

## MYTHOLOGY, HYBRIDITY, AND POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITY: NARRATIVE FORM IN VIKRAM CHANDRA'S RED EARTH AND POURING RAIN

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995) employs mythology, postmodern narrative form, and the concept of cultural hybridity to construct a postcolonial theory of identity. Arguing that the novel's formal choices are inseparable from its thematic concerns, the study analyses how Chandra uses the frame narrative structure, the intertextual engagement with the Ramayana and Mahabharata, the figure of Hanuman as mythological storyteller, and the technique of multiple narrative voices to articulate a vision of identity as inherently fluid, fragmented, and negotiated rather than stable, unified, or recoverable. The paper draws on Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity and the third space, Salman Rushdie's concept of the imaginary homeland, and Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia to demonstrate how the novel's polyphonic structure formally enacts the condition of postcolonial subjectivity that it thematises. The use of mythology in the novel is examined not merely as a narrative ornament but as a theoretical argument: by placing mythological figures such as Hanuman in contemporary settings and weaving the plot structures of the Ramayana and Mahabharata into the novel's own architecture, Chandra asserts that Indian identity is constituted by the continuous reinterpretation of ancient stories rather than by any fixed cultural inheritance. The paper further argues that the novel's resistance to linear chronology and its insistence on multiple, competing, and overlapping narrative voices constitute a formal critique of the singular historical narratives through which colonial power attempted to fix and define Indian identity. *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* is positioned as a significant contribution to the postcolonial Indian novel precisely because of its insistence that form and identity are mutually constitutive.

**Keywords:** *mythology, hybridity, postcolonial identity, narrative form, Vikram Chandra, Indian Writing in English, Hanuman, heteroglossia, frame narrative, magical realism*

## INTRODUCTION

Among the most formally innovative novels to emerge from the tradition of Indian Writing in English, Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995) presents a challenge to critical reading that begins with its structure. The novel does not unfold linearly; it moves between nineteenth-century colonial India, contemporary America and India, and the mythological realm of Hindu epic tradition, often within the same chapter or even the same passage. Its narrators include a nineteenth-century poet, a modern diasporic traveller, and a reincarnated Hindu deity compelled to tell stories in order to survive. These formal choices are not incidental. They constitute the novel's primary argument about the nature of postcolonial identity—that identity is not a stable inheritance to be recovered but a continuous process of negotiation, reinterpretation, and reconstruction conducted across the competing claims of history, myth, and modernity. This paper examines how Chandra's engagement with mythology, his use of hybridity and heteroglossia, and his structuring of the novel as a frame narrative together constitute a sustained postcolonial argument about the nature and conditions of Indian identity in a world shaped by colonial history and its aftermath.

Bhabha (1994) provides the central theoretical framework for this paper's analysis. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha argues that hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities, and that it produces a third space where identity is constantly negotiated and redefined. His further observation that identity is always hybrid, formed in the space between past and present, between the colonial and the postcolonial, captures the formal logic of Chandra's novel, in which no single narrative voice or historical period is allowed to dominate. Rushdie (1991), whose *Midnight's Children* (1981) is the most frequently cited precursor to Chandra's work in critical discussions of Indian magical realism, argues in *Imaginary Homelands* that reality is not simply there but must be searched for and constructed. This epistemological claim underpins Chandra's approach to both history and identity in the novel, where both are presented as constructed through narrative rather than given in any unmediated form. Rushdie's concept of the imaginary homeland—the version of India that the migrant writer reconstructs in fiction because the actual homeland is lost, altered, or inaccessible—is equally relevant to Chandra's depiction of Sanjay's romanticised memories of India.

Bakhtin (1981) offers the formal theoretical complement to Bhabha's cultural theory. His concept of heteroglossia, developed in *The Dialogic Imagination*, describes the coexistence within a single text of diverse social speech types, each with its own belief system and perspective. Bakhtin's argument that the novel orchestrates its themes using this diversity of voices applies with particular precision to *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, where the polyphonic structure is a deliberate formal strategy for representing the fragmented and contested nature of postcolonial identity. Ramanujan (1991) contributes the crucial observation that mythology in Indian culture is not a relic of the past but a living tradition, constantly reinterpreted and reshaped in contemporary contexts. This principle governs Chandra's use of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in the novel, where mythological structures are not nostalgically invoked but actively reworked in relation to contemporary conditions of exile and alienation. Mukherjee (2000), in *The Perishable Empire*, observes that the Indian novel in English is a site of contestation where the traditional and the modern, the indigenous and the foreign, are constantly negotiating their spaces—a formulation that describes both the thematic and formal tensions that drive Chandra's narrative.

