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LISTENING TO VIKRAM CHANDRA:
"ALL STORIES HAVE IN THEM THE SEED
OF ALL OTHER STORIES"¹



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Working on Vikram Chandra's fictional writing is much more than an academic experience. For me, he is not only an author to read and admire. He has become a daily presence, a real person that I can reach, somebody to talk to. Thus, the purpose of these pages is to go on engaging in a dialogue with him, listening to his own voice. Vikram Chandra spends his time shuttling between Bombay, where he writes, and Washington, DC, where he teaches creative writing at George Washington University. Born in New Delhi in 1961, he was educated both in India and America. He completed most of his secondary education at Mayo College, a boarding school in Ajmer, Rajasthan, a desert state in the north-west of India, and traditional home of the Rajput warrior clans. After that, he stayed some time at St. Xavier's College in Bombay, and finally went to the United States. Vikram graduated from Pomona College (California) in 1984, concentrating on creative writing. Later, he attended the Film School at Columbia University in New York. There, in the Columbia library, by chance, he found the autobiography of Colonel James "Sikander" Skinner, a legendary nineteenth-century soldier, half-Indian and half-British. In a way, this became the inspiration for Vikram's first book, the novel *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*. Reading the English translation of Sikander's autobiography, originally written in Urdu, Vikram began to consider "the large interpolations and excisions made by the translator.² I thought, then, about language, about speaking in alien tongues, and being made to speak in someone else's voice, and about history and memory and the preservation of the past" (personal communication, 17th September 1999).

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At that moment, Vikram left school to start exploring and working on the novel, which was written over six years, at the writing programs at Johns Hopkins University and the University of Houston. The author obtained an MA at Johns Hopkins, where he worked with John Barth, and an MFA at the University of Houston, with Donald Barthelme. While writing *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, Vikram taught literature and writing, and also worked independently as a computer programmer and software and hardware consultant. His clients included oil companies, non-profit organizations, and the zoo of Houston. 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. The book was received with great critical acclaim, and in 1996 it won the David Higham Prize for Fiction and the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Best First Published Book. Essentially, oral storytelling is the heart of *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*. In this text we find a nineteenth-century epic story intermingled with a contemporary road trip across the United States, from California to Texas. One of the main narrators is Abhay, restless and confused, alienated both in USA, where he studies anthropology, and India, where his parents live, where his memories are. The other principal storyteller, Sanjay, is a nineteenth-century Indo-Anglian poet now reincarnated as a monkey. He will only stay alive if he can entertain an audience with his storytelling, that constantly entwines with that of Abhay. Both storytellers share the hybrid condition of their identities. Chandra's multifaceted book develops as a knot of stories, a literary zapping, a huge tapestry, a spiralling quest. Diverse narrative frames construct the whole texture, by means of different first-person discourses that create a kaleidoscopic interacting of past and present, from the battlefields of the British Raj to the freeways of contemporary United States.

Chandra's second delivery, *Love and Longing in Bombay*, a collection of short stories, appeared in 1997, edited by the same publishing houses. Two of the stories had been formerly published in the *Paris Review* and *The New Yorker*. Indeed, in 1995 the story "Dharma" was awarded the Discovery Prize by the *Paris Review*. *Love and Longing in Bombay* obtained the Commonwealth Prize for the Best Book for the Eurasian Region in 1998. 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, 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. As the title indicates, all the stories speak about love, longing and Bombay. In fact, the city itself becomes one of the main characters throughout the whole

collection. Bombay is depicted as the modern city it is, with its traditions, contradictions, differences, great passions and mysteries.

At the moment, Vikram Chandra is working on his third book, a new novel, a detective story set in Bombay. As a sort of foretaste, in a special issue of *The New Yorker* (June 23 and 30, 1997) he has already published "Eternal Don", which will be the first chapter of this new work. Furthermore, he does not forget one of his beloved projects: writing a film script. Indeed, cinema is a very familiar world to Vikram, who comes from a filmmaking family of producers, directors and script-writers. The deep influence of his mother's passion for writing can be clearly seen in his work. About her, Kamna Chandra, a successful screenplay writer for Indian cinema, Vikram states that he cannot remember a time when she was not creating.

Apart from writing, teaching and lecturing, Vikram Chandra carries out many other activities that 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, the most important being stand or base, meeting place, or resort. Local writers, published or not, gather at this literary space on the first Tuesday of each month, at U Street's Chi-Cha Lounge. However, the origins of *Adda*, chiefly designed to foster interaction and conversation between artist and audience, 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.

