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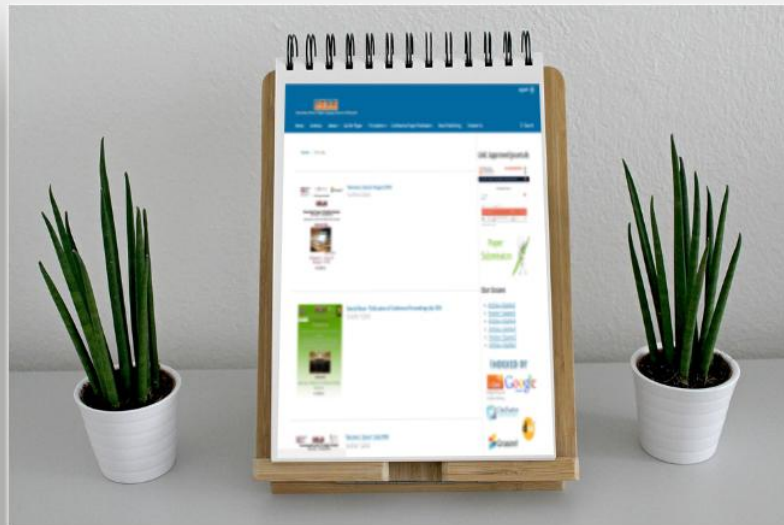
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Cliffhanger Narrative: Storytelling And Web Pattern In Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth And Pouring Rain*

Abstract

Contemporary Indian fiction in English revives the novel genre through cliffhanger writing techniques inspired from the Indian story telling tradition. In Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, digressive storytelling that reflects oral patterns merges with structural strategies rived from the web pattern and hypertext. The author's creation of an online storytelling community that gives him email feedback on his writing mimics the tradition of storytelling in a way that responds to hyper textual interactivity. The implied audience emerges from the work of a whole community rather than of an individual narrator. *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* is a modern version of Arabian Nights, filled in by well-told tale meant to earn the protagonist's endurance. Throughout the novel it focuses on individual develop and makes statements about society at specific historical movements, based on factual observation. The presence of myth-based traditional storytelling, digressions and ponderings on the meanings of events, in a discourse matters is the endless storytelling process that much keep growing like a serial.

Key words: Contemporary Indian fiction, Storytelling and Web pattern.

The popularity of contemporary Indian fiction in English acknowledges to its use of the resources of traditional Indian narrative and the techniques of cliffhanger story, reminiscent

of the *Arabian Nights*, whose tales often come from India. This article aims to show that fiction of contemporary Indian author Vikram Chandra. In Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* – it involves a mixture of rediscovered traditional Indian storytelling and modern web-inspired techniques.

Red Earth and Pouring Rain is a framed collection of stories told by Sanjay, the white monkey who regains human consciousness from nineteenth-century life, and Abhay, America return student fails to readjust to Indian realities. After his near fatal, shooting of monkey by Abhay, Sanjay is given one last chance to prolong his life by Yama, the Hindu god of death: like Scheherazade in *The Arabian Nights*, he must entertain the audience by telling them stories. Hanuman, the monkey-god, and Ganesha, the elephant-headed god encourage him. Sanjay signs a contract with Yama, that if he stops stories he could lose his life. As he is too weak from the wound to fulfil the contract himself, the obligation carried with the help of Abhay, Ashok and Mrinalini. The contract binds the storyteller to please not just Yama, but a whole audience of children (the best judges of stories), who even contribute to the storytelling with prompts and encouragement, like the audiences of traditional Indian oral storytellers. This opens the text up to a whole series of metafictional comments on cliffhangers of good story. The emphasis from the storyteller and his survival is the initial dynamic behind the storytelling process. Moreover, continues even after Sanjay's death and presumably, after the end of the novel.

The idea behind the novel is based on the author's experimentation with the overlap between stories and history as fictions with an equal state of representing "reality". As a film school student in New York, Chandra discovered Colonel James Skinner's autobiography. This exciting, real-life tale about a legendary nineteenth-century Indo-British soldier was an inspiration to *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*. The novel published in 1995, won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book and the David Higham Prize for fiction; the author left film school and worked as a teacher of creative writing, a computer programmer and a software and hardware consultant. Chandra's inside knowledge of the world of computers contributed to the writing process. The novel's structure related to the intricate, always expanding web of connections that make up the Internet. The shifts of the main narrative thread between the various stories between parallel temporal levels are reminiscent of the various stories of the use of links to change websites, but also suggest that story is a living and life-giving entity. Abhay's vital definition for storytelling at the end of the novel claims story as an organic process which cannot be stopped, invested with a great power to

