

Article

# “Only I Am the Brahma”: Religion and Narrative in the Netflix Thriller Series *Sacred Games* (2018–2019)

Ana Ashraf

Department of English Literature, KU Leuven, 3000 Leuven, Belgium; anaashraf@ymail.com

**Abstract:** *Sacred Games* (2018–2019), based on Vikram Chandra’s novel of the same title, is India’s first Netflix crime thriller series. This series shows how the lives of a Sikh policeman, Sartaj Singh, and a powerful gangster, Ganesh Eknath Gaitonde, weave together in a mission to save Mumbai from a nuclear attack. The series immediately received critical acclaim and viewers’ appreciation, but the way the series represents the (mis)use of metanarratives of religious and political ideologies, as they come to influence Gaitonde’s life, needs further perusal. For this purpose, this article investigates how Gaitonde’s life, and its abrupt end, are shaped and challenged by the larger ideological and religious metanarratives of his milieu. At the same time, this article examines Gaitonde’s ability to gain control over his own narrative despite the overwhelming presence of these metanarratives. More specifically, Gaitonde’s transgressive will and his desire to tell his story are brought under scrutiny. Along with the analysis of Gaitonde’s character, this article also examines how the use of various cinematic and narrative techniques heightens self-reflexivity and metafictionality in *Sacred Games* and emphasizes the role of mini-narratives as unique, singular, and contingent, in contrast to the generic, universal, and permanent tones of metanarratives.



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## 1. Introduction

*Sacred Games* (2018–2019), based on Vikram Chandra’s novel of the same title, is India’s first Netflix crime thriller series. Divided into two seasons of eight episodes each, the series depicts how the lives of a Sikh policeman, Sartaj Singh (played by Saif Ali Khan), and a notorious and powerful gangster, Ganesh Eknath Gaitonde (played by Nawazuddin Siddique), weave together in a mission to save Mumbai from a nuclear attack. The series consists of two parallel storylines: the first one revolves around Gaitonde’s life and his growth as a gang leader in Mumbai in the 1980s and 1990s. His life story grows against the backdrop of the rise of right-wing Hindutva<sup>1</sup> ideology in India, as well as India’s entry into the global market. The second story is situated in modern-day India, where Sartaj Singh is shown to have a tumultuous time reconciling himself with the extrajudicial killing of a young Muslim boy. Working with morally decrepit colleagues in the police department, Sartaj Singh has trouble finding his place within a corrupt system. Gaitonde, for his part, has now returned to Mumbai after many years, but this time it is with a changed heart. Rather than his usual killing spree, he wishes to save the city from a looming nuclear attack. Since he distrusts the police in its ability to listen to his story, Gaitonde hides in an abandoned mall and talks to Sartaj over the phone as an anonymous caller. Being familiar with Sartaj’s father from his earlier years in jail, Gaitonde chooses to entrust Sartaj not only with the information about the looming nuclear attack, but also with the story of his entire life. However, once Sartaj manages to locate Gaitonde in the abandoned mall where he is hiding, Gaitonde commits suicide. Although Gaitonde’s life already ends in the first episode, his narrative voice is consistently present to lead Sartaj and the viewer into the secret labyrinth of his childhood, his early adulthood, and his entry into the underworld of Mumbai.

*Sacred Games* has received both critical acclaim and viewers' appreciation (cf. The Indo Asian News Service (IANS 2018; Naahar 2020)), but the way in which the metanarratives of political ideologies and religious practices and doctrines shape Gaitonde's life needs further perusal. Based on Jean-François Lyotard's concepts of mini- and metanarratives (Lyotard 1984), this article investigates how Gaitonde's mini-narrative relates to the metanarratives at play in the background. More specifically, this article investigates how and to what extent Gaitonde's life story, and its abrupt end, is determined by a confluence of the rise of right-wing Hindu nationalism, the religious practices and doctrines as they are led and propagated by the spiritual yogic leader Gurujī, and the interconnection of the Mumbai underworld within the political sphere. The tension between Gaitonde's mini-narrative, as an individual who wants to carve his life path out on his own terms, on the one hand, and the metanarratives propagated by certain political and religious actors operative within India, on the other hand, are determined by the way power operates in various strata of society.

Finally, along with the analysis of Gaitonde's narrative, this article demonstrates how allusions to various classical and modern stories (literary and cinematic) make *Sacred Games* both self-reflexive and metafictional in nature, which, in turn, positions *Sacred Games* within the existing tradition of storytelling. At the same time, this article shows how the series tries to do justice to the uniqueness of mini-narratives in contrast to dominating metanarratives.

To guide my analyses, this article seeks to answer the following questions. In which ways is the mini-narrative of Gaitonde's life intertwined with the metanarratives propagated by various religious and political actors? How do the notions of "sacred", "power", and "dharm" play their part in Gaitonde's life and in the series at large? Despite the over-permeation of metanarratives, how does Gaitonde gain authority and power over his own narrative? Is the incorporation of various storytelling traditions a way to challenge the supremacy of different metanarratives?

## 2. Ganesh Eknath Gaitonde—The Transgressive Gangster or the Ultimate Saviour?

### 2.1. Gaitonde's Struggle

It is significant to see how Gaitonde's life turns in a direction where he uses his will to carve an individual and unique path for himself that defies the traditional role of a Brahmin, separates him from the familial bonds, and throws him into a much larger whirlpool of socio-political and religious forces that come to shape his character. Although born in the small village of Islapur to a Hindu *pundit*,<sup>2</sup> Gaitonde perceives his father as nothing more than a "beggar" (S01E01). From an early age onward, he shows an aversion for his father who is a Brahmin *pundit*, as he lives frugally on the charity from others. On an occasion when his father is collecting rice from a village woman, the young Gaitonde asks him: "Father, is God everywhere?" To which his father responds, "Of course. He is everywhere". Gaitonde rebukes, "But he doesn't beg!" The series shows his father performing the duties of a *pundit* passionately. What his father does to follow his religious path as a Brahmin *pundit* is perceived by Gaitonde as a "weakness" (S01E01). At the same time, the fact that his father's begging does not suffice to fulfill the needs of the house incites anger in him. In contrast to his father, Gaitonde finds his mother adorable. Being "affectionate" and observant of Gaitonde's needs, his mother proves to be his only solace in the house, as he says, "When it was dark, she was the light in our lives" (S01E01). And even though his mother is involved in an extra-marital affair, Gaitonde can understand her decision. However, at one point, when Gaitonde returns home in search of solace from his mother after being bullied by other children regarding his mother's extra-marital affair, he finds, to his chagrin, his mother sleeping with her lover, without any ear for her son's troubles. This moment provokes him to kill his mother with a large stone. As a consequence, his father takes the blame for the murder on his own head, while Gaitonde, liberated from the influence of his parents, runs away from home to Mumbai.

