PURDUE UNIVERSITY

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture
ISSN 1481-4374
Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

Volume 14 (2012) Issue 2 Article 6

Elements of Hinduism in Chandra's Red Earth and Pouring Rain

Corinne M. Ehrfurth
Rochester Mayo High School

Follow this and additional works at: http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb

Part of the Comparative Literature Commons, and the Critical and Cultural Studies Commons

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, Purdue University Press selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Recommended Citation

Ehrfurth, Corinne M "Elements of Hinduism in Chandra's Red Earth and Pouring Rain." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14.2 (2012): <http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1844>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.
The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 534 times as of 07/01/14.

PURDUE UNIVERSITY UNIVERSITY PRESS <http://www.thepress.purdue.edu>

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture

ISSN 1481-4374 <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>
Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series.* Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 14 Issue 2 (June 2012) Article 6
Corinne M. Ehrfurth,
"Elements of Hinduism in Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*"
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss2/6>

Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14.2 (2012)
Thematic Issue ***New Work in Comparative Indian Literatures and Cultures***
Ed. Mohan G. Ramanan and Tutun Mukherjee
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss2/>

Abstract: In her article "Elements of Hinduism in Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*" Corinne M. Ehrfurth explores how Hindu tenets in the *Bhagavad-gītā* continue to provide a didactic framework that inspires contemporary Indian literature. Ehrfurth highlights the similarities between characters, consumed with doubt and seeking understanding, in the ancient Indian text and Vikram Chandra's novel *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* where protagonists represent the diversity and complexity of Hinduism to a global audience. In examining how the novel's protagonists handle dilemmas, Ehrfurth presents Chandra's novel as illuminating how healthy and destructive actions affect one's ability of achieving the peaceful resolve found in the *Bhagavad-gītā*.

Corinne M. EHRFURTH

Elements of Hinduism in Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*

I posit that the *Bhagavad-gītā* as a living document adapts itself to future generations and welcomes a recasting to fit the moral dilemmas of contemporary life. Reading the *Bhagavad-gītā* and studying Hinduism more in-depth illuminates two phenomena: the instructive power behind the stories and the necessity of a spiritual guide to assist one in understanding faith. In the following, I discuss Hinduism's influence on contemporary literature as seen through an examination of connections between the *Bhagavad-gītā* and Vikram Chandra's novel, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*. I focus on the *Bhagavad-gītā* and stress elements of Hinduism which provide a framework for evaluating the mindset and actions of characters placed in situations similar to what the protagonist of the *Bhagavad-gītā* faces: Arjuna Pandava doubts his role in an epic battle and finds himself morally paralyzed. As a warrior, Arjuna would not have completed his duty without Krishna's counsel. The fundamental role of a guru has been stressed since the beginning of Hinduism and is discussed in Vedic texts. While elaborating on the guru's importance, Swami Akhilananda asserts that "one can hardly expect to reach the higher state of divine realization without the help of his Guru" (192). The dialectical structure of the *Bhagavad-gītā* poses Krishna as offering wisdom to Arjuna: Arjuna returns to the battle with a confident resolve regarding his purpose and understanding of Hinduism. Chandra's novel takes certain elements from the *Bhagavad-gītā* and recasts them to fit contemporary settings. Tenets of Hinduism connect with the content of *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*. Bishnupriya Ghosh summarizes that all Indian writing in English "seem[s] to offer a microcosmic India to global audiences" (82). To arrive at meaning, current scholarship is not turning to the *Bhagavad-gītā* as a framework for understanding Indian novels. However, a pairing of contemporary Indian writing in English with the *Bhagavad-gītā* returns scholarly focus to the inherent qualities found within the text itself. Rather than following the current trend of examining Indian literature as a product marketed to Western audiences, I analyze the relationship between a foundational text of Hinduism and contemporary Indian writing in English.

Sunanda Mongia asserts that "the fact is that criticism of the Indian novel has been erratic … the contemporary novel, undeservedly, has not received consideration, possibly because critical environment is not based on initiation of academic debates by venturing opinions before there are quotable precedents of one's critical positioning" (215-16). Aside from basic reviews and author interviews, scholars who analyze contemporary fiction tend to focus on the direct impact Indian novels in English have made on India. Bishnupriya Ghosh's *When Borne Across: Literary Cosmopolitics in the Contemporary Indian Novel* offers a reason for the paucity of scholarly material: "Indicative of how young this literary tradition is, criticism on 'Indian writing in English' almost always adopts a generational rhetoric, the periodizing gesture imparting sought-after literary credentials" (6). Ghosh's research and analysis follows the difficulties and rewards experienced by novelists who break with the past while still allowing it to inform current insights. An example of what Ghosh labels "generational rhetoric" appears when Mongia attempts to categorize Indian writing in English. She records three chronological phases of such novels, nine patterns found within novels published between 1981 and 1997, and describes six trends of literary form and style. In the pattern that Mongia calls "Re-visions of religion, mythology, history, Independence, Partition," she pairs Shashi Tharoor's structure in *The Great Indian Novel* with how "Chandra ranges over the history and mythology of India and uses the narrative framework of *Mahabaharata* in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*" (221). While Mongia does not reprimand Chandra's recasting of religious figures (such as Ganesha) or mythological structure (looping frame narrative and emphasis on dialogue), her chastising of Tharoor implies disapproval of Chandra's novel since his work exhibits "the irreverence of Shashi Tharoor's interpretation of Hindu religion" (221). Mongia categorizes Indian novels by period, content, and structure. Most contemporary novels are not treated as products of the author's own literary or creative merit.