establish points of communication between all people and events. As he walks out of the hospital where Saira, a little girl who embodies the principle-implied reader, lies ill, he walks straight into world of stories that demand. Chandra, studied creative writing with John Barth and Donald Barthelme, is very interested in theoretical and practical debates about the novel form. Even though he admits that the novel as we know it was born in eighteenth-century Europe, he believes that the common assumption that the novel is “about the individual, the Western individual, that very sort of eighteenth and nineteenth-century post-Enlightenment individual” should be challenged. He agrees with Margaret Anne Doody that the novel has roots that go back long before the European genesis of the genre and brings in the Indian storytelling tradition. The novel generally regarded as a European import into Indian culture, one of the bequests of British colonization. *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* provides a challenge to commonly held beliefs about the most popular Western literary genres, a non-European, postcolonial perspective. However, what makes him different is the fact that, as a contemporary writer, skilled in postmodern techniques. In addition, with an interest in the Internet, he makes use of the happy coincidental overlaps between the age-old traditions of Indian storytelling and the more recent discoveries of hyper textual writing to make his own distinctive contribution to the development of the novel genre.

Paniker writes, the Indian narrative tradition encompasses the institutional epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, which collide with the novel tradition in many ways. One of most palpable is the fact that the sense of space in the epics prevails over sense of time. *The Mahabharata*, the puranas, the Jatakas and the tales collected in *Kathasaritsagara*, *Vetakpan-cavimsati*, etc., may said to ignore the dimension of time in preference to that of space. This is not so much because kingdoms and landscapes are involved in the narrative, but because even time is treated in terms of space. In *Ramayana*, for instance, the journey of Rama from Ayodhya to Lanka, through the banks of the Ganga, the Dandaka forest, the Janapada, Kishkindha etc. is primarily marked by movement across space, although nominally a passage of fourteen years also to be accounted for with a certain degree of indifference.

In this, Chandra responds to the challenges of the new forms of writing representing reality brought about by the recent IT-communication techniques. In the book *The Rise, of the Network Society* (Volume 1 of his wider study *The Information Age*), Manuel Castells describes the contemporary world as dominated by a new form of orality prompted by CMC (computer-mediated communication). This caused by the generalization of media communication that has created a society of T V viewers, in which “the media, particularly

radio and television, have become the audiovisual environment with which we interact endlessly and automatically". At the time, Castells wrote that, the Internet was beginning to become the most prominent element in this interactive network world. Yet he did predict the global spread of "real virtually" based on hypertextual communication. George P. Landow in hypertext explores the impact of these new forms of communication on textuality. A study of how websites, blogs, wikis and other forms of digital communication affect narrative structure and texture. Landow points out that there is an intrinsic connection between the style of recent critical theory (such as practiced by Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari). And hypertext, "a form of electronic text consisting of non-sequential writing, which branches and allows choices to the reader, best read at an interactive screen" This corresponds to a recent need for developing interactive "read-write systems" that make room for the audience, which makes choices by clicking on links and even material, in the making of the text.

Internet communication opens up the boundaries of *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* to the flexible possibilities of a simulation of oral storytelling. It performed by the teller and also negotiated with the audience. The notion of "community" redefined as a function of Internet Access and no longer cultural Specific. This incorporation of orality and of audience participation as vital components in the making of the story also bring the different emphasis of storytelling into the novel genre. Plot is not the matter but the digressions on the significance of events. The stories claim to truth, the storyteller's display of wise and imaginative. In 1985 interview with Gunter Grass, signify "Fictions Are Lies That Tell the Truth". Salman Rushdie, insists the norm in the Indian storytelling tradition. Where most stories were "*Arabian Nights* kind of stories"; in them, he says, "you could actually tell a kind of truth which you couldn't tell in other ways" Rushdie differs from Grass in that, like Chandra, he addresses the crisis of the novel in terms which open it up to the input of new, alternative, non-novelistic, non-European material. Rushdie considers that, at the same time as the novel genre has actually never been in any real crisis, it needs to be redefined in terms that allow for the hybridity of the contemporary world to express. To him, this hybridity is very much at home in contemporary Indian novel writing in English through the incorporation of the dynamic orality of the Indian storytelling tradition.

Despite the digressions and interpolated histories that grow from the main story line, there is a formal ending to the plot, which is with the *Arabian Nights*-like expectations created by the story, in Sanjay's death. Yet this end challenged by the existence of another

cliffhanger, providing the reader with the opportunity to choose. Saira, the young girl whose interest continuously assesses the quality of the storytelling and acts as the ideal implied reader, is on the verge of dying herself and is the only character that can be saved by the power of storytelling and the reviving force of her innocence. This cliffhanger ending, although it seems to bring the story full circle back to the beginning – with the impending threat of death, which fulfils itself and with the necessity of storytelling. The audience is free to develop as one does in a hypertext. As Landow shows, is by definition open-ended and expandable. Chandra's resistance to the concluding the plot in the way that a conventional linear novel would projects *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* into the traditional Indian continuum of never-ending mythical stories. Chandra challenged through reciprocal self-mirroring corresponds to exploration of ways to open up the novel form, so that it may respond to contemporary issues exile and displacement, be they temporal, as in Sanjay's case, or spatial, as in Abhay's stories in modern version of cliffhanger narrative.

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