This scene in which Gaitonde kills his mother is very significant for multiple reasons. First, it indicates the earliest incident when Gaitonde, as a child, uses his inferior power

over an adult. The use of power in this instance can be interpreted as a way of regaining control over his mother's body. By using brutal force as the means to mediate between himself and his mother, he reduces his mother to an object without any will. Moreover, by performing this action, he relieves himself of the need to follow in his father's footsteps, to abide by the traditional idea of *dharm*.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the use of force here becomes a "productive", "formative" and "positive" agency (quoted in Garland 1990, p. 138), at least according to Gaitonde's own interpretation, which transforms his life path and presents new avenues. As he says, "[W]hat is religion, the mother or the father? Whatever it is, I was free. I wanted a new religion" (S01E01). Although the English subtitles of this dialogue use the term "religion", the Hindi word used by Gaitonde is *dharm*. The show does not explicitly elaborate on the specific meaning in which the term is used, and the subtitles translate the term into religion which at times undermines the overall socio-cultural meaning and implication of the term imbricated in *dharm*. However, analyzing various occasions when Gaitonde uses this term, one observes that the term is used in its original meaning from Sanskrit as established law, morality or duty, as well as its more recent connotation of religion as "a reified system of beliefs, practices, and ethics" (Gottschalk 2013, p. 301).

Having been set free from all the traditional notions and cultural laws, Gaitonde finds a new religion in the absolute liberty of making his own choices in life. As he claims, "That's when I decided that I will be the master of my fate" (S01E01). Not only does he learn how to survive in Mumbai, but he also soon learns to bargain for power by manipulating the socio-political and religious norms of the city. Gaitonde found his first job as a waiter in an upper-caste Hindu hotel due to his Brahmin origin: "I benefited from being a Brahmin's son" (S01E01). This hotel, which catered to the upper-caste Hindus, boasts about serving pure vegetarian food. Catching Gaitonde serving food with dirty hands, the restaurant owner punishes and forewarns him that people do not come here because the food is good, instead, "[t]hey come here because everything is clean and pure" (S01E01). For months, Gaitonde is left unpaid for his work. Meanwhile, in order to make extra money, Gaitonde becomes a drug peddler. To make matters worse, he sells the drug to the same customers who come to the Hindu Hotel. Once the owner of the hotel discovers it, he not only beats him badly but even delays paying Gaitonde his wages.

Enraged by this event, Gaitonde comes up with a plan to ruin the facade of "purity" of this hotel by mixing pieces of chicken in the meals of his customers; as he narrates, "[a] chicken bone in a Hindu hotel can cause more damage than a gangster. It has been happening since pre-independence days. To create a rift among the Muslims, dump pork in a mosque. To incite a riot among Hindus, dump beef in a temple" (S01E01). The long-held reputation of the hotel shatters in pieces in a matter of seconds, while Gaitonde is left with the sadistic pleasure of taking revenge on the owner, by using the motif of religious norms and prohibitions for his own benefit. As he tells us, "[f]rom the Hindu hotel I learned how religion can f\*ck anyone over" (S01E02). Just as Gaitonde used his own force to throw off the burden of living a minimalist life as it has been propagated by traditional narratives related to *dharm* during his childhood, he again twitches the grand narrative of Brahminic purity laws and prohibitions for his own good. Working in a puritanical Hindu hotel as a waiter, and simultaneously selling drugs to its customers, Gaitonde justifies the dual nature of his work as follows: "Religion found business in purity and I worked to make sinning a business" (S01E02). Indeed, the piety, morality, and, ultimately, *moksh*<sup>4</sup> that religion, here embodied in Brahminic purity laws and prohibitions, promises to its followers, had become so permeated and taken for granted within Indian society for the past centuries that its metanarrative became entrenched within money-making and business by certain actors. Gaitonde, who sees through the seemingly pious goals and liberating promises of this religion, rejects this hypocrisy and instead uses his own will and force to turn the financial benefits from the hands of religious players into his own hands. Ironically, he does not shun the use of religious vocabulary, as he seems to imply that the "sinning business" he is establishing is as "sinful" as what Brahminic religion has done by turning the whole metanarrative into a business. From this moment onward, Gaitonde

uses all his might to enter the illegal businesses and to create a criminal gang. In doing so, Gaitonde transgresses even further away from the traditional notion of *dharm* or the duty of a Brahmin as was already the case. Much of his transformation from a poor Hindu boy from a small village to a powerful gangster in the financial hub of India has to do with his consistent acts of transgression. In this regard, his peculiar use of power leads him to a path of transgression where, contrary to his father's practices, he determines his own *dharm* (albeit a distorted one) to challenge the various socio-political norms and to exploit religious motifs for his own gains. In this respect, his life goes astray by violating the traditional notions of Brahmin duty. At the same time, his life choices are also a critique of the hypocrisies that live within any religious metanarrative around him. The use of power by Gaitonde is thus both enabling (cf. Dahl 1957) and constraining (cf. Bachrach and Baratz 1962, p. 948)<sup>5</sup>. It is enabling in the fact that it opens a door to opportunities that he would otherwise not get, and constraining, in that he will be used as an instrument of violence by greater forces later in life.

Looking at the trajectory of his choices and actions, one might say that Gaitonde's life is a mini-narrative that is "provisional, contingent, temporary, and relative[,] and which provide[s] a basis for [his] actions" within the specific circumstances he faces (Barry 1995, p. 64). Rather than being fully defined and determined by the metanarratives of various religions and/or religious philosophies within India, nor by the rising Hindutva political ideology, Gaitonde uses his free will to live life according to his own terms and soon becomes a force to be reckoned with. This at best is how Gaitonde would have liked to think of his life; however, as the narrative moves further forward, the viewer, as well as Gaitonde himself, realizes that regardless of his image, or rather because of his image, as a self-made powerful gangster, his life is soon on the verge of being engulfed, determined, and defined by an even more dangerous metanarrative around him. In other words, despite living a mini-narrative based on a unique "decision-making process" against the backdrop of various metanarratives in society, Gaitonde ultimately falls prey to one such metanarrative (Lukes 2005, p. 27). Indeed, despite the determination of twisting all kinds of metanarratives for his own purposes, he ultimately cannot twist them all and becomes a pawn in a complex maze that combines the already discussed metanarratives into yet another metanarrative: a confluence of right-wing Hindu nationalism, religious practices and doctrines as they are led and propagated by a spiritual yogic leader named Guruji, and the political tentacles within the Mumbai underworld itself.

