

Genre Hybridization in Leonardo Sciascia's *The Day of the Owl* and Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games*

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Abstract

This paper compares *The Day of the Owl* (1961) by Leonardo Sciascia and *Sacred Games* (2006) by Vikram Chandra, claiming that, despite their popular reception, they cannot be considered simply as detective novels. They are indeed hybrid genres between the detective and the realistic traditions. IN accord with the different poetics, settings and historical periods, they attempt to investigate the motive of the proliferation of violent criminal organizations in Sicily and Mumbai during the second half of the 20th century. The long foreign domination (Spanish in Sicily and English in India) created mistrust towards the corrupted and arrogant rulers. The consequence is the creation of a parallel apparatus that, despite its violence, helps all citizens without distinction. In Italy this is often described as anti-State. Captain Bellodi and Inspector Sartaj try to fight against the injustices of both the *mafia* and the state and, although they are sometimes influenced by the violence of the places they live in, they constantly pursue truth hoping for a better future.

Keywords: *mafia*, Inquisition, Mumbai, Indian novel.

1. The detective novel in India

In India, detective and crime fiction has developed only recently, mostly after independence. Detective novels were first imported from Europe. With a few notable exceptions, Indian literature written in English during the 19th century was often derivative, as British cultural denigration (consider for instance McCaulay's "Minute on Indian Education") had induced in early Indians writing in English a sort of inferiority complex. Indian authors suffered from that inferiority complex which led to mimicry and anglophilia (Albertazzi 2000). Among detective stories *Sherlock Holmes* achieved a wide circulation throughout the subcontinent and its influence lived on well after decolonization as "a constant object of admiring consumption, imitation and adaptation" (Matzke and Mühleisen 2006: 88). Between

1965 and 1992 Satyajit Ray published the adventures of the Bengali detective Feluda, inspired by Conan Doyle's stories. It is probably no accident that Sherlock Holmes, a private detective rather than a policeman, became popular in India. In a colonised nation police forces are viewed as oppressors and not as heroes and protectors.

The rise of an original Indian detective novel can be dated back to the 1950s. Like its European predecessor, the genre was initially considered strictly popular; books were sold at railway stations as cheap reading matter for commuters. During the Sixties, however, thanks to the rising importance of the middle class, detective novels became increasingly popular: "the paperbacks introduced just the right amount of forbidden excitement in the lives of young men and women living in ancient and congested localities with tribal social ties" (Pande 2008). More importantly, the settings began to be completely Indian, without any reference to the west.

It is at this stage that the rationalist stories of Holmes-like detectives gave way to hard boiled violence. The four decades that followed Partition were considered the golden age of Hindi pulp-fiction. The genre was introduced by the Pakistani Ibn-e Safi (1928-1980), who wrote in Urdu; it was only in the Sixties that Hindi authors began to write in their mother tongue. The most acclaimed novelists in those years were Surendra Mohan Pathak (1940-), Gulshan Nanda (1929-1985) and Ved Prakash Sharma (1955-2017), but as for the the book market, it is also important to remember the illustrator Mustajab Ahmed Siddiqui, better known as Shelle, who designed the covers. These contained explicit references to violence portraying abducted women, gun muzzles aimed at the viewer, blood trails, and bleeding knives. The Nineties saw the decline of Hindi pulp-fiction, not only as a consequence of the introduction of satellite television in India, which offered more vivid images, but also because people were bored with pulp novels, which lacked originality, and turned to sentimental stories instead. In this period there were no important examples of the genre, apart from three noir novels by Ashok Banker that were too gruesome and violent to achieve a wide readership. As Ashok Banker lamented once "it's as if publishers, editors and authors think that you have to stoop to the lowest common denominator in order to be read and break the bestseller charts" (*Mystery of the Missing Jasoos* 2010).

For years the detective genre had been on the wane and it was only in the first decade of the 21st century that new detective and noir

stories appeared: *Sacred Games* (2006) by Vikram Chandra, the collection *Mumbai Noir* (2012) by Altaf Tyrewala, *Cut Like Wound* (2012) by Anita Nair, *Witness the Night* by Kishwar Desai (2015), and more recently *The Unexpected Inheritance of Inspector Chopra* (2016) by Vaseem Khan to cite but a few. These texts are very different from those of the past and cannot always be defined solely as detective novels. They are well structured and well written but, above all, their success is due to their originality and their hybridization with realistic and psychological genres. Moreover, they are often set in big cities such as Mumbai, with a great interest in communal violence, or Bangalore, with its hi-tech world.

Speaking about Indian detective novels, one last remark must be made about the negative representation of the police. During colonization the British police did not protect or take into consideration the health of the citizens: “the rational regulation of the population from the outset implied the prevention and suppression of challenges to the power of the regime rather than the enchantment of public well-being” (Siddiqi 2002: 178). The negative representation of police forces, which is one of the main features of Indian detective novels, is the consequence of the long submission under the oppressive British rule.