## **THE FRAME NARRATIVE AS POSTCOLONIAL FORM:**

The structural foundation of *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* is its frame narrative, in which the reincarnated Hanuman is compelled to tell stories in order to stay alive. This conceit draws explicitly on the traditions of the *Mahabharata* and *One Thousand and One Nights*, both of which organise their narratives around a storytelling situation in which the continuation of the narrative is linked to the continuation of life. In adopting this structure, Chandra makes a formal argument about the relationship between storytelling and survival that runs throughout the novel: to tell stories is to live, and to be silenced—by colonial power, by cultural displacement, by historical amnesia—is a form of death. The frame narrative also functions as a formal enactment of Bhabha's concept of the third space. The space of storytelling that the novel creates is neither purely Indian nor purely Western, neither ancient nor modern; it is a hybrid space in which competing cultural traditions are brought into dialogue without any one of them being allowed to dominate. Benjamin (1968), in *The Storyteller*, argues that storytelling is the art of exchanging experiences across time and space, and Chandra's frame narrative embodies this conception by creating a textual

space in which experiences from different centuries and cultures are exchanged and compared. The result is a narrative structure that formally resists the singular, linear historical account through which colonial power sought to define and contain Indian identity.

Desai (2013) argues that stories are acts of cultural preservation, allowing displaced individuals to maintain a connection with their histories, and this function is built into the very architecture of Chandra's novel. Hanuman's compulsion to narrate is not merely a plot device; it is the structural expression of the novel's central claim that identity, in the postcolonial condition, must be continuously produced through storytelling rather than received as a stable inheritance.

## **MYTHOLOGY AS THEORETICAL**

**ARGUMENT:** Chandra's use of Indian mythology in *Red Earth* and *Pouring Rain* goes considerably beyond the decorative or illustrative. Mythology in the novel functions as a theoretical framework for understanding identity and displacement, operating on the same level of abstraction as the postcolonial theories the novel implicitly engages. By drawing on the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* as structural and thematic models, Chandra

argues that the experiences of exile, alienation, and the search for belonging depicted in his novel are not merely products of the colonial encounter but are inscribed in the deepest structures of Indian cultural consciousness. The intertextual relationship with the *Ramayana* is particularly significant. In the *Ramayana*, exile is central to Rama's narrative—his forced departure from Ayodhya, his wandering in the forest, and his eventual attempt to reclaim his rightful place constitute both the plot and the moral structure of the epic. Chandra draws on this structure in constructing Sanjay's narrative, where colonial exile replays the mythological pattern in a historical register. Doniger (2009) observes that exile in Indian epics is not just a punishment or misfortune but a transformative process through which characters gain wisdom, resilience, and a deeper connection with the world, and this understanding of exile as transformative rather than merely destructive informs Chandra's treatment of his characters' displacements.

The *Mahabharata*'s episodes of the Pandavas' twelve-year banishment similarly resonate with the novel's multiple narratives of displacement, suggesting that the experience of exile is not historically contingent but mythologically foundational to Indian cultural identity. By

placing his contemporary and historical characters within these mythological structures, Chandra argues that their experiences of displacement are not anomalous but constitutive—that to be Indian in the postcolonial world is, in some fundamental sense, to be always in some form of exile. Bhabha's (1994) assertion that the past is never merely behind us but always inscribed in the present captures precisely the temporal logic that Chandra's mythological intertextuality enacts.

#### **HANUMAN AND THE POLITICS OF**

**REINCARNATION:** Of all the mythological elements in *Red Earth* and *Pouring Rain*, the figure of Hanuman is the most formally and theoretically significant. In the Hindu tradition, Hanuman is associated with devotion, strength, and the capacity to cross great distances—both literal and metaphorical. His presence in the *Ramayana* as the loyal servant who bridges the gap between Rama and Sita makes him the tradition's pre-eminent figure for the act of mediation and connection. In Chandra's novel, he is reincarnated in a contemporary setting as a monkey compelled to narrate stories, and this displacement from his divine origins into a degraded and alien form is the novel's most concentrated image of postcolonial alienation. Hanuman's reincarnation can be read as a

metaphor for what colonialism and modernity do to cultural tradition: they force ancient forms into unfamiliar and diminished roles, stripping them of their original dignity and function while compelling them to continue performing. His storytelling in the contemporary world is simultaneously an act of survival and an act of cultural testimony, preserving stories that would otherwise be lost in a world that no longer has a natural place for divine narrators. Mishra (2007) argues that diasporic narratives are haunted by the past, where mythology serves as both a refuge and a reminder of what has been lost, and Hanuman's narrative embodiment of this argument makes it impossible for the reader to treat mythology as mere decoration.