It is precisely for this reason that *Sacred Games* places great emphasis on interweaving important historical events, not as impressive collages, but as events that have consequences for Gaitonde and by extension for all of us. It, therefore, becomes incumbent to understand this inevitable interconnection between Gaitonde's mini-narrative and the metanarratives that come to influence it. One way of doing so is by analyzing Khanna, also known as Guruji's role in Gaitonde's life.

## 2.2. Guruji's Plans and Gaitonde's Actions

"Do you believe in God?" is a strange invocation, especially when it comes from a gangster with a heavy criminal record to his name. In his first interaction with Sartaj over the phone, Gaitonde asks Sartaj if he believes in God. Seemingly, a belief in God is a prerequisite to enter the strange and unfamiliar world of his narrative. A similar inquisition awaits the viewer who, in the opening scene, hears Gaitonde's voice, "Do you believe in God?" The question follows with a scene in which a dog falls from a high-rise building. By the time the dog reaches the ground with a thud and the blood oozes from its body, the same voice, as if providing an answer to his own question, exclaims: "God does not give a f\*\*\*". In hindsight, the viewer knows that the background voice is that of Gaitonde and the question he asked is the central issue discussed in the series. As some of the central issues that *Sacred Games* deals with are religious extremism, and the (mis)use of religion for political purposes, one can say that this scene acts as a parallel forewarning. Just as Gaitonde forewarns Sartaj about the great danger the city will face in twenty-five days,

similarly, the series prepares the viewer about the interconnection of religious motifs and the lack of a divine intervention within everyday reality, including the malicious acts of gangsters like Gaitonde, leaving people to deal with their own actions on a political level. To understand it, one must examine the religious context that informs Gaitonde's notion of God, Gaitonde's character, his (dis)engagement with the Hindu religion, and finally his desperate urge to be heard.

A tradition of religious plurality has existed in India for almost two thousand years. People of various communities, ranging from Jain and Buddhist communities to Muslims, Parsees, Sikhs, Christians, and many other communities have co-existed with a large majority of Hindus. This religious diversity of Indian society has, throughout its history, brought various political tensions, but with the rise of Hindu nationalism in the wake of the struggle for independence against the British Raj, and especially with the popularity of the BJP from the 1990s onwards, these tensions became all the more emphasized. The BJP, an offspring from the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (National Volunteer Organization) (RSS) established in 1925, seeks to merge Indian nationalism with Hindu religious sentiments. In doing so, it seeks to establish Hindu majoritarianism which, as a consequence, overshadows the rights of other religious minorities in the country (see Talbot 2016). In fact, Arundhati Roy claims that though India declared itself to be a "socialist secular democratic republic", in practice, it has "functioned as an upper-caste Hindu state" (Roy 2019). The increasing political power and popularity of the BJP led to the demolition of the 450-year-old Babri mosque in Ayodhya in 1992 by an angry Hindu mob, which ensued a long epoch of hate crimes within the public arena against the Indian Muslims. With the country opening itself up to the international market since the 1990s, it was mostly upper-caste Hindus who profited from this internationalization, leaving lower-caste Dalits ("untouchables") and other religious minorities economically aloof (Munshi 2019, p. 795).

While the first series shows Gaitonde's rise to power in the underworld of Mumbai based on his own decisions, by the second series, one comes to see how Gaitonde becomes a pawn in a larger "game" of both religious and political agents above his reach. As if in narratorial voice, he tells Sartaj: "Until you hear the story of where I come from, you won't understand this religious conflict" (S01E02). One of the most important figures in this whole network is the character of Guruji (played by Pankaj Tripathi). Not much is known of Guruji's life by his disciples, but through his yogic teachings about *satyug*<sup>6</sup> (an ideal world based on truth), the correct interpretation of *dharm*, and various other notions about how one ought to understand life, Guruji has earned a strong influence over many Indian people. In this respect, he exemplifies some of the current popular gurus<sup>7</sup> or spiritual teachers operating in India today. The power that Guruji exerts over his "disciples" lies partially in his "preternatural sense of calmness" (Jha 2018), and partially in his use of mythical stories to elaborate his understanding of life, sacrifice, duty, truth, and the ideal world, and in his repeated references to sacred Hindu scriptures for his own profit. Like other self-proclaimed guru-figures, Guruji takes it upon himself to (re)interpret the sacred Hindu texts as he deems it best for himself, and especially for those within the political sphere who seek to establish what Guruji preaches. On the surface, Guruji preaches about various spiritual issues that are indeed beneficial for the human being. But underneath this garb of spirituality, he is involved in a drug racket. He uses a drug called *gochi* which is served in the form of an apparently harmless tea to his disciples. The effects it produces on the mind include hallucinations and a confrontation with one's deepest memories. The consumer of this drug might experience euphoria, shame, and spiritual awakening. Gradually, the drug takes hold of its users, and they enter a state of helpless dependency and obedience to Guruji, as he is the main provider of this drug. With the support of local right-wing Hindu politicians, he runs a successful drug cartel within India, but he wants to expand his influence internationally, and for this, he needs the might of a gangster like Gaitonde. Upon discovering that Gaitonde is not interested in being beguiled by any rhetoric of Hinduism or any form of spirituality, given Gaitonde's preceding determination to be his own boss and to make his own religion against other existing metanarratives, Guruji

carefully manipulates Gaitonde's life for 20 years and slowly forces him into obedience, albeit without Gaitonde's knowledge or consent at first glance.