Step by step, Vikram is being recognized as one of the leading voices of Indian literatures in English. Favourable reviews and international awards praise his creation, which is beginning to be included within undergraduate and postgraduate literature programs at different universities around the world.

Without a doubt, the Indian oral tradition of storytelling is the matrix of Vikram Chandra's narrative project, both living and fictional. Stylistically charming, Vikram is a virtuoso creator of vivid descriptions that enliven smells, tastes, thoughts, feelings, that show 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 tradition and modernity. Hopefully, certain traditions survive in our paradoxical (post)modern times, and Vikram's fiction helps to restore memory to its true abode.

IN CONVERSATION WITH VIKRAM CHANDRA³

DS. Let's start with a big question. What role do you think literature plays nowadays, in a world in constant transition and change at the beginning of the twenty-first century?

CHANDRA. Well, much has been made in recent times of the "death of the novel." And yet, we are also told that more novels, more fictions are being published now than ever before in the history of the human race. So literature is still very much alive, as a living presence in the lives of ordinary people. What has happened, certainly, is that the novel has been moved aside from a kind of cultural centrality, from its occupation of a space that has been now taken over by film and television and, lately, perhaps the Internet. If one reads accounts, for instance, of novel-reading in nineteenth century England, one sees that the novel, which is itself a kind of technology, had an immense glamour, an all-encompassing power. Lending libraries were chic places, the rich and powerful competed to read the latest novels first, and the guardians of public morality and order preached angry sermons against the hugely destructive effects of novel-reading. So, other technologies are now understood to have that kind of transforming power. But it's clear that the birth of a new technology doesn't necessarily kill other technologies. Television should have killed radio, but it didn't. Centres and peripheries shift and dissolve, but much remains alive that is supposed to be already dead. And reading is still very much alive, and so is writing.

DS. Reading your books, it seems clear that you consider stories as living entities, and writing as a communicative and dynamic process. Though definitions are always difficult, how would you tell us what literature is and means for you?

CHANDRA. "Literature" is a big word, isn't it? And one that raises a lot of questions and hackles. Let's talk about stories and story-telling instead. That I can be very clear about: stories are life. We are narrative beings, compelled to tell stories, and listen to them, and live through them and inside them. We are human because of stories, and we are trapped in stories. I cannot imagine a life without listening to a story, or a day of not telling one. To tell a story to someone is to change their insides, and it also means that

you need them. To be a storyteller is to be most powerful, and also powerless.

DS. How would you say that the big publishing houses influence a young writer? Have you felt any limit or restriction of any kind?

CHANDRA. I suppose one could argue in rather generalized terms that the big corporate houses set an agenda, etcetera, etcetera. Certain academics often claim to be able to identify the workings of this invisible, all-consuming agenda in specific works of fiction. I'm somewhat resistant to this kind of claim, because it's often made in a very very vague, unsupported fashion, and it removes all volition and intention from the artist. The art becomes just the working-out of these mysterious movements of language and commerce. The interaction between individual writers and this notion of what publishing houses want is of course a much more complicated one. I suppose if you were worrying about it as you wrote, it might be very destructive to the narrative you are trying to construct. When I was writing my first book, I had no idea of whether it would ever be published, or who would publish it, or when. I had an urgent need to write out this story, and I did. That somebody wanted to publish it was very pleasing, but it wasn't something that I knew for certain, or depended upon. In fact, I wrote this novel within an American creative writing program, as a thesis for my Master's degree. At my thesis defense, one of the professors on the committee, an American fiction writer herself, laughed and said, "Well, you've written a big book. Good luck with ever getting it published." The possibility that it would get published looked pretty bleak, then. In general, I think young writers have to do what young artists have always done: know what you are doing, and why, and defend your voice and preserve it. It is a good thing to be published and read, but you have to decide exactly what you are willing to do for this, how much of yourself and your work you are willing to risk.

DS. Are you aware of the market when you write? Have you a particular audience in mind?

CHANDRA. I do have a very particular audience in my mind when I write. I write for a few people I love: my sisters, my mother, and a couple of friends. These people read my manuscript as I work on it, page by page. So they are the audience I am telling the story to, these well-known and well-

loved faces. Just as in my previous two books, in which the storytellers have had an audience, a group of people they tell the stories to. As for the market, I have no idea how to imagine a market. How do you imagine this huge, anonymous, faceless audience? How do you write to them? I really have no idea.