Scholarship on Indian writing in English published since the riots of 1992 highlights political and global themes instead of Hindu ideals and traditional lessons present within contemporary works. Ghosh summarizes what scholars aim to elucidate in literature written during and after the most recent Indian Renaissance: "Given the new capital-generating global economic and communication networks, what can literary production accomplish in struggles for political and social justice? Can a glamorized practice such as this recent explosion in South Asian writing effect cultural intervention

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1844

into globalism?" (17). While discussing Indian culture, Ghosh leaves out the role of religion. These examples suggest that scholars fail to examine the influence of the *Bhagavad-gītā* on Indian writing in English. M.K. Naik attributes the scant analysis of Hinduism to an absence of understanding: "There seems to be virtually no end to the average Anglo-Indian novelist's ignorance of Hinduism in its several aspects" (152). The content of Chandra's novel serves as evidence against Naik's harsh pronouncement.

Writing in English garners a wider readership and increases international interest in Indian culture. Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood propose the *Bhagavad-gītā*'s "enduring value, not only for Indians, but for all mankind" (*Bhagavad Gita* 6). Indian writing in English incorporates complex and ambiguous layers of allusions from mythology, Hindu gods as active characters, and adaptations of the *Bhagavad-gītā*'s battlefield discussion. Salman Rushdie, for example, has received international attention for his depictions of religion's influence on Indian characters and many of his novels (e.g., *Midnight's Children*) draw from mythology and religious texts. Ghosh endorses another contemporary Indian author who she believes communicates the values and traditions of ancient Indian societies to a global audience: Arundhati Roy "typifies the political and ethical drives of cosmopolitical writing: the unflinching political commitment to local struggles, and the subsequent ethical stance" (22). Indian fiction which includes Hindu tenets provides insightful glimpses into the plurality of India aside from the debate on which language (i.e., English, Hindi, Urdu, local vernaculars) communicates cultures and themes. Chandra applies Arjuna's struggles and Krishna's advice to his own characters, thereby using Hindu ideas in a particular way that transforms the *Bhagavad-gītā*'s content to contemporary settings.

Homi Bhabha's ideas are often used to study postcolonial literature and his concept of "third space" of hybridity facilitates theoretical examinations. As an expert of postcolonial and cultural studies, his assertion that "even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" facilitates plurality of meaning found in one work of literature (Bhabha 37). According to Bhabha, understanding of identity emerges when enunciating ambiguity, doubling, and temporality, for the words and spaces between words divulge vast significance and meaning. Bhabha gives voice to complexities which Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak doubts a Western audience can handle with care and attention to detail for she sees such individual analysis as an act of control. Conversely, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada — the translator of *The Bhagavad-gītā* — explains that in order to grasp all that the *Bhagavad-gītā* offers "one has to associate with authorities in Kṛṣṇa consciousness and learn the secret from them; this is as good as learning from the Lord directly. Otherwise the most intelligent person will be bewildered" (*The Bhagavad-gītā* [Prabhupada] 76). Fortunately, Chandra presents characters who take journeys that represent an increased understanding of tenets within the *Bhagavad-gītā*; in turn, readers enter Bhabha's third space of interpretation.