2. *Sacred Games* and *The Day of the Owl*

The representation of police forces as violent, corrupted and ineffective, and the consequent development of criminal organizations may be considered typical features of Indian crime novels. However, reading vis à vis Chandra’s *Sacred Games* (2006) and the novel by the Italian writer Leonardo Sciascia *The Day of the Owl* (1961) against each other, many similarities between postcolonial Mumbai and post-fascist Sicily stand out. Despite the different times of publication and the different backgrounds of the authors, the similarity of themes invites a comparison not only between the poetics of the novels themselves, but also between the two historical periods in relation to the very different settings, where violence, both physical and psychological, plays a major role.

Leonardo Sciascia tells a story of mafia in Sicily from the viewpoint of a detective called capitano Bellodi; he is an honest man from Northern Italy who, much to his dismay, discovers a land beset by corruption and violence where it is impossible to arrest the bigger

criminals who enjoy the protection of the politicians. At the time when Sciascia was writing, even the government was reluctant to admit that a criminal organization called mafia existed in Italy. The novel is set in post-Fascist Sicily, but it often refers to the Spanish domination in Southern Italy, which can be considered the starting point for the rise of the *mafia*.¹

The situation in *Sacred Games*, despite the difference in time and place, is somehow comparable. Vikram Chandra set his novel in the Nineties, nearly 45 years after Independence, when the effects of foreign domination are still felt in Mumbai. The gangs often fight in the name of religion as a consequence of the communal animosity between Hindus and Muslims fostered by the British. Post-partition tensions have never died down in Mumbai, where they exploded in the communal violence of the early Nineties.² At that crucial point even the gangster Gaitonde – the protagonist, who started off as an agnostic leader – is compelled to pick sides, choosing the Hindu out of self-interest.

The Day of the Owl is told by a third person narrator and begins with the murder of the head of a cooperative building company, Salvatore Colasberna. After the initial investigations, Captain Bellodi, discovers the motive for the homicide: the criminal organization called *mafia* killed Colasberna because he refused to pay for protection. The whole novel is centred on the Captain's interrogations of the killers and reaches its climax during the dialogue between Bellodi and the *mafia* boss Don Mariano Arena. Yet, at the end, owing to the political connection of Sicilian *mafia* with the government in Rome, the culprits are freed and the murder is rubricated as passion crime. The scope of the novel is rather wide as it offers insights not only into the collusion of Italian mafia with Italian politics, but a quasi-anthropological survey of Sicilians.

¹ The Spanish colonization of Sicily began in the XVI century, with a 15 years intermission in the XVIII century, when Sicily was conquered by the Austrians. The Spanish Sicilian rule lasted until 1861, when it was annexed to the Italian kingdom. But even then the Italian government was felt just like another “foreign ruler”. The feeling of those years is well recorded in the novel *The Leopard* by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa.

² Between 1992 and 1993 in Mumbai more than 900 people died because of the religious fights between Muslims and Hindus. This period had its climax on March 12th, 1993 when the city was hit by the almost simultaneous blast of several bombs in different quarters.

The structure of *Sacred Games* is far more complex than that of *The Day of the Owl*. The chapters dedicated to the protagonist, Inspector Sartaj Singh, are told by an omniscient narrator. Yet, Chandra also shows the point of view and the psychology of the antagonist, the gangster Ganesh Gaitonde, who tells his own story in the first person. Therefore, although Gaitonde's narration chronologically precedes Sartaj's investigation, *Sacred Games* alternates chapters about the protagonist and about the antagonist. Moreover the narrative adds chapters called "Insets" that blow up the micro-histories of minor characters.

The novel starts when Gaitonde anonymously phones Sartaj to reveal his hiding place. Inexplicably the gangster, barricaded in an anti-atomic bunker in the centre of Mumbai, has decided to tell his story to the Inspector just before ending his own life. Later Sartaj is asked by a member of the Secret Service to investigate the motives of the suicide and Gaitonde's reasons for building an atomic bunker in Mumbai. Thus at the beginning there is no real crime and the investigation seems to have no clear purpose. At length, the inspector discovers that a man called Guruji (Gaitonde's spiritual guru) has hidden an atomic bomb somewhere in Mumbai because he is convinced that an atomic conflict will put an end to the current Kaliyuga; a bomb in Mumbai will set forth a series of chain reactions that will eventually destroy the world. Sartaj finds the bomb, but, as in *The Day of the Owl*, justice does not really prevail. In order to find the atomic device he must betray his mentor and chief Parulkar, who ends up committing suicide, and, more importantly, the mind behind the plot, Guruji, escapes. In the end, Sartaj's work is never acknowledged and ironically he obtains a promotion only for the capture of Gaitonde, who had actually given himself up to the police on his own initiative just before shooting himself.