DS. Neither do I, indeed. But, how do you feel being a successful author? What are the rewards and difficulties of being read across different countries and cultures? Do you feel a privileged person?

CHANDRA. Well, being a successful author, whatever the degree of one's success, is a lot better than being a struggling or unsuccessful author. For one thing, you're not worried about where the next rent cheque is going to come from. Which, in my very firm opinion, makes for better work, better art. It is of course very strange to imagine that something that was once inside your head is now an object being read and being imagined into by people on the other side of the globe. It's certainly very pleasurable and flattering, but I don't think—at least for me—that this knowledge enters into a very intimate dialogue with the actual making of the work. As I said, I imagine a very small audience, of people I know well. That other people outside this small circle want to read your work is amazing and wonderful, but I can't imagine them. I can't see them. In *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, the narrator-monkey tells a story to his adopted family, inside a small room. The pages he types are then passed outside to a much larger audience on the maidan. This larger audience, that stretches away to the horizon, is an unknowable beast. What they do with the stories you tell is also unknowable, unpredictable, and very often, completely surprising. And yes, I do feel very privileged. I make a living doing something I love. That's something quite rare in the world.

DS. Do you consider the study of Indian literatures by Western readers as positive or do you have reservations regarding academic readings and labels such as "post-colonial literatures"? In any case, you know that I would rather speak about narrative transculturation.

CHANDRA. Oh, I think everyone should study Indian literatures. Of course there will be readings I love and some readings I hate. But that's the way of all readings. To feel perpetually threatened and to be perpetually

defensive is silly. I think we're complicated enough and strong enough and old enough to withstand a lot of readings. That said, it seems to me that the "post-colonial" reading is sometimes used in a reductive way. Modern Indian literatures come after thousands of years of other histories, as well. Colonialism was one event among many, a late one that itself was post-Mughal, post-Vedic, post-everything-else. All those complexities hum through the literatures, and the culture.

DS. Where do you get your inspiration from? Or what happens to personal experience in your hands to make it grow into a story?

CHANDRA. That's a hard question to respond to in a really coherent fashion. I usually start with an image, a fragment of sound and smell. If I pay enough attention to this persistent image, it starts to reveal itself to me, starts to become more complicated and interesting. A story then unreels out of it. I usually have a strong sense of the general direction of where the narrative is going, but not a specific outline of the plot. That reveals itself as I write. I sometimes recognize, as I write, little bits of information or ideas or incidents or people that I have observed in the world. But they are usually quite transformed, mixed up together and changed quite considerably. There's no one-to-one correspondence between fiction and reality.

DS. You really appreciate audience's responses and feedback, mainly because you define yourself as a storyteller, not as a writer in the traditional sense. Indeed, the narrating act and the transmission-reception process is staged in your works. I believe that this identification subsumes a relevant ontological difference in your view of what literature is, what an author is, and how the interaction between author and audience is meant to be. Comment?

CHANDRA. Perhaps, under the glossy celebrity skin of every author is a dusty old storyteller. That primal desire to tell somebody "Once upon a time" is where all authorship comes from. In our time especially, the relationship between "autor" and "audience" is complicated by modern methods of mass production, by the whole structure of industry and packaging and consumption. One might feel the impulse to retreat from this whole spectacle, into the interiorly-directed world of the author, to one's country villa where one composes perfect lyric gems. And yet, even the most reclusive of authors has an ideal listener inside his or her head, this loved one

you caress with your poem. Maybe you find this reader in the world, maybe not. But you speak to this reader anyway. The danger of course is that the pressure to speak to that huge mass audience—which may be internally created or externally—this pressure may cause you to lose sight of that ideal reader. I'm interested in the reactions of individual readers to my work, because in those interactions there is the movement of a story, an erotic exchange. But I'm not so interested in the reactions of some imagined, collective "they".

DS. When I asked you two years ago about which literature had influenced you most, you named first and above all the traditional Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Also Indian authors such as R. K. Narayan, Khushwant Singh, Anita Desai and Salman Rushdie; Victorians including Trollope and Thackeray, and Americans, namely Fitzgerald, Hemingway and the noir writers. From this heterogeneous and intercultural "family", I know that you feel emotionally attached to the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, their great poets, Valmiki and Vyasa, and the way in which narratives entwine. Could we say that these epics, together with Indian cinema, are the deepest references for your fiction?