The text of the *Bhagavad-gītā* becomes a living document that adapts itself to future generations and welcomes a recasting that fits the moral dilemmas of contemporary eras just as aptly as it did at the beginning of time. Chandra has constructed situations where a strong, moral character delivers an individual through the most trying situations while simultaneously highlighting how the individual is responsible for knowing and making the right decisions. To appreciate Chandra's adaptation of the *Bhagavad-gītā*'s lessons, more about the Gita itself needs to be understood. The Gita occurs within the sixth book of the *Mahabharata*, an ancient epic of India. A poetic collection of narratives, the *Mahabharata* is about King Bharata's descendants. Before the Gita begins, after the Pandavas were cheated out of returning to their kingdom and after Krishna's failed attempts at rational mediation, civil war at Kurukshetra transpired between the Pandavas (Arjuna being the third of five sons) and the Kurus (the one hundred sons of the current King Dhritarashtra, uncle of Arjuna). To relay the events as they happened to the blind King Dhritarashtra, he needed Sanjaya, "a student of the sage Vyāsa, and therefore, by the mercy of Vyāsa, Sañjaya was able to envision the Battlefield of Kurukṣetra even while he was in the room of Dhṛtarāṣṭra" (*The Bhagavad-gītā* [Prabhupada] 2). An audience privy to Hinduism's ancient Brahmins and their mythology therefore trusts the accuracy of the story about to be told since Vyasa (the original author of the Gita) affords Sanjaya such sagacious ability. The wisdom that Krishna imparts to Arjuna also extends to Dhritarashtra and "the whole of India" (*Bhagavad Gita* [Prabhavananda and Isherwood] 23) as the battle itself involved all of India at the time.

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1844

The Gita, situated as a dialectical departure from the details of the battle itself, divulges vital philosophies within Hindu tradition. Featuring Krishna as imparting counsel to Arjuna emphasizes the importance of seeking a spiritual guide when facing a moral dilemma. Arjuna struggles with his duty as a warrior because he cannot handle the fact that he will be killing enemies who are actually relatives, teachers, and other individuals he loves and respects. Arjuna cannot overcome his doubt alone. To explain the timeless significance of this situation Phulgenda Sinha expounds an analogy: "Sometimes a man is faced with a situation in which it is very difficult to decide what to do. If he acts one way, it will be bad; if he acts another way, it will be worse. What should he do in that condition? This condition of indecisiveness might be very tortuous, painful, and disturbing. The remedy for sorrow resulting from such a situation was not provided by Kapila or Patanjali [ancient Hindu philosophers]. Thus, Vyasa felt that unless an answer to this type of sorrow were provided, man would still not be free from sorrow and would not enjoy a healthy and happy life" (77). Arjuna's circumstance in the Gita extends to anyone facing a moral decision. Adding to Vyasa's original Gita, other scholars and spiritual guides' redactions continued to layer solutions for such debilitating sorrow caused by problems in the material world. Throughout all these versions, Arjuna's attentiveness to Krishna's lessons and Arjuna's resolve at the conclusion set an example for how future Hindus may successfully lead good lives: "Instead of forcing others to do what one wishes, these Indian thinkers [meaning ancient philosophers like Vyasa and Kapila] advocated persuasion through example. Being inspired by such precedents, the people would adopt and follow them of their own volition" (Sinha 222). Arjuna's struggle helps impart Hindu ideals to the masses.

dharma, a central Hindu concept, stands out as an example of Hinduism's stable fluidity and interconnectedness. In *A Short History of the World* we find the following assertion: "a virtually untranslatable concept, but one which embodies something of the western ideas of a natural law of justice and something of the idea that men owe respect and obedience to the duties of their station" (Roberts 67). One Christian Indian provides another working definition of this intricate concept in his analysis of its role in the Gita: "it is also an insertion into the divine power that transforms everything unto the final state of integration called *dharma*" (Painadath 308). Not only does *dharma* mean literal duty done to fulfill a role in life, it transcends corporal boundaries. Arjuna's trust in Krishna metaphorically represents intangible meaning of *dharma* because Krishna embodies complete integration of all that was, is and will be. Another way to understand the cosmic scale of *dharma* is to expand upon its root, which means "'dhr,' to support, to preserve, to integrate, to hold. Dharma is therefore the state of order and harmony" (Painadath 311). Just as seen in the Gita with Arjuna, a character's search for or disregard of dharma inspires action depicted in contemporary literature.

Arjuna doubts his *dharma* as part of the warrior caste and cannot act and pleads with his friend Krishna: "Now I am confused about duty and have lost all composure because of weakness. In this condition I am asking You to tell me clearly what is best for me. Now I am Your disciple, and a soul surrendered unto You. Please instruct me" (*The Bhagavad-gītā* [Prabhupada] 2.7). Despite his confusion, he knows enough to admit his culpability in this situation and to request advice. Although Arjuna is not a wise Brahmin and throughout the Gita has difficulty understanding Krishna's advice, Arjuna does know he must act if he is to complete his purpose and live justly. He fully realizes how wrong his enemies are and ascribes the physical and emotional battle to their selfish behavior: "When the family is ruined, / the timeless laws of family duty / perish; and when duty is lost, / chaos overwhelms the family" (*The Bhagavad-Gita* [Stoler Miller] 1.40). Arjuna's search for the right action sets a positive example in the midst of others acting out of an emotional imbalance, for "everyone is in difficulty, just as Arjuna was on the Battlefield of Kurukṣetra … each one of us is full of anxieties because of this material entanglement … Unless one is inquiring as to why he is suffering, he is not a perfect human being" (*The Bhagavad-gītā* [Prabhupada] xxi). Incomplete knowledge is part of the human condition. Humans must seek to understand the function that desire and illusion impose upon individuals striving to understand their purpose in life.