3. Mafia and the ghost of Inquisition

In both these novels the antagonist is not represented by a single entity or person, but by a larger group of people, a criminal organization and more importantly by their violent and yet lucid mentality. Indeed violence, whether implied as in *The Day of the Owl*, or actually represented as in *Sacred Games*, impregnates the stories and, remaining mostly unpunished, becomes an ominous threat even for the reader. The detectives discover something more than the

simple motives, means and perpetrators of Gaitonde's suicide and Colasberna's homicide. Sartaj's inquiries (along with the gangster's narrative) introduce the reader to the world of corruption and of criminal gangs, their beliefs and their codes, where greed and violence are highly ritualized becoming almost one with honour in a kind of perverted civilization. Both novels emphasize that Mumbai and Sicily are places ruled by complicated systems, some non-official, corrupted societies that also extend to institutions and government and in which everyone has to conform (often negating the existence of the *mafia* as in *The Day of the Owl*), because there is no other option. Violence is a key feature in this system and serves several purposes. Crimes cannot be traced back to one single person, indeed: "corruption of the government prevents realization of justice. [...] The enemy is not the single criminal but the total system" (Jackson 1981: 25).

In this corrupted society, people mistrust of politicians greedy for money and power, ready to help only the highest classes to the disadvantage of lower ones. Criminal organizations both in India and Italy were born as a reaction to this antipopular state allegedly helping and supporting that part of population that had always been subjugated by an unjust and indifferent state. The origins of Sicilian *mafia* can be traced back to the Spanish domination from the 16th throughout the 18th centuries and the period of the Inquisition. Ever since, and particularly during Fascism, every new authority has always been considered as an oppressor, a line of thought that emerges very clearly from the novel. Bellodi is in fact seen as a foreign enemy, because he comes from Northern Italy and represents the State. This is why in the end he fails. The old *mafia* (and *omertà*³ along with it) was born as a reaction to an inveterate misuse of power and had always thrived by convincing people that State and justice were conflicting notion⁴ (Fano 1993: 48). According to Sciascia, policemen:

are always the embodiment of the Law, in the absence of which society cannot exist. Their misfortune is that they can't succeed in applying this

³This word refers to the world of the *mafia* and the underworld. There is *omertà* when a person (or a group of people) does not report a crime for fear of retaliation from the culprits (in this case the *mafiosi*) of this same crime.

⁴"la vecchia *mafia* (e con essa l'*omertà*) è nata per reazione a un abuso secolare del potere. Ed è sempre riuscita a prosperare, questa vecchia *mafia*, diffondendo tra la gente l'idea che Stato e giustizia, che ragione di Stato e veri problemi siciliani fossero entità contrapposte e inconciliabili" (Fano 1993: 48).

Law. They are honest and strict, they have good principles, the same principles that are of inspiration of every democratic state, but practically, they are powerless⁵ (Sciascia 1979: 67-68).

In Sicily the idea has taken roots that the State cannot solve the problems of the people, because State and justice do not coincide. For this reason a lot of people prefer *omertà* to reporting the violence suffered from the *mafia*, which in the past has been identified with protection against the interference of the State. One of the notable characters in *The Day of the Owl* is very clear about this point:

“Has there ever been a trial during which it has emerged that there is a criminal association called the *mafia* and that this association has been definitely responsible for or actually committed a crime? Has any document or witness any proof at all which has ever come to light establishing a sure connection between a crime and the so-called mafia? In the absence of such proof, and if we admit that the *mafia* exists, I’d say it was a secret association for mutual aid, no more and no less than freemasonry” (Sciascia 1961: 64).

Many Sicilians were persuaded that the State is after all more violent and harmful than the mafia, partly aware that it is simpler to escape from a police sentence than from the *mafia*, which kills anyone who betrays it. This happens for example to the informer *Parrinieddu*, who, disconcerted by Bellodi’s kindness, reveals too much during the interrogation: “with someone treating him kindly and taking him into his confidence, things were different” (Sciascia 1961: 30). What emerges from this scene is how the *mafia* system works. Actually no one knows about *Parrinieddu*’s revelations, yet after the encounter with Bellodi, the informer is overcome with fear. The *mafia* boss Mariano Arena notices it: “Yesterday, when I ran into him, his face changed colour; he pretended not to see me and vanished up an alley” (Sciascia 1961: 52). This fear betrays *Parrinieddu* and seals his fate.

