The text repeatedly presents us with close-up views of the city and its subjects, yet simultaneously refuses us full admittance. In one sense, then, *Sacred Games* resonates with and extends the recognition that has been growing in urban theory, and is especially emphasised in Southern urbanism, of the fundamental plurality of city life, and the dangers of presupposing any one particular way of knowing the city. But I would argue that the text also goes further: by theorising the city, and in fact the modern urban condition, as fundamentally illegible and even unknowable, so the novel challenges the normative projects of imagining and planning the city. *Sacred Games* suggests that not only is there not one correct way to know the city, in fact there is no way to genuinely know the city, and that impossibility creates an ambiguity that sits at the heart of urban life. In this sense the story challenges the very premises for doing urban research, questioning both our assumptions that urban space is legible and our normative visions of what the city should be.

Conclusion: urban modernity as moral ambiguity

In *Sacred Games*, much of what is going on is illegible not only because it is physically hidden, but also because it is illicit. Both corruption and violence in this novel, as in innumerable fiction and non-fiction stories about Bombay, are both pervasive and utterly normal. Thayil's intoxicating novel *Narcopolis*, Piyush Jha's novellas in *Mumbaistan*, Zaidi's three non-fiction accounts of the notorious D-company gang,[37] Mehta's autobiographical *Maximum City* and even Aravind Adiga's gentler *Last Man in Tower*, are just a few of the contemporary texts telling Mumbai's stories of everyday brutality and illegality. In this category must also be included films such as the 2007 *Shootout* at Lokhandwala and the *Once Upon A Time In Mumbai*, released in 2010, both fictionalised accounts of gang-related events in the city. *Sacred Games*, like many of these textual and visual accounts of this excessive and enchanting city, often aligns us as readers not just with the normality but the necessity of corruption (such as the many under-the-table payments to the police that fund all kinds of official activities to which state funds are hopelessly inadequate). Chandra's novel then forces us to reserve judgement, alerting us to the fact there is always more going on that we could ever hope to read, much of which falls within the realms of the emotional, the erotic and the imaginary.

It is the novel's very form as an imaginative text that enables it to generate this ambiguity more powerfully than a more conventional piece of theoretical writing. The literary voice and the moral imaginary through which the novel works, positions us as readers in particular ways relative to the characters, sometimes antagonistic, sometimes complicit. If, as in *Sacred Games*, the villain is utterly human and someone with whom we often identify, and the 'hero' is both deeply flawed and ineffectual while still being admirable and sympathetic, then the right outcome is far from given.

Whatever else theoretical writing does – and there is plenty that it does well – it seldom engages human emotion in ways that genuinely enchant us, evoke a sense of empathy for the other, and give meaning to human life. Imaginative writing, however, creates space for the intangible, and has therefore a special capacity to open up to scrutiny the uncertainties of human experience in the city. From the modernist James Joyce and Aldous Huxley to the contemporary Zadie Smith and Thrity Umrigar, urban writers often challenge not only what we think the city is about, but also our sense of the moral. Chandra's novel is exemplary in this regard. While in so-called real life we can make clear-headed judgements about police corruption and gangster violence, the narrative voice of *Sacred Games* exploits our sympathy with certain characters such that we find ourselves (emotionally) identifying with people and events that we don't necessarily (rationally) agree with.

Like the other forms of illegibility foregrounded by the text, *Sacred Games* suggests that this moral ambiguity is part of the fundamental ambiguity of urban life – right and wrong are cryptic categories in the modern city. Building a narrative with and through these moral tensions is a strength of imaginative writing, but it requires a degree of fluidity that theory does not particularly like. For this very reason, including imaginative texts in our urban archives is important. They alert us to the need not just for multiple stories, but also for different modes of narrating that are able to hold more difference within them. As Roland Barthes argues 'the most important thing is not so much to multiply investigations or functional studies of the city as to multiply the readings of the city, of which, unfortunately, till now, only the writers have given us some examples'.[38]