At the prime of his strength in his youthfulness, Gaitonde has already rejected Guruji's offer to become part of his circle and to work for him; an offer that he receives indirectly through a local politician, Trivedi. Gaitonde does not know that, upon his rejection, the next twenty years of his life become planned, scripted, and predetermined by Guruji and his political proponents in such a way that Gaitonde is ultimately forced and subjugated to meet and work for Guruji, and to be influenced by his teachings. In this regard, despite Gaitonde's assumption that he had a free hand in living his life in the way it unfolded, one might argue that Gaitonde adhered to the stricture and law (*dharm*) as determined by another Brahmin, i.e., Guruji. Although traditionally considered a guiding force in one's life, *dharm*, when mingled with Guruji's vested interests, becomes a constraining force limiting the potential of free will in human actions and ascribing human subjects to a predetermined path, whether through Vedas or through the indirect guidance of another, more learned, Brahmin, as happens in Gaitonde's case. In this way, Gaitonde faces "constraint" from Guruji's exertion of power, which clearly inhibits Gaitonde's life in various ways to Guruji's advantage (cf. Bachrach and Baratz 1962, p. 948). Physically, Gaitonde is forced to live in jail and is later exiled to Kenya, away from his beloved city Mumbai. Secondly, Gaitonde's desire for absolute power and control comes under strain as he is constantly under surveillance, and he can no longer make free choices as in the past. This is also the instant when Gaitonde faces the influence of power from Guruji in a most invisible and imperceptible way. In this way, Gaitonde is under the greatest influence of power, as it "takes place when it is invisible and unobservable, whether in terms of interpersonal relations or institutional organizations" (Lukes 2005, p. 27).

After a period of almost two and a half decades, Gaitonde is ultimately convinced by Guruji's teachings. Guruji first teaches him to dissociate himself from everything that is material. At the same time, he introduces his *gochi* tea to Gaitonde. Upon being introduced to this tea by Guruji, Gaitonde explains his experience as follows: "Guruji gave me tea that looked more like a red soup. Who knows what it was made of, and what was in it!" (S02E03) After drinking this tea, Gaitonde encounters his deepest moments of shame and fear. In a hallucinating state, he imagines confronting his father in jail, who is being punished for Gaitonde's crime. As he confronts his father and asks for his forgiveness, which he never did in reality, he explains how "suddenly all the heavy weight of pain poured out of me. And everything felt very light" (S02E03). At this stage, he is convinced not only of Guruji's teachings but also of the usefulness of the drug used in the ashram<sup>8</sup>. As he says, "From that day on, I started a new trade. *Gochi Trade*. *Gochi* would be made in Guruji's ashram in Dubrovnik. And I would distribute it to all the ashrams and black markets all over the world" (S02E03).

Along with the habitual use of *gochi*, Guruji instills in Gaitonde the idea that this world is an evil place (*kalyug*)<sup>9</sup> and that "we", as the followers of the right path, must bring this world to its absolute destruction to enter the world of ultimate truth: *satyug*. Listening to Guruji's English talk about *satyug*, given in Croatia, Gaitonde describes Guruji's concepts of *satyug* as follows: "He said man f\*cked himself up because of greed and lust. And entered *kalyug* from *satyug*. A time when war is business, religion is business, love is business, music is business. Now there was only one way out of this *kalyug* [ . . . ] together we will find *satyug* again. That's how he became my third father" (S02E02).

Ultimately, Gaitonde starts to believe in *satyug*, a place of truth and an ideal sanctuary which will only come into realization after the complete destruction of this *kalyug* (i.e., the place of darkness). Guruji explains his plan for *satyug* as follows:

We need to go from *kalyug* to *satyug*. [ . . . ] The earth is dying of the burden of our weight. [ . . . ] Our lack of humanity is bleeding us dead [ . . . ] However, there is a way out, which in scientific terms is called a wormhole. Time and space can be bent to reach from one end to the other in a flash. *Kalyug* is a slow death. We need to speed up this process. [ . . . ] There exist three important historical

conflicts in the world. South and North Korea . . . Second, Israel and Palestine . . . Third, [and] the biggest one, India and Pakistan. They have been at war for over 70 years. And this is not a war of religion or nations. This is a war of civilizations. We have the next nine years to push this world into the next stage of evolution [ . . . ] One small step in the wrong direction will cause calamity. All we need to do is set one off between the borders of Pakistan and India (S02E05).

Guruji's plan to destroy Mumbai with a nuclear attack is the first flicker in a longer chain of destructive events which would ultimately, according to his narrative, bring about *satyug* in the world. In this way, Guruji's search for *satyug* through the destruction of this world forms what Foucault (1980) has termed the "most pervasive" exercise of power (p. 38). By creating a longing for a better world in his most powerful disciples, he transforms them into instruments of violence who can be used as pure vehicles to realize his dream, especially through political actions. Secondly, by amalgamating traditional wisdom with his interpretation of what constitutes good and evil and which actions should be taken to pursue one's ideal of a better world, Guruji constitutes knowledge and in some respects truth for his followers that, in turn, suit his own purposes and interests. This construction of truth and knowledge is indeed most pervasive as it creates a sense of duty among the followers, reduces an otherwise intricate human being into an instrument of violence and even legitimizes the use of force over another individual or even a whole community, as happens in Guruji's case. One might deduce that Guruji's power lies in his knowledge of traditional concepts like *dharm* or *satyug*, and mythical stories derived from the ancient Vedic texts, as well as his claims to know how to interpret and distinguish good from evil. By using this power, Guruji reduces Gaitonde into an unreflective instrument of violence. As Lyotard mentions, metanarratives in the name of "order", "unity", "identity", and "security" seem to "liquidate" the uniqueness and polysemy of human existence and various mini-narratives (quoted in Barry 1995, p. 65). In a similar vein, Guruji's plan seems to reduce Gaitonde's life, thoughts, and actions to nothingness. Lyotard rightly claims that these metanarratives are illusions, and challenges the "idea of a unitary end of history and of a subject" (quoted in Barry 1995, p. 65). Therefore, Guruji's plan to annihilate the world is at best a simplistic solution to a very intricate problem of human existence. *Sacred Games* depicts Guruji's metanarrative of *satyug* through skepticism and disbelief. By showing Gaitonde as an individual who takes action despite the tremendous pressure of these narratives, the series seems to challenge the power of any grand or totalizing narrative, even if they consist of a confluence of political, religious, and 'underworld' power (three very powerful agents). Indeed, despite Guruji's training and his dependency on *gochi*, Gaitonde has not lost the ability to think and therefore act by his own reason. This becomes clear when Gaitonde witnesses the atomic bomb as the means to bring *satyug* to realization, imagines the magnitude and the scale of its disaster, and feels deep empathy for his beloved city which will be destroyed if the bomb were to be activated. Gaitonde iterates this realization as follows: "The city of Bombay gave me everything. From being a waiter, I became the God of Gopalmath. It then struck me. What could be purer than giving without expectation of anything in return? If people could get this, the whole world's 'darkness' would finish right away. And there would be no need for Guruji's plan" (S02E06).