The Day of the Owl focuses on the passage from the old, more ethical (but always violent) *mafia* to a new one. The former more connected to the people and the territory, the second closer to the power that be. Old Don Mariano Arena is a good representative of the

⁵“incarnano sempre la legge, senza la quale una società non può vivere. La loro sfortuna è proprio che questa legge non riescono ad applicarla. Sono onesti e rigorosi, animati da buoni principi, quei principi ai quali si ispira ogni stato democratico, ma loro sono praticamente ridotti all’impotenza” (Sciascia 1979: 67-68).

older mafia. He maintains his own personal ethics, albeit a criminal one (Fano 1993: 52). He propounds his *Weltanschauung* when he calls Bellodi “a man”, because he approves the captain’s resolution to lead a hard life to remain true to his own principles⁶ (Crepaldi 2002: 91):

What we call humanity [...] I divide into five categories. [...] Men are very few indeed; half-men few, and I’d be content if humanity finished with them... But no, it sinks even lower, to the pigmies who’re like children trying to be grown-ups, monkeys going through the motions of their elders... Then down even lower we go, to the arse-crawlers who’re legion... And, finally, to the quackers; they ought to just exist, like ducks in a pond: their lives have no more point or meaning... But you, even if you nail me to these documents like Christ to His Cross, you’re a man (Sciascia 1961: 102).

Thus Don Mariano grants the captain the honour of war. However the captain acknowledges the boss in the same way. During the dialogue Sciascia equates the antagonist and Bellodi, but he subtly eschews the risk of exalting or justifying his actions. Arena actually represents a type of *mafia* that was born in contrast to the abuses of power, based on popular principles and ideals, and that little by little is being replaced by a new violent *mafia* interested only in money and power (which will be described in the Sciascia’s subsequent novels).

Lately the same term *mafia* has often been adapted to define the underworld of Mumbai. Like Sicily, India had been long subjected to foreign domination and Mumbai is one of the cities that suffered the after-effects of the British domination most. Mumbai is a metropolis with a population of nearly 12 million and in the city there great inequalities remain between the poor, who live in huge squalid slums, and the rich, who live in large luxury apartments. In this situation, a *mafia*-like system has taken root, populating the city with criminal gangs that often fight each other in the streets in the name communal identities. As Vikram Chandra declared in an interview with Claire Chambers: “Everyone’s acutely aware of the creaking infrastructure and social breakdown. [...] yet there’s still a strong attachment to the place” (Chambers 2008: 47). Over the last few years, the rate of

⁶“approva l’eroica determinazione del capitano a condurre una vita di stenti in nome dei principi in cui crede” (Crepaldi 2002: 91).

violence in Mumbai⁷ has increased, but still the underworld, which in *Sacred Games* is well represented by Ganesh Gaitonde and his gang, has also become famous as a sort of mutual aid for the population – a parallel state which controls the territory and its inhabitants and may even administer local justice. If policemen are corrupted, and the State sluggish, why not turning to criminal organization for protection or justice, when they may be more efficient? In *Sacred Games* this is evident, for example, when Gaitonde helps the politician Bipin Bhonsle to win his first election:

“We want to make sure that certain people don’t vote.” I laughed. “Okay. You want the election given to you.” He wasn’t embarrassed. He smiled, and said, “Yes, *bhai*.” “I thought you *Rakshaks* wanted to clean out corruption in the country.” “When the whole world is dirty, *bhai*, you have to get dirty to do any cleaning. We can’t fight their money without tricks. Once we are in power, it will all be different” (Chandra 2006: “Ganesh Gaitonde Wins an Election”⁸).

Even with legal activities the underworld is quick, efficient, and probably no more expensive than the police: “A dispute over a flat, which takes twenty years in court, is taken care of in a week or a month by the underworld” (Mehta 2004: “Number Two After Scotland Yard”). Criminal organizations win the respect of ordinary people in several ways. Sometimes gangs resemble joint families in which everyone has a role. This is evident in *Sacred Games*, when Gaitonde even creates a private lingo that strengthens the bonds among the gang members and insists on their wearing certain clothes.

Another theme joins *The Day of the Owl* and *Sacred Games*, namely: the theme of Inquisition. Obviously, the term “inquisition” cannot be literally and historically associated with Mumbai, but it well defines the similar violent methods resorted to by both the Sicilian and Indian government through the police and the diffused fear to be found wanting. In *Sacred Games*, and even more in “Kama”⁹ during the interrogation of a suspect, something like the

⁷In Mumbai the locality Jambli-Muhalla is called “Palermo of India” by the Mumbai newspapers (Chandra 2000).

⁸For simplicity, the position of the quotation from *Sacred Games* are indicated with the name of the chapters.

⁹*Kama* is one of the five stories of the collection *Love and Longing in Bombay* written in 1997 by Vikram Chandra. It is a brief detective story in which Sartaj appears for the first time, together with his wife Megha and his new colleague

Inquisition (though without its religious implications), although not explicitly mentioned, is an overhanging shadow. People are frightened by the police because they may resort to violence and torture to obtain confessions (which are consequently not always reliable). In other words the panopticon put up by the gangsters, who require no constitutional guaranties, works better than the one created by police forces. Moreover, the proclaimed idea of a State based on equality is perceived as hypocritical by many Indians. Therefore the fear of something akin to the Inquisition, which in *The Day of the Owl* is by now only a disturbing memory exploited by the *mafia* to assert its authority, is nowadays part of Mumbai society, in particular as a consequence of the religious violence of the Nineties.¹⁰ The Inquisition, like *mafia* and the police exert a power not so much through dramatic public violence, but through the reverberation of news about secret tortures and sudden arrests or kidnappings.