Bakhtin's (1981) concept of heteroglossia is also illuminated by Hanuman's role in the novel. As a narrator who exists outside of time and history in one sense while being fully embedded in them in another, Hanuman represents a perspective that cannot be assimilated to any single social or historical position. His voice adds to the polyphonic texture of the novel a dimension that is at once ancient and contemporary, divine and degraded, mythological and novelistic. The coexistence of this voice with those of Sanjay and Abhay creates the dialogic structure that

Bakhtin identifies as the defining characteristic of the novel as a form.

**HYBRIDITY, MULTIPLE VOICES, AND FRAGMENTED IDENTITY:** The most formally distinctive feature of *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* is its use of multiple narrative voices and non-linear chronology to represent what Bhabha (1994) calls the hybrid nature of postcolonial identity. Rather than presenting a single, authoritative account of the experiences of exile and displacement, the novel distributes its narrative across three radically different perspectives—the nineteenth-century colonial, the contemporary diasporic, and the mythological—none of which can subsume the others or claim to provide the complete picture. This polyphonic structure is not merely a formal experiment; it is the novel's central argument about the nature of postcolonial identity, which is by definition multiple, contested, and incapable of reduction to a single coherent narrative.

Bakhtin (1981) argues that the novel orchestrates its themes using a diversity of social speech types, each with its own belief system, and that this diversity is what distinguishes the novel as a form from other literary genres. Chandra's exploitation of this generic capacity is thoroughgoing. Sanjay's

narrative voice carries the rhythms of nineteenth-century Indian literary culture inflected by both the oral epic tradition and British colonial encounter. Abhay's voice reflects the dislocated modernity of the diasporic intellectual, caught between cultures and fully at home in neither. Hanuman's voice introduces the register of the mythological into a contemporary novelistic context, creating a form of heteroglossia that is specific to the postcolonial Indian literary situation.

The novel's non-linear chronology reinforces these multiple voices by refusing to assign any single historical moment the status of origin or culmination. The past is not presented as the cause of the present, nor the present as the resolution of the past; instead, they coexist and interact, each illuminating and complicating the other. Bhabha's (1994) assertion that it is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that intersubjective and collective experiences are negotiated describes precisely the temporal and narrative logic of Chandra's novel, where meaning is produced in the spaces between stories and between periods rather than in any single strand.

**THE NOVEL'S CONTRIBUTION TO INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH:** Red

Earth and Pouring Rain occupies a significant position within the tradition of Indian Writing in English both because of its formal innovations and because of the theoretical sophistication of its engagement with questions of identity, mythology, and postcolonial subjectivity. Chandra's debut novel appeared at a moment when the tradition was already well established through the work of Rushdie, Roy, and Ghosh, and it extended that tradition by pushing the formal possibilities of the Indian English novel in new directions. Where Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) used magical realism to connect individual biography to national history, Chandra's novel uses the frame narrative and mythological intertextuality to connect individual experience to a temporal horizon that extends across centuries and lifetimes.

Mukherjee (2000) argues that the Indian novel in English is a site where the traditional and the modern, the indigenous and the foreign, are constantly negotiating their spaces, and *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* makes this negotiation its explicit structural principle. The novel does not resolve the tension between Indian mythology and Western literary form, between colonial history and postcolonial identity, or between the past and the present; it sustains these tensions in productive dialogue,

demonstrating that identity in the postcolonial condition is constituted by this ongoing negotiation rather than by any settled outcome. Chandra's remark that he grew up listening to the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* from his grandmother but was also reading Faulkner and Joyce, and that this combination informs his writing, captures the dual inheritance that the novel formally embodies.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* makes its most significant contribution to postcolonial literature through its formal choices—the frame narrative, the mythological intertextuality, the multiple narrative voices, and the non-linear chronology—which together constitute a sustained argument about the hybrid, contested, and narratively constituted nature of postcolonial identity. Through Bhabha's theory of hybridity, Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, and Rushdie's concept of the imaginary homeland, the paper has demonstrated that these formal strategies are not merely aesthetic decisions but theoretical positions, ways of insisting that identity in the postcolonial condition cannot be fixed, recovered, or narrated from a single perspective. The mythological dimension of the novel, far from being decorative, is central to its argument: by embedding contemporary

and historical experiences of exile within the structural patterns of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, Chandra asserts that displacement is not a product of colonialism alone but a foundational feature of Indian cultural consciousness, one that mythology has always provided a framework for understanding. *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* ultimately insists that form and identity are mutually constitutive, and that the postcolonial novel's greatest contribution is its capacity to hold multiple histories, voices, and traditions in productive and unresolved dialogue.

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