Krishna's advice aligns with ancient Hindu philosophy: Arjuna needs to listen and act on all of Krishna's advice. Sinha asserts that "when man (*purusha*) acquires proper knowledge of himself, nature (*prakriti*), the *gunas* (everlasting operating forces and constituents of nature), the emergence and functions of the twenty-five elements (*tattvas*) and the cause-effect relationships, and acts correctly, then he, by his own power, eliminates sorrow and achieves happiness" (110). The process of

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1844

how Krishna extends proper knowledge so that Arjuna is able to first think and then act rightly may be replicated by future individuals who desire to follow Hindu philosophy. Numerous emotions cloud Arjuna's judgment and thereby disable him: discipline and faith in sacred dharma are necessary. The fate of the battle has already been decided and Krishna helps Arjuna understand that his actions are committed as an instrument of predetermination instead of unrighteous killing. The Kurus too know that Krishna favors the Pandavas, but they fulfill their duty as warriors just as Arjuna doubly ought to — especially since his side is in the right, according to Krishna. Since "the whole cosmic order is under Me. By My will it is manifested again and again, and by My will it is annihilated at the end" (*The Bhagavad-gītā* [Prabhupada] 9.8), Arjuna need not worry as long as he acts in accordance with his *dharma*. For "those who are not deluded, the great souls, are under the protection of the divine nature. They are fully engaged in devotional service because they know Me as the Supreme Personality of Godhead, original and inexhaustible" (*The Bhagavad-gītā* [Prabhupada] 9.13). Therefore, all Arjuna's fretting is done for naught if he acts in harmony with Krishna's wishes.

Staying in tune with the divine play requires great discipline, which yields benefits that Arjuna ought not strive for but reap as a consequence of selfless actions done according to his *dharma*. Krishna talks Arjuna through how to control misperceptions in order to get to a point of unattachment: "when your intelligence has passed out of the dense forest of delusion, you will become indifferent to all that has been heard and all that is to be heard" (*The Bhagavad-gītā* [Prabhupada] 2.52). Meditation, or *Sankhya-yoga*, keeps one's disposition aligned with the divine and by "always controlling the body, mind and activities, the mystic transcendentalist attains to the kingdom of God through cessation of material existence" (*The Bhagavad-gītā* [Prabhupada] 6.15), for liberation (*moksha*) from the cycle of *samsara* is the ultimate reward for the devoted soul. Breaking out of existence in the material world eternally frees one from the struggles that Arjuna faces. Nascent sensitivity to the aptitude of an individual's disposition dissolves the perception that life follows strict binary systems and thereby eliminates the view that Krishna's wisdom is contradictory. Throughout the eleventh chapter and elsewhere in the Gita, Krishna asserts that *sattva* is the preferred temperament since those whose natures are ruled by goodness more clearly understand how to act and think with equanimity. A disposition mostly influenced by *raja* causes one to act rashly for selfish ends: "*Rajasic* action is performed / with a wish to satisfy desires, / and with the thought 'I am doing this.' / and with an excessive effort" (*Bhagavad Gita* [Mitchell] 18.24). When an individual is governed by *raja*, thoughts are dominated by emotions such as anger and jealously. *raja* often leads to violence and *tamas* results in idleness. If *tamas* dominates an individual's disposition, that person cannot understand reality and does not care if harm befalls others: "Knowledge is called *tamasic* / when it clings to one thing as if it / were the whole, and has no concern for the true cause and essence of things" (*Bhagavad Gita* [Mitchell] 18.22).

All combinations of the *gunas* cause some degree of attachment to this material world; however, the most enlightened person rises above human nature into a transcendent state of being. For "he who faithfully serves me / with the yoga of devotion, going / beyond the three *gunas*, is ready / to attain the ultimate freedom" (*Bhagavad Gita* [Mitchell] 14.26). An individual detached from this world dedicates his life to selfless service. Not many individuals are able to achieve such a feat because "the person in material consciousness is convinced by false ego that he is the doer of everything … [and] due to his long misuse of the sense, he is factually bewildered by the false ego, and that is the cause of his forgetfulness of his eternal relationship with Kṛṣṇa" (*The Bhagavad-gītā* [Prabhupada] 56). Such a delusion (*maya*) causes people to attribute all positive consequences to their own doing, which yields pride and continues the cycle of acting to gain something.