CHANDRA. Yes, I think that's right. That's quite a mixing of high and low, isn't it? I suppose that's another kind of border area that I'm interested in, another kind of crossing. There's a tremendous energy I feel in the intertwining of these contradictory connections, that I draw upon in my work and my life.

DS. Traditionally, Indians who wanted to study abroad went to the United Kingdom. However, now there seems to be a shift towards the United States. I'm thinking about contemporary Indian authors settled there, namely you, Vikram Seth, Bharati Mukherjee, or Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, among others. Can you comment on this? Do you feel related to them? Could we speak of any sort of group or generation, or are you creative voices that only share a birthplace called India?

CHANDRA. This shift would be obviously part of the larger cultural movement towards the United States, in the age of the American empire. It's inevitable that people would be drawn towards New York, which is the new centre of the world, as London once used to be. And it's also inevitable that

people will also resist New York, in the way that London was resisted. I know some of these writers you've named, and share a cultural kinship with them, and a certain commonality of culture and class and location, we're mainly urban, English-speaking, middle or upper-class. I don't think there's really an ideological grouping, or an aesthetic drawing up of ranks, which I'm rather grateful for. People are doing a lot of interesting work in different modes. I have friendships with artists in Bombay and elsewhere, in various disciplines, and those relationships are nourishing to me. These people, these friends aren't necessarily writers.

DS. In *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* you introduce the experiences of a young Indian educated in America: Abhay, who studies anthropology in the United States. All in all, I would not speak about exile, but about a constant travel or migrancy, a permanent liminality, being in both places at the same time. Regarding the cultural and emotional problems of borders, cross-cultural or transcultural identities and living experiences could be really tragic, as it is revealed at some points in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*. But nowadays multiculturalism defines most of our societies, and migrancy is something we live with, day after day. Intercultural communication is something we need to face and creative writing can be a bridge towards the understanding of differences. In this sense, once you told me that Indian identity is like a knot of stories, their knottiness is enhanced and they become something. Indeed, transcultural identities are mixture, addition, multiplicity of interspersed threads, twist, exchange, dialogue between cultures. But, they are also loss, somehow. Memory is endless, but is it powerful enough? Do you feel you have lost anything on the way?

CHANDRA. Travel, journeys, and "multiculturalism" have always been with us, I think. We tend to think of these trends as uniquely modern, and look with nostalgia at a past in which we imagine people to have stable cultural and psychological identities. We tend to exaggerate the arcadian, unchanging stability of a medieval and ancient world that was actually very tumultuous, full of encounters that were at least analogous to ours. The story of *homo sapiens* is a story of movement, of change, from that very first trek out of Africa. What we become is a result of what we carry within us and its interaction with what is outside. The contours of your body and your self are memory itself. Of course, in these changes, many of which are forced on us, there is tremendous pain, sometimes damage, loss, suffering, death. There are stories which will no longer be told, and that is a tremendous loss. But to be

frightened into only clinging to these stories, and refusing the ones that might be forming, that are in themselves memory and more than memory, that are action, that is also a great loss.

DS. In *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* we can observe East and West communication and dialectics, whereas *Love and Longing in Bombay* depicts this city's many hues. The novel you're writing right now also features life in Bombay. This being so, Abhay's homecoming in *Red Earth...* seems to be a statement that finds its continuity in your later narrative. In a recent article, Rachel Dwyer (1998) discusses the novels of the Indian author Shobha Dé, drawing attention to their lack of interest in the West and their featuring of popular culture (chiefly cinema) in the novel. In relation to this, I consider that your own fiction is moving towards a transcendence of the "writing back" paradigm widely posed by post-colonial theory and criticism. I would rather relate your storytelling to Homi Bhabha's powerful rethinking of cultural identity in *The Location of Culture* (1994), where he explains his contentions about cultural hybridity, going beyond the politics of polarity between East and West, enhancing the spaces in between. Moreover, you have chosen to write in English, following a path that began with Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), who amazingly seems to be fictionalized in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*. However, assuming that English is used in a differential way, your prose contains many untranslated indigenous terms, and its texture shows a spiralic flow coming from diverse Indian languages. In *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, Sorkar, one of the nineteenth-century characters, forced to learn the English language, uses a sharp metaphor in order to describe his learning process: "from a foreign jungle I have made it mine own garden". Would you say, with the Indian poet Kamala Das, that the important thing is not the language one employs, but the thought contained in the words?

