

**A Critical Analysis of Chandra's use of doubles in his modern Indian ghost story 'Dharma'
to create a sense of the uncanny.**

Vikram Chandra's ghost story 'Dharma' is set in Bombay and centers on Major Antia, who returns to sell his childhood home in Bombay after requesting to be relieved of his military command due to a phantom pain from his amputated leg that is troubling him. On his return home, he finds out that the house is haunted and Major Antia struggles to confront the ghost of his repressed past in order to exorcise the ghost from the house, so that he can sell the property. The surprise twist of this modern Indian ghost story is that Major Antia ends up confronting not the child-ghost of his dead brother Soli, but the ghost of himself as a child.¹

Chandra uses doubles to create a sense of the uncanny in 'Dharma'. The doubles that he creates in the story represent binary oppositions where the identification of a presence is accompanied by a sense of its opposite: absence.² This binary opposition creates a sense of alienation in the reader which can be read as a manifestation of the 'diasporic uncanny' in this story. In my essay I will draw upon five examples of 'doubles' that successfully create the uncanny effect in Chandra's story and create a sense of alienation that reflects the 'diasporic uncanny' described by Punter.³ I will specifically reference Freud's explanation of the double as a literary device that 'has the function of observing and criticizing the self and exercising a censorship within the mind, and which we become aware of as our "conscience".⁴

¹ Vikram Chandra, 'Dharma' in Love and Longing in Bombay (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), pp. 1-28.

² Andrew Teverson, "The Uncanny Structure of Cultural Difference" in the Sculpture of Anish Kapoor' in Gothic Studies, 5.2 (November 2003), p. 82

³ David Punter, 'The Uncanny' in The Routledge Companion to Gothic, ed. by Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2007), pp. 133-134.

⁴ Helene Cixous, 'Fiction and its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's Das Unheimliche (The "Uncanny")', New Literary History, 7.3 (Spring, 1976) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/468561.pdf> [1 December 2009], p. 630
Note that this essay incorporates a translation of Freud's essay, from which the quotation is taken.

Major Antia's story begins with the mention of a pain in a missing leg. The odd thing about this phantom pain is that the leg has been missing for twenty years and has never shown a phantom pain until Major Antia's fiftieth birthday. The pain intensifies over time, denying him sleep and creates a worry in Antia that he may make a mistake at work that will jeopardize the lives of his men. So, he asks to be relieved of his command and returns to his childhood home. But, the pain continues to haunt him there. Freud's essay on the Uncanny states that, 'among instances of frightening things there must be one class in which the frightening element can be shown to be something repressed which recurs. This class of frightening things would then constitute the uncanny'.⁵

The phantom limb is a reminder of loss, a negative space that is the opposite of Major Antia's good leg. The absence of his leg already creates a sense of the uncanny in the story, but by giving the phantom limb the feeling of pain the missing leg is suddenly animated, even though it doesn't exist. The missing leg becomes present and absent at the same time. The uncanny effect is thus intensified by this recurring pain. Major Antia's pain is due to repressed guilt caused by the death of his brother while they were playing together as children; something that Major Antia has not dealt with in the past. It is this intensification of pain that eventually leads Major Antia to the confrontation with his own self as a child in the story, that is, the child-ghost that haunts his childhood home. The confrontation results in psychological reconciliation with his repressed guilt from the past releasing his phantom pain and he is able to laugh again.⁶

⁵ Cixous, 'Fiction and its Phantoms' p. 634.

⁶ David Punter, 'The Phantomatic, the Transcolonial' in Postcolonial Imaginings: Fictions of a New World Order (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 66.

The second double that the author mentions is that of the haunted house. The author begins with an unusual narration technique where the narrator introduces himself as well as the narrator of Major Antia's story, called Subramaniam, who doesn't explain his relationship with the events or the characters in the story. The reader is left without knowing how Subramaniam has come to know Major Antia's story. Before the narration of Major Antia's story begins, the 'I' in the story mentions a house in Bombay that people suppose is haunted:

It was one of those old three-storied houses with balconies that ran all the way around set in the middle of a garden filled with palms and fish ponds. It sat stubbornly in the middle of towering apartment buildings, and it had been empty as far back as anyone could remember, and so of course the story that explained this waste of golden real estate was one of ghosts and screams in the night. (Chandra, p.2)

In Subramaniam's narration of Major Antia's story, Chandra creates an uncanny doubling of this haunted house:

The house stood in a square plot on prime residential land in Khar, surrounded by new, extravagant constructions coloured the pink and green of new money. But it was mostly dark brown, stained by decades of sea air and monsoon rains, and in the late afternoon sun it seemed to gather the light about it as it sat surrounded by trees and untidy bushes. There was in its three stories, in the elegant arches on the balconies, and in the rows of shuttered windows, something rich and dense and heavy, like the smell of gun oil on an old hunting rifle. (Chandra, p. 9)