Krishna urges Arjuna to act for the action's sake alone as an inescapable function of *dharma*. Krishna compares Arjuna's duty to his own, cosmic *dharma* of maintaining balance. Krishna offers himself as the ultimate example of selfless action: "no work is prescribed for Me within all the three planetary systems. Nor am I in want of anything, nor have I the need to obtain anything — and yet I am engaged in work … If I should cease to work, then all these worlds would be put to ruination, and I would be the cause of creating unwanted population, and I would thereby destroy the peace of all sentient beings" (*The Bhagavad-gītā* [Prabhupada] 3.22, 3.24). Krishna continues his work — both driving Arjuna's chariot and counseling him — just as Arjuna ought to fulfill his *dharma* by acting and accepting the consequences of *karma* without doubt. Such doubt arises, in part, because Arjuna

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1844

understands his life through a limited scope only and therefore struggles with the unknown causes and effects of completing his particular *dharma*. In juxtaposition, Krishna foresees all outcomes, which eliminates any trace of doubt and affords him an omnipotent perspective toward duty. And the Gita itself stresses selfless actions done out of dharma and devotion. Arjuna serves as the ultimate example of an individual seeking guidance from a knowledgeable spiritual guide. Krishna, in turn, bestows upon Arjuna all the wisdom necessary for future generations to follow during their own times of personal turmoil. The battlefield inside Arjuna's mind is just as important as the external chaos between the warring families.

In *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* Hindu mythology is integrated with contemporary life by retracing the lives of present day Indian characters back to *itihasa* and to lessons offered through tradition. Chandra's authorial choices — including naming the story-teller Sanjay, presenting numerous moral dilemmas, sharing the characters' dispositions and discoveries of dharma through shifting points of view — reverberate the Gita's timeless themes. Chandra empowers his protagonists by giving them connections to the traditions and values of Hinduism, thereby validating the continued, sustaining vitality behind tenets of Hinduism found in the Gita: "The years passed, and city nations collided with each other, and out of this churning came empires, with their monuments and epic poetry and sciences of assassinations and power. There were some battles that passed into time, and others that became memory and gathered the dreams of whole peoples about them, like a speck of dust accumulated a pearl about itself, and these accumulated stories became the stories of stories, the stories of a nation made up of many nations, the collective dream of many peoples who were one people" (267). When Chandra's characters try to understand their *dharma* and complete their duties without consulting the Gita's lessons, understanding the deep traditions of Hinduism, or seeking guidance from a spiritually mature Hindu, they fail to arrive at the same certain conclusion that both Arjuna and Sanjaya proclaim at the end of the Gita. Similar to the resolve exhibited by Sanjaya and Arjuna, both Sanjay and Abhay Misra in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* discover their *dharma* and commit to fulfilling it.

Chandra's postmodern conceit fuses a frame narrative with ancient epic story-telling. Within this hybrid genre, the concept of *samsara* transfers to story-telling. It links Abhay, US-Americanized through his university education and friends, to Sanjay, the monkey who relays his previous lives to an increasingly large audience. In the conclusion of Chandra's novel Abhay continues the oral tradition when Sanjay eventually dies. However, Abhay's willingness to adopt tradition and share it with his generation only occurs after listening to Sanjay throughout the course of the novel. Abhay's frustration clearly shows during the introductory chapter, where he has just returned to his rural home outside of Janakpur: he is "nagged by a feeling that he had been away for several centuries, not four years, afraid of what he might find lurking in the shadows of bygone days, and suddenly he felt his soul drop away" (6). Abhay takes his insecurities out on a monkey (Sanjay) who pesters his family and steals his jeans. He shoots the monkey. Such a *rajastic* action horrifies Abhay's mother, Mrinalini, and his parents take the monkey in (whose sentient consciousness and ability to communicate — only through writing — has been awakened by the mortal wound) to try and nurse it back to health. Yama, the god of death, and Hanuman, the monkey god who champions causes of good in the world, set a wager for Sanjay's life: for at least two hours every day, over half of an audience must be kept entertained by story-telling.

Sanjay frames his own stories within the novel by creating Sandeep, an Indian who wanders out of the jungle and into an *ashram*. He befriends the *sadhus* and delves into a blended *itihasa*, composed of his own experience and what he learned after taking care of an ascetic-looking woman he found in the forest. Her objective in sharing her vision as a story to Sandeep echoes the peace that the Gita also ought to offer: "it will clear your heart and cleanse your soul" (27). Since Sanjay repeats what he hears from Sandeep, who has relayed the ascetic's story, this cycle of story-telling retains one of the concluding purports in Prabhupada's translation of the Gita: "The understanding of the *Bhagavad-gītā* is so transcendental that anyone who becomes conversant with the topics of Arjuna and Krsna becomes perfect in righteousness, and he cannot forget such talks" (*The Bhagavad-gītā* [Prabhupada] 273). While not the same story of the Gita, the *itihasa* that comprises the majority of Chandra's novel traces the origin of Sanjay's and his brothers' magical birth, adventures, the search for *dharma*, and failures.