While Sartaj allows for some violence like most of his colleagues, on the other hand, Bellodi knows what people think about the police and is ashamed of being perceived a sort of heir to, or simply successor of, the ancient inquisitors. This reflection is triggered by the encounter with an old man who has called his evil dog *Barruggieddu*, which means “someone who is bad”. The old man is unaware that the name is the diminutive of “Bargello”, the chief of police in the late Middle Ages. The old man is embarrassed when he learns the real meaning of the name, but Bellodi concedes that after all popular lore has a point:

Perhaps he wasn't so far wrong, thought the captain; for centuries the *bargelli* had bitten men like him, bitten after reassuring. ‘Hound of the law,’ he thought of himself; and then he went on to think of the ‘hounds of the Lord’, who were the Dominicans, and of the Inquisition, a word which conjured up a dark crypt and stirred gloomy echoes of history (Sciascia 1961: 88).

Katekar.

¹⁰ *Sacred Games* is not the only novel where tortures are described at length, the chapter entitled “Encounter” in *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* by Suketu Mehta describes tortures and executions perpetrated graphically. In another context *The Lives of the Others* by Neel Mukherjee also denounces how the police tortured the Naxalites.

The disquieting memory of the Inquisition is still present in Sicily and this passage makes explicit the perceived correspondence between the police and the Inquisition.

Sacred Games and *The Day of the Owl* attempt to provide an explanation for the existence of the *mafia* in their different worlds and to demonstrate that the proliferation of criminal organizations in Sicily and Mumbai cannot be read only in terms of greed. In fact, despite the attachment to power and money, the *mafia* is the direct consequence of an oppressive and corrupt system in which legal and social justice are virtually absent.

4. The genre

Since *Sacred Games* and *The Day of the Owl* narrate an investigation, the texts can be considered as part of the detective genre, but this definition does not exhaust either novel. Both Vikram Chandra and Leonardo Sciascia aim to describe the *mafia* society in the most realistic way, but without exalting it or its actions. Consequently, both authors decide to use the duality between good and evil (typical of the non-realistic detective genre), creating a solid moral separation between the criminal organization and the men who try to oppose it. Yet, the peculiarity of both novels is the realistic finale characterized by the inexorable failure of institutional justice.

Sacred Games runs the risk of exalting the antagonist more than *The Day of the Owl* does. For example, Chandra not only allows Gaitonde to speak in the first person and to justify his actions, but he also expounds Guruji's reasons and spirituality so accurately that he seems to endorse them, and the reader is almost induced to understand and sympathise with them. Vikram Chandra manipulates the typical themes of the detective tradition in order to show the lives of the protagonists (Gaitonde, the antagonist, has a major role in the novel) and their reactions to unexpected events. As the author says:

When I set out to write, [it] was an anti-thriller. Gaitonde and Sartaj seem to belong to the classical detective tradition [...], but in fact, like all of us, they are caught up by events that are far bigger in huge web of agenda and politics and ideologies (Singh 2006).

Thus *Sacred Games* breaks away from traditional crime fiction modes. In the past, the detective novel was considered a popular

genre, partly deriving from gothic fiction.¹¹ Chandra creates a hybridization with psychological drama, because the feelings and thoughts of the characters play an essential part in the story and are often more important than the actions themselves. Consequently, the novel can be defined as a piece of “highbrow literature” and can be appreciated by readers who would find hard-boiled novels rather unpalatable.

Like Chandra, Sciascia did not write a typical detective novel. He showed the psychology of his detective, but he distorted some typical elements of the genre. Bellodi, for example, lacks the support of the society, unlike the detectives of the traditional detective stories, where the distinction between good and evil is less blurred. Furthermore, in *The Day of the Owl*, the solution of the case comes in the very first pages and the whole story is centred on Bellodi’s efforts to nail the criminals. Yet in the end, despite the discovery of truth, in both *Sacred Games* and *The Day of the Owl*, the culprits are not punished and the only victory remains intellectual – one cannot even call it moral. Therefore, both novels have a realistic anticlimactic ending and not the typical happy ending of the detective novel in which the reader expects to read about the final capture and punishment of the criminals. The union between detective and realistic novels apparently excludes catharsis.

The use of violence is another interesting characteristic of the two novels: allowing for a difference in that Chandra includes some graphic scenes in the story, both depict the use of violence which is not animal instinct, but rather a rational means to the end of obtaining power bot immediately and in the long run. Since violence is resorted to by both the law and the criminals, readers are compelled to take it into their system of values in order to read the books. This is particularly true of *Sacred Games* where it is impossible to take any side without committing oneself to violent methods. In a certain sense it is impossible not to sympathize with Guruji’s attempt at putting an end to this Kaliyuga through its own commitment to violence. Likewise a reader of Sciascia is tempted to have civil rights suspended in Sicily while the police wipes mafia *away*. Neither novel in fact logically disputes these solutions, leaving it to the reader to reflect.