There is something ghostly about the appearance of the first house in the text. One house is assumed to be haunted but potentially has no ghost whereas the other one definitely has a ghost in it, a presence. Both houses are described in the colonial style and are a legacy of the British

Empire. As Punter writes, 'They are taken as a source of distinction, as representing an unassailable truth about history; they confront us with an extraordinary form of alien intrusion yet at the same time they signify that the 'locality' has been, if only in some uncanny and mysterious sense, important in the eyes of the outside world.'⁷ The colonial styles of the houses are a reminder of India's colonial past which haunts modern India even now. Chandra alludes to this when he describes both of the old houses sitting among modern 'towering blocks' or 'new, extravagant constructions'.

The third set of doubles in 'Dharma' are of Major Antia and his brother Soli, who dies while they are flying a kite as children. Major Antia blames himself for Soli's death as he fell on top of Soli when they both fell three feet from the roof top of childhood home onto the bricks below. (Chandra, p. 27) Instead of dealing with the death of his brother, he represses the pain of loss and distances himself from both his childhood home which is the scene of his brother's death and from his parents, who appear to reflect disappointment and weariness caused by Soli's death whenever Major Antia looks at them. (Chandra, p.9) It is the creation of the binary opposites of life and death; presence and absence, which results in Major Antia alienating himself from all that is familiar in his life. He essentially alienates himself from his points of origin, that is, his parents who gave birth to him and his childhood home. This sense of alienation is similar to what the diaspora feel when they migrate away from their home or point of origin.

The fourth set of doubles in 'Dharma' is linked closely to the death of Major Antia's brother. By not dealing with the death of his brother, Major Antia is doomed to repeat a pattern of killing brothers in his military career. The doubles I refer to here are Major Antia and his

⁷ David Punter, 'Haunting the Secret Site' in *Postcolonial Imaginings: Fictions of a New World Order* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 87

troops who parachute into Sylhet during the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971 in essence to kill the ‘enemy’ who used to belong to the same country. Major Antia and his troops attacked Pakistanis who, before the creation of Pakistan, used to be Indian. Major Antia’s ‘brothers’ thus become the enemy, the Other. His repressed guilt from killing his brothers during the war is thus manifested by a pain in the leg that he self-amputated during this war after it was blown off by an enemy mine. The uncanny effect is created here again through the binary opposites of brothers who live and brothers who are killed due to political divides.⁸ Politics created a division between brothers. The Self became divided to create an Other. This Other can be represented by the missing leg, the absence of those enemy brothers killed in the war.

In fact, the clue to the story about what is haunting Major Antia’s past turns out not to be Soli, but the dead soldiers of his past. The clue is in the final confrontation with the child-ghost of Major Antia’s own Self. The ghost wears Major Antia’s military uniform and has his own name written above the pocket of the uniform. (Chandra, p.27) The uncanny effect of the presence of this child-ghost of Major Antia’s own self intensifies the sense of alienation Major Antia feels from the violent separation of his country, which results in him having to kill his own brothers. (Chandra, pp.14-18)

This leads nicely to the fifth double in the story, which relates to the presence of two ghosts in the story: the phantom pain and the child-ghost. In both cases, the sense of alienation intensifies as Major Antia is familiar with the loss of his leg, but unfamiliar with the phantom pain that he begins to feel from his amputation. Similarly, Major Antia is familiar with himself as a child, but not with the ghost version that keeps asking him, ‘Where shall I go?’ to which Major Antia has no answer. (Chandra, p. 27)

⁸ ‘Indo-Pakistani War of 1971’, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indo-Pakistani_War_of_1971>[19 January 2010]

The uncanny effect created by doubles in 'Dharma' intensifies the sense of loss and alienation that is characteristic of this story and also, of the 'diasporic uncanny.' Punter describes the 'diasporic uncanny' as a 'profound effect of displacement, an uncanny absence of origin, which forbids entirely any attempt at a convincing and unitary notion of origins.'⁹ Major Antia's self-inflicted pain through self-amputation and self-inflicted alienation from his childhood home and his parents are what create a sense of the 'diasporic uncanny' in this story. When Antia returns from the military to sell his home, his sense of unease at home is due to the years spent with repressed guilt from the brothers he believes he has killed, the confrontation with his child-ghost allows him to confront the repressed guilt from his past lightening his pain and allowing him to laugh for the first time in the story. By confronting the repressed guilt of his past he is unburdened and free once again to return home.

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