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1844

The stories about Sanjay weave back throughout his former life in an India of his Brahmin family and caste codes, kings and world conquerors, great and secret loves, and traditional sacrifice. Chandra's looping narrative structure within these recollections and embellishments allows for continual reinforcement of the central yet variously applied concept of Hinduism: *dharma*. Chandra even personifies *dharma* in "an old man with fine white hair and gold eyes" (511). At the close of Sanjay's life — once he concludes telling the five books that compose his entire frame narrative — Sanjay glimpses into this old man's eyes: "I saw myself, my monkey-face and the other one besides, translucent and mixed up, the scars of one appearing in another, and as I looked at myself there were a thousand others who seemed to float behind: de Boigne, George Thomas, Begum Sumroo, Ram Mohan, Arun, Shanti Devi, Janvi, Hercules Skinner, Sorkar, Markline, a host of others, even the mad Greek Alexander, they were all there" (512). All these individuals played diverse and significant roles for his understanding of *dharma*; all the lives represented in the image he sees reinforce the value of an interconnected perspective. In turn, Sanjay's contemporary Indian audience hears multiple situations where understanding and debating dharma must occur in order for them to apply what they learn about Sanjay's growth to their own decisions. Sanjay's clarity of purpose stemmed from all the interactions he shared with the people seen in Dharma's eyes. Literally looking Dharma in the eye and understanding it completely affords Sanjay an Arjuna-like faithfulness when he admits, "Dharma, who is the friend of men and women. You are forever with us, even when we do not know you, you walk with us in our streets and finally we return to you" (512). Sanjay fully accepts the cycle of life and the role he has played in it. Such resolve exists for Sanjay as a culmination of experiencing life and witnessing other's decisions. An accident during Sanjay's childhood literally leaves him with double vision; a prescient awareness of himself and those around him also awakens. Sanjay's ability affords him highly sensitive and mature insight into how the mother of his close friends, Chotta and Sikander Skinner, feels. During a pilgrimage to the Ganges, Janvi Skinner tries to reverse — or at least stalemate — her husband's pact with a Catholic priest. According to Mr. Skinner, the pact involves the older daughters profiting from a superior English education and a completely different life. Janvi cannot accept that her daughters must leave family, faith, and tradition in order to fulfill what her husband sees as necessary.

While witnessing this conflict, Sanjay's emotions mirror those of Arjuna at the battlefield. The Gita makes it clear that although Arjuna serves as a warrior in an actual war, the symbolism of the battlefield within him while he tries to determine his duty subsists as the true setting and extends beyond the *itihasa* of the *Mahabharata*. The child Sanjay — likewise caught in between action and inaction during a clash between two sides of a family — starts to notice "that something had happened to him" and wants to know why "he doubt[s] everything [for] he considered himself curiously, examined his own emotions and sensations … and the simplest action — drinking a glass of milk, sitting at dinner with the others—became an event difficult to get through because of his acute sense of himself" (252). As the Skinners' battle continues around him, he does not know what to make of his new acumen regarding life's problems and decisions. Yet, he maturely articulates the magnitude of his apprehension: "Sanjay wondered how it was that in the presence of such fleshly dangers, such solid and potentially bone-cracking hazards, one could be frightened of abstractions" (245). Sanjay has no arrows and bows to throw aside, but similar to Arjuna in chapter one of the Gita he pauses to reflect on his duty and strives to understand his role in life.

To read Chandra's novel as a recasting of the lessons of *dharma*, Janvi Skinner must be seen as imparting wisdom that alters Sanjay's perception of his own duty. To appropriate the situation for the contemporary reader, Chandra continues his habit of modifying Hindu customs by altering the context for the controversial act of *sati*. The ritual of *sati* traditionally occurs upon the death of a husband, whereupon a good Hindu wife ought to throw her body on his burning pyre as a final act of her devotion. Janvi knows that her daughters will leave their country: the Hindu in them will die. The powerful British side of her husband refuses to understand her perspective. Janvi's unequivocal, methodical revision of sati speaks louder than her words of protest: "I will not have them made into something else" (254). Just as the battle at Kurukshetra only begins after all of Krishna's mediation and rational attempts at compromise have been exhausted, Janvi tries all angles available to her before acting with the most poignant statement: *sati* done according to her own standards and volition — not according to the Laws of Manu or any other guidelines created by man or tradition. Her parting