In this regard, Gaitonde's struggle is at two levels. At the level of experience, he wants to make personal choices that shape him as a self-made man, but circumstances and environment suppress this. At the level of narrative or storytelling, Gaitonde, by taking control over his own story, wants to ensure that no one should reduce him to being 'just the son of a Brahmin', 'a mere gangster' or, in the end, 'a plotter to destroy Mumbai'. The internal conflict is one of wanting to take control of his own life and his narrative, on the one hand, and constantly being on the verge of losing that control in the presence of "authoritative, overarching and totalizing" metanarratives of religious and political ideologies, on the other hand (cf. Lyotard 1984). This struggle in Gaitonde to reclaim authority over his own actions and create his own unique mini-narrative, rather than

being merged in the metanarrative of *satyug* propagated by Guruji, is depicted in the most cinematic and powerful scene of the series.

After perceiving the destruction that the nuclear bomb will unleash, Gaitonde arranges for a meeting with Guruji who, by now, has gone into hiding and awaits the perfect execution of his plan. At this stage, Gaitonde is the only one in the team of ten to twelve people who raises his dissenting voice to Guruji and says that the plan to attack should be abandoned. Sensing doubt and dissent in Gaitonde's tone, Guruji resorts to engaging him in a meditative session. He manipulates Gaitonde to take the *gochi* pill for the last time and chant the Vedic mantras along with him. The recitation of specific mantras from meditative practices is perfectly twisted by the information Guruji has of Gaitonde's life, i.e., his deepest sorrows, his fears, his failure, and so on. Mixing Gaitonde's emotions regarding unresolved issues from the past with a strong sense of shame, while gradually confirming that whatever Gaitonde did, it was inevitable, for which he should have no remorse, Guruji assumes that Gaitonde would return to a state of normalcy, which here implies resigning one's will in complete obedience to Guruji. Deep into this meditation, Gaitonde chants the following mantra along with Guruji:

I am supreme

I am insignificant

I am obscene

I am fierce!

I am Brahma!<sup>10</sup> (S02E07)

Slowly, in the continuous recitation of "I am Brahma", Gaitonde stands up from the lotus asana (a cross-legged sitting meditation pose). So far, he has only been repeating Guruji's words, but when he stands up, he suddenly and violently chants without the guidance of Guruji, "Only I am the Brahma!" (S02E07). At this moment, the camera stays focused on Gaitonde's face while the whole screen is turned red, and the viewer realizes that in his trance, Gaitonde suffocates Guruji to death while he keeps on repeating that he himself is God (Brahma).

There are two ways of interpreting this scene: one, and perhaps an obvious one at first glance, is that Guruji becomes the victim of the monster he has created. If that is the case, then even after his death, Guruji is partially successful, for that is what he would like Gaitonde to be—an impeccable instrument of killing. The second way of understanding this scene is that in the process of letting his rational self be taken over by chanting and meditative processes, Gaitonde invents a new mantra that Guruji does not teach him. "Only I am the Brahma" would imply that Gaitonde would not let others determine and fixate the meaning and purpose of his life, and that instead, Gaitonde is the only God over his own life. He would determine through his own actions what would become of his life, even at the cost of, or precisely the particular cost of, killing his beloved guru<sup>11</sup>. After he kills Guruji, even in his half-trance/half-drugged state, he runs away with "the book of time" (Kaal Garanth) which contains the secret of how to deactivate the atomic bomb that, by now, is on its way to be activated by the other followers of Guruji. In this way, Gaitonde reasserts the uniqueness of his narrative within the larger metanarratives of pure destruction and annihilation that Guruji had laid down before him. At this moment, not only does Gaitonde reclaim the agency to create his life path through his will, but he also nullifies Guruji's foolproof plan for destruction, thus challenging the ideological assumptions on which Guruji's teachings are based.

Gaitonde's realization of the pre-plotting of his entire life comes in the last episode of the whole series. This delay of information in one way keeps the audience's suspense intact, but it also shows the struggle that Gaitonde has to undergo before he can finally confront this systematic planning of his mini-narrative by agents far more powerful than himself. In order to stop the nuclear attack, after killing Guruji in a trance, Gaitonde kidnaps Trivedi, a local politician, who is also part of Guruji's special cult. Although Trivedi knows that

Guruji has been killed by Gaitonde, he has full faith in the perfect execution of Guruji's plan. Overconfident with faith, he wishes to confront Gaitonde with the deepest secret of his life to make him realize his powerlessness in front of Guruji's vision of the new world. Tied to a chair in a dingy basement, Trivedi provokes Gaitonde by informing him how, with Guruji's guidance, Trivedi maneuvered his life for the past two decades. He exclaims: "You are not Ashwa[t]thama<sup>12</sup>. Neither a king. You are just a slave for Guruji's new world. You are a slave. Nothing more". Gaitonde's first response is of absolute disbelief as he rebukes, "You are lying!". When Trivedi keeps asserting the same, Gaitonde loses his temper, starts abusing Trivedi verbally, and searches for an instrument to attack Trivedi. Soon he finds a heavy iron rod and starts hitting Trivedi, who cannot retaliate physically as he is tied to a chair. While beating Trivedi obsessively, Gaitonde keeps repeating: "Mother\*\*\*ker, I am Ashwa[t]thama" (S02E08). Despite Trivedi's repetitive assertion, Gaitonde does not want to believe that Guruji had planned his life in order to use him as an instrument in his plan. His last hope is his closest friend, Jojo. He invites her to the underground mall and wants her to confirm that whatever Trivedi told him is untrue. Contrary to his expectations, when he finds out that Jojo was also part of Guruji's group, he shoots her dead. Jojo's last words are a confirmation of what Trivedi told him: "Yes, I knew . . . how they took you for a ride for 20 years" (S02E08).

Showing how Gaitonde uses his transgressive will, the narrative seems to challenge the notion of the law and the scriptures which aims to control the nature and extent of human action. Just as he transgressed by disobeying his father in taking a different path from that a traditional Brahmin is supposed to follow, by impulsively killing his mother, and by involving himself in different criminal activities for his own gains, he transgresses at this point and uses his free will yet again, this time to save his city and its inhabitants. In doing so, Gaitonde's character and the narrative show how the religious notions of *dharm* are twisted and used to manipulate people's lives into actions that are morally questionable. Through his transgressive potential and free will, Gaitonde sees through Guruji's perilous plans and decides to take a different route than the one set out for him by Guruji, and, in doing so, actually chooses to act in a way that is morally a better option: to save a city and its inhabitants from death and destruction.