¹¹NEROZZI, PATRIZIA, 1987, *L’Altra Faccia del Romanzo. Creatività e Destino dell’Antirealismo Gotico*, Cisalpino, Milano.

Another important characteristic of these hybrid texts (which can be defined “detective-realistic novels”), concerns the antagonists: Don Mariano Arena in *The Day of the Owl* and the gangster Ganesh Gaitonde with his spiritual “Guruji” in *Sacred Games*. Sciascia and Chandra dedicate several pages to the description of these characters and their psychology, so that they become as relevant as Captain Bellodi and Inspector Sartaj. The confrontations between the characters through the novels assume more importance when, at the end, the reader discovers that the failure of justice coincides with a sort of victory of the antagonists. The formulaic detective novel is based on the continuous tension between a basically good and intelligent detective and an evil and cunning enemy. The action ends with the decisive defeat of the antagonist who, despite his astuteness, cannot prevail over the moral intelligence of the protagonist and the power of the Law. Yet in *The Day of the Owl* and *Sacred Games* the culprits are not punished because they are not only cunning, but as intelligent as Bellodi and Sartaj, who actually lack the support of a healthy police system. Consequently, all characters are on the same level and there is no longer that disparity that in the typical detective novel permitted the predictable final victory of justice.

5. The linguistic choice

Language plays a pivotal role in both *Sacred Games* and *The Day of the Owl*. Chandra is an Indian author writing in English, but the language of his novel can be more precisely defined *Hinglish*. *Hinglish* refers to several varieties of English spoken, rather than written, in India by the lower middle class. Apart from a distinct local accent and intonation, *Hinglish* stands out for the high frequency of vernacular words. Sometimes the choice of writing in English has been considered as politic – English as a language belongs to those who use it, and Indians have a right to their own English. Chandra’s decision to write in *Hinglish* is more aesthetic than political; in fact he decided to use it only as a consequence of the increasing importance of this language for the Indian reality:

In *Sacred Games* I was particularly trying to use a fluid, spoken English. I wanted to recount the story as if I was telling it to my friends in Bombay over dinner. The way that we would speak together

would be with a sprinkling of different languages, and I wanted to convey that in the text (Chambers, Claire 2008).

The importance of English in modern India emerges, for example, when Gaitonde decides to learn this language, because he identifies it as the language of business and the Indian elite and therefore synonymous with an elevated social status:

I turned to my English books. I was teaching myself with children's books and the newspapers and a dictionary. [...] It was humiliating, but necessary. I knew that much of the real business of the country was done in English. [...] When you bought an expensive new shampoo "Made with American knowhow", what was that it said in red on the label? [...] I had to know (Chandra 2006: "Ganesh Gaitonde wins an election").

In both novels, the various linguistic choices characterize and set characters apart, in particular the protagonists and the antagonists. Ganesh Gaitonde in *Sacred Games*, but also the *mafia* in *The Day of the Owl*, use a private jargon and dialect words as a form of opposition and protest against the modern state, which in their opinion is only the heir to the former dictatorship. Sciascia was a Sicilian author who wrote in Italian. Yet, like Chandra, he tried to reproduce the Post-Fascist Sicilian society through language, the Sicilian dialect, spoken by the working classes and particularly the *mafiosi*, who take pride in not speaking standard Italian. Therefore, in the novel there are a number of expressions that emphasize the sense of alienation of the characters who take a position against the *mafia*, first of all Captain Bellodi, who speaks Italian and often must resort to interpreters to understand a language and a culture alien to him. This happens for example during the interrogation of Colasberna's wife, when for the first time the word *ingiuria* (offense) appears:

She used the word *ingiuria* and for the first time the captain needed the sergeant-major's talents as interpreter. "Nickname," said the sergeant-major, "almost everybody here has one, some so offensive that they really are 'offences'" (Sciascia 1961: 40).

In the *mafia* underworld there is a semantic shift of the term "ingiuria" from "offense" to "nickname." The reason for it is that nicknames are often given with such malevolence as to resemble

offenses. This points to a diffuse system where violence surfaces in every little exchange and must be put up with at every level.

And again three pages later: “‘*Zicchinetta*,’ promptly translated Sposito, ‘a game of chance: it’s played with Sicilian cards...’” (Sciascia 1961: 43).

Gangs develop a peculiar jargon that plays a double role: on the one hand it is difficult to decipher for those who do not belong to that world; on the other hand, it creates a bond between those who share it and its *Weltanschauung*.

In both *Sacred Games* and *The Day of the Owl* the linguistic choices depend on the different ways of thinking of the characters and the language can be considered as a form of protest against a state that continue to be associated with oppression and indifference. Therefore, those who do not comprehend these jargons are incapable of fighting criminal organizations and are doomed to fail.