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1844

words to her younger sons and Sanjay overtly speak to their individual *dharma*: "'Always remember who you are.' She looked at Sanjay. 'And you. You with your dreams'" (257). After her own deed of duty and mourning, Sanjay internally acts by understanding how vital it is to keep his eyes open and see. This is especially critical because as she burns alive, Sikander forces Sanjay to look since he could not watch his own mother's death. What Sanjay observes reinforces how she indubitably completed her final action of duty: "the flames had risen, she sat not moving, her head high" (258). Her actions complement her advice to the young boys; to the very end she stays true to what she knows is her duty. During the horrific conclusion of the Skinner family's civil war, Sanjay's uncle Ram Mohan chants the opening lines of the Gita. Such an apposite allusion asks the seer Sanjaya what the king's sons are doing on the dharma field of war. Throughout Chandra's novel, the child Sanjay wishes for unambiguous understanding of people and their actions, which the Gita's story-teller actually possesses. Near the end of Janvi's *sati*, Yama appears only to the child Sanjay. With a simple "Yes" the god of death directly answers Sanjay's question: "There will be more of this, won't there?" (258).

This pivotal conflict typifies other events that also propel Sanjay's growing recognition of his *dharma*. In an interview Chandra comments about the timeless quality of needing to ascertain *dharma* as a central step toward understanding the self as an individual with a larger purpose: "The sense of being is connected to the epic, the tradition, the community. So there's a tension between that and individual desires, the individual character in the community … that becomes the great sticking-point between the individual character and the community. This ideal of the modern individual, in some sense as much as anything else, is a construction" (Chandra qtd. in Alexandru 8). No matter the time period, an individual's existence is determined only as part of a community, and thereby self-understanding increases in direct correlation to an understanding of the wider whole. Chandra's idea harkens back to the tradition of honoring the atman within all individuals. Krishna speaks of the tension that Chandra personifies in his characters: "He should lift up the self by the Self / and not sink into the selfish; / for the self is the only friend / of the Self, and its only foe" (*Bhagavad Gita* [Mitchell] 6.5). The self and Self ought to coincide in harmony. However, individuals driven by selfish desires or those deluded by maya fail to act in accordance with the Self. *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* reinforces the importance of finding one's sense of being.

Sandeep's story of Sanjay aligns closely with Krishna's advice of renouncing earthly attachments. In a final pleading with Yama, Sanjay convinces him to reverse his spell of immortality, for Sanjay no longer can bear the burdens of conscious life. After Yama agrees, Sanjay sits under a tree by a river and meditates upon his life: "with a sigh he let it all go; and one by one all the things that tied him to life dissolved and vanished and he felt his soul floating unfettered and close to the white frontier of death but still there was something, it held him back like a thin chain" (Chandra 509). Sanjay's thoughts link to verses from the Gita: "try to act giving up all the results of your work, and be self-situated. If you cannot take to this practice, then engage yourself in the cultivation of knowledge. Better than knowledge, however, is meditation, and better than meditation is renunciation of the fruits of action, for by such renunciation one may have peace of mind" (*The Bhagavad-gītā* [Prabhupada] 12.11-12). Sanjay finally experiences peace after exactly adopting Krishna's advice: "the last spark of desire leav[es] him, it was the hardest but the bond of pride then vanished and he was free" (Chandra 509). Sanjay releases all selfish and emotional attachment to accomplishments done during his long life. Such an attitude toward his human life is exactly what the Gita counsels.

Since a realization must be made that losing one's sense of being brings positive consequences, Sanjay and others face serious challenges while striving to achieve the peace outlined in the Gita. Characters within *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* do not always follow the Gita's wisdom. Imperial influences interfere in Sanjay's and his brother's attempts to renounce earthly desires and successes. Arjuna-like doubt racks each of them differently: Sanjay abandons his gifts for composing poetry then turns to a well-known witch, Begum Sumroo, and follows through on an immortality spell with Yama; Chotta lives in unhappiness by devoting his whole self to his older brother's lifestyle; and Sikander replaces his duties as a warrior with an insular life of writing. The results of deviating from *dharma* and devotion ruin lives and cause heartache throughout *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*. However, the conclusion Chandra provides for his characters reiterates the final message of the Gita: "This was the story of Sikander and Sanjay, and those who listen to it attentively and with faith will be delivered from doubt, and after they have heard it they will be changed forever, they will be

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1844

something else" (510). According to oral traditions, listening to a story about finding *dharma* and understanding selfless service ought to transform its audience. A model story — such as the Gita — gives spiritual ideals to emulate. Chandra's explicit declaration of a story's ability to mute doubt and transform lives imitates how Krishna dispels Arjuna's crushing doubt, which leaves him free to act in accordance with his *dharma*.

Layered between Sanjay's search for *dharma* and understanding of devotion, Abhay finds his *dharma* in an archetypal coming-of-age journey: all he needed to know resided in his homeland and in himself. Abhay traveled abroad for education, happiness and experiences — all of which he thought he saw in an older peer who attended Yale University: "it seemed he was gifting us with possibility, with all the promise of America" (170). Yet his *dharma* only became apparent after returning to India. Both of Abhay's parents are teachers, natural story-tellers. Thus, basic notions of caste clearly delineate Abhay's duty; however, his Western education and contemporary life (which the younger Hindu boys envy) drew him away from such straight-forward knowledge of his purpose. Assisting Sanjay's story-telling duties brings Abhay lucidity and peace. Comparing his *rajastic* demeanor at the outset of the novel with his genial calmness at the end certainly evidences Abhay's maturing character.