In other words, the series provokes one to think that when the words or actions of one individual are sacralized to the extent that they cannot be critically investigated by any other authority, this leads to a potentially dangerous cocktail of absolute destruction. This message is all the more relevant as the historical backdrop in which the series is situated shows how, quite often, the unreflective and perhaps unnecessary sacralization of a few people leads to the disempowerment of a multitude of other people. Indeed, India has seen the rise of nationalism, which is steeped in religious sentiment. The amalgamation of Hindutva religious fervor with Indian national identity has largely promoted an uncritical and majoritarian perspective, wherein Hindutva nationalism sees anything other than itself as a potential danger to the country. Eventually, it has led to the shaping up of a past which is ahistorical, a present that relies on jingoism and violence toward others, and a future that aims to reduce the diversity and polysemy of its people into a monotonous and unrealistic oneness. When Guruji's knowledge falls short of solving the intricate issues of violence, unrest, and injustice in the world, he concocts a narrative by (mis)using religious concepts and mythical legends, and promises a simple solution to an otherwise complicated world. Guruji's metanarrative of *satyug* can be considered a parallel of the chants of extremist Hindu nationalism that seeks a better world by silencing the diverse and multiple voices of the minorities in India. One might argue that the greatest resource of India is the diversity of its people. However, the danger of any ideology as a totalizing grand narrative lies in its power to take away this diversity and to reduce every "other" into a potential threat, an enemy, or a terrorist. Subsequently, the greatest danger here is exercised by taking away the right of people to tell and live their unique stories. In this regard, Gaitonde's character is significant, as he also resists the liquidation of his story and regains control over his own

narrative as a narrator, despite all the morally questionable actions that he himself has performed.

### 2.3. Gaitonde's Act of Storytelling

Along with bringing a strong critique to the way various religious motifs and political ideologies can be exploited within the quotidian, *Sacred Games* also brings home the significance of storytelling. This is achieved partially through Gaitonde's eagerness to tell his story on his terms, and partially by creating a self-reflexive narrative that brings together various traditions of storytelling to heighten the metafictional nature of the series. Indeed, Gaitonde's specific mechanism to use and maintain his authority over his life story demands special attention as an act of storytelling, whereby he positions his mini-narrative along with the prepondering metanarratives of his milieu, and provides a link between storytelling, memory, and survival.

The narrative reverberates with innumerable references in which a certain kind of sacredness is associated with Gaitonde: whether that is his name, Ganesh Eknath Gaitonde,<sup>13</sup> or his act of proclaiming himself to be a god (Brahma). What lends Gaitonde's voice this sacredness? After all, he has been a notorious gangster all his life. The answer can be found by looking at the way Gaitonde gains control over his life story within the series.

As seen above, Gaitonde's entire life is about transgression. For Gaitonde, this transgression provides him with the power to discover his own religion and be his own God, as he exclaims, "[s]ometimes I feel like I am God" (S01E01). This pattern of transgression from the usual terrain can be traced even in his last act of asking for help from Sartaj, and by telling him his story. The first interaction of the audience and of Sartaj with Gaitonde happens through hearing Gaitonde's voice. While Gaitonde is alive, he speaks to Sartaj over the phone, which makes the narrative a traditional realist mode of depiction. However, just a few minutes into the series, Gaitonde shoots himself as he does not want to be arrested by the police. Gaitonde's suicide is yet another method of taking control of his life and his story. Describing the dying man as one who has absolute authority in storytelling, Benjamin (1970) comments: "Suddenly, in [the dying man's] expressions and looks, the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him" (p. 94). Here one must notice that Benjamin refers to a tradition from the past, wherein an old man, who has lived his life to the full, is about to die. Around the time when he is about to die of natural causes, his family members and friends start to gather around and visit him. Traditionally, it is assumed that, at this moment, the dying man is full of wisdom and would say something meaningful for others to remember him by. In the case of Gaitonde, he is not dying a natural death. On the contrary, he dies from a sense of urgency to save himself from an uncomprehending and unsympathetic police investigation. At this stage, the authority that a dying man's voice can bear is extended through a cinematic innovation. His authority to tell his story is prolonged cinematically by letting his body die, and his voice continues the narration.

Even after death, Gaitonde's need to tell his story remains and imparts on his act of storytelling an ever more emphatic sense of authority and urgency. As when Sartaj looks at his dead body, the same voice which so far had been talking over the phone to him says, "You can't get away so easily, Mr. Sartaj. You'll be back to hear my story" (S01E02). To do so, the narrative skill (to tell) and the cinematic skill (to show) are combined into one spectacle, whereby the viewer is shown what Gaitonde's voice narrates. This lends his voice the uniqueness and singularity which he aims for. In fact, it is important to notice that Gaitonde's greatest fear is oblivion, that sooner or later, no one will remember him; the struggles of his life, the moments which were precious to him, and most importantly, his life choices amid the given circumstances are all about to vanish into thin air after his demise. In some ways, one might say that this fear is not peculiar to Gaitonde alone. Most people experience the fear of mortality, decay, and putrefaction, which is not only physical but also of one's experiences, thoughts, ideas, and ways of looking at life and the

world. In this regard, stories help to fight this fear. By incorporating interpersonal and oftentimes intergenerational interaction, the act of storytelling lends one the assurance that some part of oneself is preserved in another person through memory. In this respect, the communication of Gaitonde's story is as significant, if not more so, as the information about the nuclear attack. For him, his story is as sacred and unique as a fable in the sacred texts. As he tells Sartaj: "I always thought my life was a fable from the Puranas<sup>14</sup>. The world was fragments of my story. Like my father" (S01E01).

Additionally, the etymology of the term "sacred" also provides a plausible explanation. The word sacred implies something holy, set apart, which comes down to being "whole", in other words, complete. Thus, one can say that Gaitonde's voice is sacred as it brings to light the "whole" uniqueness of his experiences. His act of telling his story (mini-narrative) defies the power of the metanarratives that are inflicted upon him and/or taken for granted by his birth and by the larger socio-political and religious context that tend to "liquidate" him (quoted in Barry 1995, p. 65). Apart from the urgency to disclose the existence of the atomic bomb before his arrest and tell Sartaj about it, his story also points to the urgency of being heard and understood.

It is not a coincidence that, even before Gaitonde enters the narrative, Sartaj is shown to be forced to give false testimony about an impoverished Muslim boy who was not armed with a gun, who did not point any gun at the senior police inspector, and yet was brutally killed in a fake police encounter. While talking to his junior colleague Ashok Katekar about his anxiety over giving false testimony, Sartaj recollects in this informal meeting that which he would not be able to say in the court; he says, "I was in the street . . . blocking the exit. He came running towards me . . . unarmed. He was in his late teens. . . . He started crying when he saw me. . . . Parulkar [the senior police inspector] came from the other side. I yelled out that he was surrendering" (S01E01). Despite his moral trepidation, Sartaj would not be able to tell the truth about the killing of this young Muslim boy when in court.