Notes

1 Gyan Prakash, *Mumbai Fables* (Noida, UP: Harper Collins India, 2010), 2.
2 Ananya Roy, "Urban Informality: Toward an Epistemology of Planning". *Journal of the American Planning Association* 71, 2 (2005): 147.
3 Sophie Oldfield, Engaging Critical Urbanism "from the South"? Lecture text for: "Debating Cities of the South: Theories and Materialities", Capital Cities Public Conversation, Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria. 10 April 2014, (2013): 4.
4 Ibid.
5 Lila Abu-Lughod, "Introduction: Feminist Longings and Postcolonial Conditions", in *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle-East*, ed. L. Abu-Lughod (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 3.
6 See, for example, Roy, as well as John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America is Evolving toward Africa* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge), 2012, and Juan Obarrio "Theory from the South: Theorizing the Contemporary" (https://culanth.org/field sights/268-theory-from-the-south), 24 February 2012.
7 Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, "On Alternative Modernities", in *Alternative Modernities*, ed. D.P. Gaonkar (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001).
8 Abdoumaliq Simone, For the City Yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004).
9 Edgar Pieterse, *City Futures: Confronting the Crisis of Urban Development* (London and New York: Zed Books. Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 2008).
10 Neil Brenner, "What Is Critical Urban Theory?" *City* 13, 2–3 (2009): 198.
11 Ntone Edjabe and Edgar Pieterse, "Preface", in *African Cities Reader*, ed. Chimurenga and African Centre for Cities (Vlaeberg: Chimurenga and African Centre for Cities, 2010): 5.
12 Stephen Watson, *Selected Essays 1980–1990* (Cape Town: Carrefour, 1990), 26.
13 Joanne Sharp, "Towards a Critical Analysis of Fictive Geographies". *Area* 32, 3 (2000): 329.
14 Ben Highmore, *Cityscapes: Cultural Readings in the Material and Symbolic City* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan), 2005. 5.
15 William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock, "Introduction", in *Visions of the Modern City: Essays in History, Art, and Literature*, eds. W. Sharpe and L. Wallock (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 1.
16 Joanne Sharp, 329.
17 Martha Nussbanum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 290; see also John Horton and Andrea Baumeister, "Literature, philosophy and political theory" in *Literature and the Political Imagination*, eds. J. Horton and Andrea Baumeister (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).
18 See Wesley A. Kort, *Place and Space in Modern Fiction* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004).
19 Jonathan Charley, "Drugs, Crime and other Worlds", in *Writing the Modern City: Literature, Architecture, Modernity*, eds. S. Edwards and J. Charley (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2012). 101.
20 David Spurr, *Architecture and Modern Literature* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2012).

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21 Vikram Chandra, *Sacred Games* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006).
22 Ranjani Mazumdar, "Spectacle and Death in the City of Bombay Cinema", in *The Spaces of the Modern City: Imaginaries, Politics, and Everyday Life*, eds. G. Prakash and K.M. Kruse (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), 401.
23 Nauzer Baruchal, "1.2 Million in City Earn Less than Rs 20/day" *Times of India*. 1 September 2009.
24 Gerry Mooney, Steve Pile, and Chris Brook, eds. *Unruly Cities? Order/Disorder* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).
25 Jennifer Robinson, *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006).
26 Sophie Watson, *City Publics: The (Dis)Enchantments of Urban Encounters* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006) and Alison Young "Cities in the City: Street Art, Enchantment, and the Urban Commons". *Law and Literature* 26, 2 (2014).
27 Zachary Neal, *The Connected City: How Networks Are Shaping the Modern Metropolis* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).
28 Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
29 Colin McFarlane, "Assemblage and Critical Urbanism", *City* 15, 2 (2011): 204–224.
30 Chandra, 201.
31 The parallels between Navnagar as described in this passage, and the Hindu deity, Kali, are significant. Both are associated with violence and destruction, and simultaneously with life. Navnagar is a site of murder while also pumping the city into life; Kali is a loving mother-figure, decorated with human skulls, who liberates her children from bodily attachments thus giving life to the soul.
32 Chandra, 537–538.
33 Chandra, 684.
34 Chandra, 691.
35 Chandra, 897.
36 Chandra, 898.
37 Zaidi, S. H., *Black Friday: The True Story of the Bombay Bomb Blasts* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2002); Zaidi, S. H., *Dongri to Dubai: Six Decades of the Mumbai Mafia* (New Delhi: Roli, 2012); and Zaidi, S. H., with Borges, J., *Mafia Queens of Mumbai: Stories of Women from the Ganglands* (Chennai: Tranquebar, 2012).
38 Roland Barthes, "Semiology and Urbanism", in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. N. Leach (London: Routledge, 1977), 171.

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