The private language the *Bhais* employ is also strictly connected with a violent world. “Now this was our own language, kanchas and gullels for bullets and pistols” (Seth 2006: 112). Speaking a private language is not only a way to create bonds, but also to own the nominated object and share it only within a close circle of accolites.

6. Captain Bellodi and Inspector Sartaj Singh

Both Captain Bellodi and Inspector Sartaj have their personal sense of justice, and their ideas of right and wrong do not always coincide with legality. Sartaj is not the first policeman in his family, in fact he has followed in the footsteps of his father and grandfather. In *Sacred Games* the reader discovers the corruption of the police in particular through the deputy commissioner Parulkar who is earning money illegally thanks to “right alliances” especially with a *Bhai*, Suleiman Isa, who lives in the Middle East, but “works” in Mumbai. Sartaj tries to be different from his chief (and mentor), but he also has to accept money from victims because he does not earn enough:

When Sartaj had been married, he had taken a certain pride in never accepting cash, but after the divorce he had realized how much Megha’s money had protected him from the world, from the necessities of the streets he lived in. A nine-hundred-rupee monthly transportation allowance hardly paid for three days of fuel for his

Bullet [...] and there was nothing left for the investigation of a young man's death in Navnagar. So Sartaj took cash now, and was grateful for it (Chandra 2006: "Policeman's Day").

Thus, in the end Sartaj's image is not really tainted by corruption; he is not greedy and only resorts to bribery in order to do his job better. It is the government that pays its representatives too little that actually takes the blame. Likewise, towards the end of the novel, Sartaj makes a deal with Iffat-bibi (boss Suleiman Isa's maternal aunt), but it is only to discover where the atomic bomb is hidden and to save the world. Therefore, Sartaj does not always embody the image of the ideal policeman, but the reader "forgives" him, because compromise appears the only way to pursue justice.

Like Bellodi, Sartaj can be considered a sort of outsider. He "appears both at odds with the ways of the city and unable, or unwilling, to embrace its excesses, hampered, so it seems, by a tradition, and by values, of a different India" (Belliappa 2008). Sartaj, unlike his boss, is not greedy. He does not help people for money, as the sub-plot of the blackmailed lady, Kamala Pandey, shows. However, after a long investigation in which he has discovered Gurujji's destructive plan, he has to come to a compromise with Iffat-bibi in order to find the bomb.

In Captain¹² Bellodi's mentality there is no space for any type of corruption: "His ideals of justice, freedom and truth make him intransigent with any compromise that supports crime and injustice" (Jackson 1981: 14). Throughout the novel, he is described as a very intelligent and learned man (he often cites classic writers) and, because of his elevated ideal of justice, he is ready to fight (and even die) to pursue his aim. His obstinacy in seeking truth derives from his past. Born in a Republican family, he was a partisan during the Second World War, and from this experience, he has learnt the importance of liberty and equality of all men. This is evident during the interrogations, because he is civil to everybody, even criminals, unlike his colleagues who behave arrogantly and often obtain information using the power of fear. Sometimes, however he has to admit to his chagrin that honest, humane methods do not pay off.

¹² Bellodi is a captain of the Carabinieri. Founded by Vittorio Emanuele I in 1814, they were originally only a part of the army (light infantry), but in 1861 they officially obtained the recognition as Italian army. In 2000 the Carabinieri became an independent armed force managed by the Ministry of Defence.

The captain had felt a sudden, sombre sense of discouragement; of disillusion, helplessness. That name or *ingiuria* or whatever it was, was finally out; but it had only come out at the second when the sergeant-major had suddenly seemed to become for her a terrifying threat of inquisition, of condemnation (Sciascia 1961: 43-44).

Equality in *The Day of the Owl* is a sort of mark of Bellodi's foreignness. This is evident from the first description of the captain:

The captain was young, tall and fair-skinned. At his first words the Santa Fara members thought, with a mixture of relief and scorn, 'A mainlander'. Mainlanders are decent enough but just don't understand things (Sciascia, 1961: 16).

In fact, Bellodi tries his best to understand Sicilians, but he cannot bring himself to share their viewpoint. Through his civility and sense of equality he astonishes suspects, colleagues and, above all, shady politicians who feel sure that with "a mainlander" they will be free to conduct their illicit affairs unhampered.

Equality and justice are not part of Sartaj's moral constitution, because the meaning of legal and illegal does not always coincide with right or wrong. For instance, when a blackmailed bride, Kamala Pandey, asks for his help, at first he refuses because he considers her only as a spoiled rich dame accustomed to obtaining everything through her money. However, after he has solved the case and found the blackmailer, he beats him up because the man is guilty of a heinous crime and, blinded with presumption, even offends Sartaj by trying to make him his accomplice. "He carefully aimed his kicks [...] and the pleasure of it throbbed in Sartaj's hand" (Chandra 2006: "The End of the World"). Sartaj does not believe in the equality of men and his system of values is independent of the law and even the Rights of Man.