CHANDRA. Oh, I do think that language matters tremendously. The deep structures of a language, its words, its syntax, its arrangements, all these things form the world that the speaker and listener experience. But a language is a living thing, constantly in interaction with its surroundings, with other languages. So the English I've grown up within, that I partially live inside now, is an English that has cohabited with the Indian landscape and Indian languages for hundreds of years now. It is a language that is very different from what might have been spoken in London three centuries ago. The world

that it makes is my world, and that world is as Indian as any Gujarati or Punjabi landscape.

DS. Regarding multi-lingualism, multi-culturalism and creative writing, I remember how the Puerto Rican author Rosario Ferré, who has written in English part of her work, has underlined the fact that, above all, Spanish is the language of her dreams, while writing in English remains for her a cultural translation. Which is the language of your dreams, Vikram?

CHANDRA. It's a hearty, rich mixture of Hindi and English and Punjabi and all the other languages that are spoken on the streets of Bombay.

DS. Reading *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, we would say that at some points there is an ironic gaze concerning history and chance. Moreover, it seems that you prefer to account for history and reconstructions of the past by means of personal (hi)stories. Do you think that literature can heal big historical wounds somehow?

CHANDRA. As many writers have done with fiction, I like imagining a version of history that is an alternative to official and semi-official narratives. The substance and pleasure of doing this is a certain complexity you might open up, a tracing of the network of connections that make an event, a history. If your readers understand and engage with this complexity that you are positing, their understanding of this history may change. Certainly they may experience what one could call "healing," although I'm reluctant to assert that the first task of literature is to apply bandages to old wounds. One should also remember that various kinds of fictions, that are literary and otherwise novels, but also news reports, songs, cartoons, films, all of these narratives can be used also as weapons. Political mass murderers, for instance, always have a historical narrative, a history, that justifies their actions. Literature can cause wounds as well as heal them.

DS. The storytelling form and structure of *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* and *Love and Longing in Bombay* show an overt concern with time, space, memory and voice. At the same time, thematically, love is a central axis for both works. Would you say that these outlines define your narrative project as a whole?

CHANDRA. Yes, I think that's an interesting insight, one that didn't occur to me except in retrospect, that at the centre of the stories there is this unquenchable longing for love, and always the risky exercise of the ability to love. I suppose that's not so surprising really, since one might argue that this longing is the first and last human impulse.


DS. The idea that storytelling will never end is clearly put forward in your narrative. In *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* diverse forces of religious and political fights try to silence the storytelling circle, though they fortunately fail. Above all, Abhay has learnt Sanjay's vital lesson. A lesson that Subramaniam passes on to Ranjit in *Love and Longing in Bombay*. Do you mean that literature is an aesthetic socio-cultural discourse that goes beyond any kind of restriction?

CHANDRA. Yes. But also that in a more basic sense, human beings cannot exist without stories, that we exist only through stories. And to paraphrase what a critic said about *Love and Longing in Bombay*, that we can only know ourselves through the stories of others.

DS. Finally, could you let us know anything about the work in process of the book you're writing at the moment? "Eternal Don" is promising to grow into a detective novel where storytelling finds new and surprising paths.

CHANDRA. The novel starts in Bombay, in an encounter between a Bombay police inspector and a gang boss, a Don. So, the story starts in the world of cops and organized crime, in that deadly terrain. But the narrative then moves outside of Bombay, and engages with larger cultural and political forces. It's becoming a much larger book than I had originally thought it was, both in size and conception. Which makes it very pleasurable and very terrifying to be in the middle of writing it. When something grows like that, you know it's alive. But you also don't know where it's taking you. It's another one of those long journeys into the unknown, full of its own rewards and risks.

DS. Well, Vikram, thank you very much for sharing your feelings and thoughts so generously. Now we are going to "listen" to your essay, "The

cult of authenticity. India's cultural commissars worship "Indianness" instead of art", dealing with complex and open angles of entry: Indo-Anglian fiction and "regional" Indian writing, the debate around the perception the public in India have about their now internationally known authors, discussing whether they write real depictions or exoticised products for Western audiences. Let's listen... 

NOTES

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² This is a question that has been studied in depth by the so-called "Manipulation school" in the field of translation studies. See, for instance, Lefevere (1992).

³ This interview has been carried out via e-mail.

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