Chandra concludes his novel with Abhay voicing his utterly unwavering belief in the power of stories and knowing that his *dharma* resides within his ability to tell them. The value of interconnectedness emanates out of what Abhay has learned by listening to Sanjay's stories. His *sattvic* passion recognizes the inevitability of change, and he has internalized the last lines that Arjuna speaks in the Gita: "I have regained my memory by Your mercy, and now I am steady and free from doubt and am prepared to act according to Your instructions" (*The Bhagavad-gītā* [Prabhupada] 18.73). Abjay's positive outlook toward the integration of past, present and future sustains the tradition of story-telling and by extension Hinduism. Sanjay's final words guide Abhay into feeling such a renewed sense of purpose: "I know there is more to be done" (541). With a firm sense of resolve founded upon the traditions of his past, Abhay begins a story that demonstrates his deep connection to Hinduism: "I will tell you a story that will grow like a lotus vine, that will twist in on itself and expand ceaselessly, till all of you are a part of it, and the gods come to listen, till we are all talking in a musical hubbub that contains the past, every moment of the present, and all the future … Then we will sit in circles and circles, saying, bless us, Ganesha; be with us, friend Hanuman; Yama, you old fraud, you can listen if you want; and saying this we will start all over again" (542).

In conclusion, themes about an interconnected approach to living aptly tie to lessons shared in the *Bhagavad-gītā*. Tenets of Hinduism, as discussed in the Gita, continue to influence contemporary Indian authors like Chandra. Characters persist by questioning their duty and doubting their convictions — just as Arjuna did while talking to Krishna. Solutions found in the Gita continue to assuage doubt that results from the complexities of contemporary life in a globalized India. Hindu mythology, ancient texts, and practices seamlessly provide a weighty context for molding contemporary Indian novels. Readers in an imperfect, constantly changing world benefit from relating to characters who also strive toward understanding their *dharma* in order to overcome doubt. Chandra's novel conveys a sense of reality that remains consistent with — or deviates from — tenets present in *Bhagavad-gītā*.

Works Cited

Akhilananda, Swami. *Hindu Psychology: Its Meaning for the West.* New York: Harper and Brothers, 1946.
Bhagavad Gita: A New Translation. Trans. Stephan Mitchell. New York: Three Rivers, 2000.
Bhagavad Gita: The Song of God. Trans. Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood. Hollywood: Vedanta, 1987.
The Bhagavad-gītā as It Is. Trans. A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. Los Angeles: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1972.
The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War. Trans. Barbara Stoler Miller. New York: Bantam, 1986.
Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
Chandra, Vikram. *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*. Boston: Bay Back, 1995.
Chandra, Vikram. "'Virtual Reality on Infinite Bandwidth': Vikram Chandra Interviewed by Maria-Sabina Alexandru." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 40.2 (2005): 8.
Ghosh, Bishnupriya. *When Borne Across: Literary Cosmopolitics in the Contemporary Indian Novel*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2004.

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1844

Mongia, Sunanda. "Recent Indian Fiction in English: An Overview." *Spectrum History of Indian Literature in English*. Ed. Charu Sheel Singh and Ran Sewak Singh. New Delhi: Atlantic, 1997. 213-32.

Naik, M.K. *Mirror on the Wall: Images of Indian and the English-Man in Anglo-Indian Fiction*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private, 1991.

Painadath, Sebastian. "The Integrated Spirituality of the *Bhagavad Gita*: An Insight for Christians: A Contribution to the Hindu-Christian Dialogue." *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 39.3-4 (2002): 305-24.

Roberts, J.M. *A Short History of the World.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993.

Singer, Milton B. *When a Great Tradition Modernizes: An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilization.* New York: Praeger, 1972.

Sinha, Phulgenda. *The Gita as It Was*. La Salle: Open Court, 1986.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory.* Ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Christmas. New York: Columbia UP, 1994. 66-111.

Author's profile: Corinne Ehrfurth teaches at Rochester Mayo High School. Her fields of interest include Holocaust literature, comparative religion, postcolonial studies, and writing pedagogy. Her recent publications include "Indian Novels Teach Complex Identities to Secondary Students" (with Candice Deal and Paula Schevers), *Minnesota English Journal* 46 (2011) and "Learning Inextricably Linked to Writing," *Minnesota English Journal* 44 (2009). E-mail: <corinne.ehrfurth@mnsu.edu>

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1844