7. Mumbai and Sicily: the setting

The investigations are conducted in two specific places: Mumbai in *Sacred Games* and Sicily (more specifically a small unnamed village near Palermo) in *The Day of the Owl*. In both cases the influence of

the place on the protagonists cannot be overstated, but in the novels it is shown in different ways.

In *Sacred Games* Mumbai is well described, not in a univocal way, but depending on the point of view of every character. Sartaj for example feels like an outsider:

now [Mumbai] was too vast, escaped from him, each family adding to the next and the next until there was that cool and endless glow, impossible to know, or escape. Given it to himself in gift, the memory of a happier place? (Chandra 2006: “Policeman’s Day”).

During his life, Sartaj has witnessed the transformation of the city and he remembers a happier past, the period of his childhood, in contrast to the present-day city that has become too vast to be fully comprehended. He feels different, belonging to an older generation that is now disappearing, and for this reason, in the first chapter of the novel, he even considers suicide.

The situation changes dramatically in the last pages of *Sacred Games*. Sartaj is happy to be back in Mumbai. After a pilgrimage to Amritsar:

Sartaj drank it all in, incredulous that he had missed all this while he had been away, and that he was glad to be back. [...] ‘Once the air of this place touches you’ Katekar had said ‘you are useless for anywhere else’ (Chandra 2006: “Mere Sahiba”).

At the end of the investigation into Gaitonde’s suicide, after saving the world from the atomic bomb and possibly World War 3, and thanks to his new relationship with Mary, Sartaj feels reinvigorated, because he has finally understood how to survive in the metropolis. He is now ready to start a new day and a new life in his big, now more familiar city. Sartaj is now ready to take in his stride a certain level of injustice and violence, conscious that he is working on the right side.

Unlike *Sacred Games*, in which the action takes place in recognisable city, in *The Day of the Owl* everything happens in an unspecified place. The homicide takes place in a square in “S.” and the captain investigates in “C.” and “B.”, but, apart from the initial letters and some cues that suggest to the reader that Palermo is not far, the place is never precisely described. Moreover, the reader knows that everything happens in the post-war years, but the exact date is

never specified either. Consequently, “S.,” “C.” and “B.” become synonyms with Sicily at any time in the aftermath of the Fascist regime and this device makes the novel exemplary¹³.

The only place minutely described in *The Day of the Owl* evokes death: the *Chiarchiaro*. It is in the countryside where Nicolosi’s dead body is found. On reaching the point the captain thinks: “This is where God throws in the sponge” (Sciascia 1961: 85). Bellodi here makes a comparison between the evil and the good of men. In fact, *Chiarchiaro* is characterized by shrubs and black rocks, but is surrounded by a flourishing and colourful nature. The author uses the *Chiarchiaro* as a metaphor to describe the waste heart of Sicilians which even God cannot touch, recognizing his defeat. And this reflection is emphasized by the popular expression: “*E lu cuccu ci dissi a li cuccuotti: a lu chiarchiaru nni vidiemmu tutti*”¹⁴ (Sciascia 1961: 86), that underlines the sense of death emanated by the *chiarchiaro*.

Importantly, although a *polentone*¹⁵ (Sciascia 1961: 93) and unlike Sartaj, from the beginning Bellodi tries to comprehend and change Sicily, yet he fails. In the end every criminal he has arrested is freed. Nonetheless, after a brief period in Parma, he decides to return to Sicily: “[...] before reaching home he knew, with utter lucidity, that he loved Sicily and would go back. ‘Even if it’s the end of me,’ he said aloud” (Sciascia 1961: 120). Bellodi is aware of his failure and knows that returning to “C.” means running risks (even his very life), but he cannot help trying to bring justice to Sicily, because he is an idealist who hopes in a better future with less violence and more justice.

Considered as detective stories, both novels have a happy ending as both detectives solve their cases. Considered as social novels, both end with a failure to contain the physical and moral violence of their respective setting, a violence that is deeply rooted in mismanagement and coloniality. Readers must recognise that it is not possible to fight this violence without recurring to a much harsher one, like the fascists tried to do, in vain, or like Guruji would do. However, taken as place

¹³ Crepaldi Speaks of “valore esemplare” (Crepaldi 2002: 16).

¹⁴ Sicilian dialect: “an owl said to its owlets: we’ll all meet in the end at the *Chiarchiaro*” (Sciascia 1961: 86).

¹⁵ The Italian word means “polenta-eater”. It is a depreciative way to define a person who comes from the north.

sensitive novels, they are both successful and even optimistic in that their protagonists learn to love their environments and long to be there and mix with other people, even when they know it will entail hard labour, compromise and danger. Even knowing that their integrity as policemen may be tested and stained in this environment, they accept it as a reasonable price to pay in order to serve the place they have come to love.

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