Clearly, then, although the Muslim boy had all the rights to a legal hearing, he was not even provided with one, due to his status as a second-rate citizen. Not only does this episode shed light on the vast communal differences of privilege or the lack of it between Muslims and Hindus, but more significantly, it also presents the case of targeted killings by the police, which is a common method of encounter in countries like India and Pakistan. Indeed, the use of targeted killing (both legal and illegal) gained wider acceptance during the "War on Terror" in various countries such as Pakistan, Israel, the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Switzerland (Melzer 2008, p. xi). In such a mechanism, one faces a twofold injustice: firstly, through on-the-spot murder, he or she is denied a legal hearing, and secondly, his or her mini-narrative is annihilated by the metanarrative of a more powerful agency.

Soon Sartaj gives false testimony about the boy, and his whole life is reduced to that of a criminal, which aligns with the mainstream propaganda about the involvement of Muslims in terrorism and underworld activities. This dynamic of unequal representation and power plays on in many different sectors of society: refugees, illegal migrant men and women, ethnic, religious, and racial minorities, and so on. Mostly, these groups form the modern-day "subalterns" who, denied of their rights to existence in various ways, are still unable "to speak" for themselves (Spivak 1988). The powerful metanarratives of ideology and religion more often than not formulate a false or at least a flawed sense of knowledge and truth, by denying inclusion of the mini-narratives of such groups of people. Indeed, legally as well as socioculturally, the "subjective sovereignty" of marginalized groups is compromised (Spivak 1988, p. 271). To resist this monopoly of representation, *Sacred Games* uses Gaitonde's voice even after his death as a surreal but prerequisite narrative or cinematic technique. That is why, despite his physical death, Gaitonde could take control over his narrative, unlike the young Muslim boy. He could speak to Sartaj and, by extension, to the audience so as to be heard and understood.

Storytelling is as old as human history. The reasons for telling stories are as various and complex as human society. People tell stories to remember, to empathize, to heal from

a traumatic memory, to celebrate certain values and condemn others. *Sacred Games*, as the first Netflix series from India, performs many of these functions. By engaging with a global audience through a story that is centered around the life of a gangster, but which dwells on themes as wide as religion, politics, and power, *Sacred Games* situates itself in the contemporary tradition of storytelling while using past traditions of storytelling as strong reference points. As a narrative, it relies heavily on actual historical events and stories from the ancient and contemporary world. It is important to understand how the use of various literary references helps to position *Sacred Games* within the larger and global tradition of storytelling, and how, at the same time, the series uses this mechanism to point to the very danger that the precedence of a tradition might forge for other stories.

### 3. Classical and Modern Intertextual References in *Sacred Games*

*Sacred Games* is laced with innumerable references to ancient and modern traditions of storytelling. On the one hand, this excessive allusion to other stories heightens the self-reflexivity of the narrative itself, helping to remind the viewer of its nature as a story or performance. On the other hand, this also points to the continual and disruptive nature of stories as such. The titles of most episodes are references to a particular mythical legend. These mythical references sum up the core issue of a specific episode. Gaitonde's wife always tells stories from the ancient Hindu scripts to influence his actions. Guruji tells stories from the ancient Vedic texts to explain the concepts of *apasmara*<sup>15</sup>, *dharm*, *satyug*, *kalyug*, and so on. Among the allusions to various classical texts, one text that is alluded to most recurrently in the series is *Mahabharat*. Considered the fifth Veda, *Mahabharat* is the "longer" of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India (the second one is the *Ramayana*). Being ten times longer than the Greek classic epics *Iliad* and *Odyssey* put together, *Mahabharat* is an "encyclopedic compendium of myths and teachings, famously claiming to include everything there is to know" (Cush et al. 2008, p. 469). Some of the central issues in this long narrative are the "complex and ambiguous nature of dharma", "the nature and duty of the king", and finally, "the pervasive and inexorable nature of fate and time" (Cush et al. 2008, p. 470). In this regard, *Sacred Games* uses many of the motifs and thematic concerns of *Mahabharat*. For example, on multiple occasions, Gaitonde wants to believe that he is Ashwatthama. As Ashwatthama is one of the heroes in the Kurukshetra war who fights on the side of Kaurava, and one of the few survivors of the war, one understands that Gaitonde wants to be considered as this brave hero. However, unlike Ashwatthama, who becomes *chiranjeevi* (immortal) due to Lord Krishna's curse, Gaitonde's immortality lies in his act of storytelling. The recurrent references to the notions of *kalyug* and *satyug* form another consistent allusion to the ancient epic. Similarly, Bunty, Gaitonde's gang member, who is involved in producing a televised version of *Mahabharat*, recreates some of the scenes from the epic that act as a constant reminder of the theme of good and evil in the show. Lastly, the series, like the ancient epic, also places great emphasis on the ambiguity and complexity of the nature of *dharm*, albeit implicitly. All these examples show how the series uses the Sanskrit epic as a reference point to build a narrative of *dharm* about modern-day India.

Apart from an abundance of allusions to Hindu mythology, *Sacred Games* also uses allusions to other religious traditions, such as the ancient Mesopotamian religion, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. For example, Malcolm, who acts as a very cold-hearted murderer in Guruji's scheme, narrates the story of Cain and Abel to explain his point of view regarding sacrifice. Indeed, the proliferation of these references in the narrative performs two functions simultaneously. Firstly, at the thematic level, the consistent parallelism between ancient past myths and the present events points to the repetitive and cyclical nature of events in human history: the clash between good and evil, the desire for self-preservation, the distinction between *satyug* and *kalyug*, the need for self-denial and sacrifice, and so on. Secondly, this overlaying of ancient, classical texts with present-day reality creates a metanarrative that limits the role of human agency and free will. In other words, if all that is happening now has already happened in the past, then the urge to destroy a

predetermined path by an individual such as Gaitonde is futile. In this respect, the very existence of past literary/narrative tradition seems to nullify the birth of more complicated or different stories.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, this consistent use of ancient mythical stories is a reminder of another, more complex, sociopolitical context of *Sacred Games*. The larger premise behind the narrative of *Sacred Games* is the rising spirit of religious extremism within India, and its exploitation for political gain. Conjoined with this rise of Hindu extremism and anti-Muslim sentiment in India is India's growing power internationally as an economic force. Every time a certain ideology uses force unabashedly to coerce people to its ideals, a recourse to ancient texts, classical mythologies, and the distant past serves as an anesthetic to the pain of the present crudity exercised by this ideology. One can think here of the way fascists used the notion of a pure (Aryan) race to obfuscate their cruelty to a diverse group of people, the way the notion of "holy crusades" was used by the Bush administration to justify the sheer use of power against poor and already war-ridden countries like Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11, or the way in which the Muslims of India who wanted a separate country, based on religion, used the notion of *ummah* or Islamic brotherhood to justify their claim for a separate land. Quite often, the use of ancient mythology or the distant past to justify one's actions in the present blurs the ground realities. In this respect, *Sacred Games'* incorporation of ancient myths and stories, while pointing to their failure to provide a sufficient explanation of the present, can be seen as a much-needed critique of the present scenario within India.

Along with the references to classical or ancient myths, *Sacred Games* also includes references to Indian film culture, its songs, and its idiosyncratic way of telling stories. Considered as one of the world's largest film industries in terms of the sheer number of feature films produced, Hindi cinema has an important role to play as far as storytelling tradition in India goes. Ideally, Hindi cinema could be a great vehicle to represent the diversity and complexity of the people of India. At the same time, it cannot be ignored that, ever since its inception as a mainstream film industry in India, the films produced in great number are largely a "far from reality" scenario, present "larger than life" characters, showcase human characters as stereotypes, and reduce the potential of innumerable human stories to a few cliched and redundant storylines. As mentioned earlier, this fact is highlighted in *Sacred Games*, when Gaitonde approaches a filmmaker in India and asks him to make a film of his life. The result is a caricature of Gaitonde's life, loud acting, unrealistic dramatic scenes, and simplified plotlines. This episode, though one might treat it as comic relief in an otherwise serious narrative, does provoke questions about the role such platforms could have played within the larger and more global tradition of storytelling, and the role that they are made to play given the current scenario.

The ending of *Sacred Games* defies the usual expectations from a thriller. As the main narrative revolves around Sartaj being able to save the city from a nuclear attack, one expects that at the end, the narrative reveals whether or not he is successful in doing so. In the last scene, Sartaj is left alone with the bomb while everyone else is leaving. He tries to enter the right code to deactivate the bomb. Before trying the code for the last time, Sartaj sees Gaitonde sitting in the same chair where he commits suicide. Gaitonde looks at Sartaj with serenity and assurance, and exclaims, "Aham Brahmasmi" (S02E08). To this, Sartaj looks into Gaitonde's eyes, nods with understanding and chants the same. Using his intuition, he uses his father's hand imprint to deactivate the bomb. The result is not shown, and the series ends with a sudden blackout. This is disruptive and discontinuous, and leaves the audience dissatisfied but awakened to the present moment, to face these questions regarding one's use of power and submission to grand narratives. Whether the city is saved or not is left as an open-ended question with different possibilities. What is instead brought home with much conviction is the need to tell stories to save human lives from oblivion and meaninglessness, and in doing so, to envision a society in which the great potential of human lives is not engulfed by the metanarratives of religion, in its various forms and practices, and political ideologies.

#### 4. Conclusions

*Sacred Games* represents Gaitonde as a complex character. He is neither a typical villain nor a hero, but a man who, on the one hand, can make decisions based on his free will, while, on the other hand, he is constrained by the socio-political context around him as well as the metanarratives that are instilled in him. Clearly, then, the series presents the mini-narrative of one man within the larger political and religious narratives of the times in which he lives. Indeed, through his character, the series presents a strong critique of the way in which many metanarratives take control, dictate, and even predetermine the lives of ordinary people from birth onward. His transformation from a transgressive gangster to an empathetic savior can be credited to his ability to think, reflect, and accordingly take action despite the overwhelming pressure of the totalizing explanations of various metanarratives around him, in general, and of Guruji, in particular. The presumption that *dharm* and the Vedic scriptures are unchangeable, non-negotiable, or not to be interpreted by those who do not follow Brahminical tradition, is challenged through the life story of Gaitonde. Indeed, even though Gaitonde transgresses every part of the traditional notions of duty, in the end, he can reflect on what he must do, even against the interpretation of Guruji. In this regard, in a milieu where India witnesses a rise of Hindutva ideology, an increasing hatred against political minorities, as well as the lynching of poor underprivileged people for dealing in cow-related business, *Sacred Games* serves as a timely reminder of the necessity to use one's own rational ability to think beyond the (mis)use of religious and political narratives by certain agents in society. In this way, *Sacred Games* points to the danger of idolization, the needless sacralization of certain concepts and individuals, and blind appropriation of certain rituals and beliefs.

Gaitonde's eagerness to tell his tale on his own terms is a way to gain control over his narrative, to push his story out of collective amnesia (forgetfulness) toward anamnesis (remembrance). In this regard, the series also incorporates multiple and recurrent allusions to other classical and contemporary storytelling traditions. This abundance of allusions serves two functions: firstly, it heightens the self-reflexive nature of the series as a story. This self-reflexivity can be treated as a typical postmodernist feature, whereby a piece of art draws attention toward itself, not only because of its mimetic semblance to reality but also due to its ability to remind the audience of its status as an artwork. In doing so, *Sacred Games* deviates from the traditional expectations of a realist thriller. Secondly, these multiple allusions to innumerable other stories within the series also point to the danger which each story faces, i.e., that of being positioned within a larger, cyclical, and repetitive pattern of narratives in such a way that its own uniqueness is compromised. Contrary to the metanarratives that surround Gaitonde, his story is clearly a mini-narrative that is unique, singular, and contingent instead of generic, universal, and permanent. In this way, *Sacred Games* combines the unique and the universal, the personal and the public, the sacred and the profane into one narrative of survival and perseverance. Challenging the usual expectations of a thriller, the series foregrounds the significance of individual stories to create acts of remembrance, not merely to "re-member" the past passively but to "forge" one's future through understanding this past. Steeped in a socio-political context of extreme violence and religious fanaticism, the series highlights the need to remember and retell for the sake of creating comprehension and empathy for the "other", whatever one's background and life story.

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Here it is relevant to note that the term Hindutva, popularized by the works of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966), an Indian nationalist activist, was initially used to point to a "Hinduness" that was shared by people of all religions and castes, in their sense of belonging to the land. In this regard, Savarkar used this term in its political rather than its religious connotation (Purandare 2019, p. 154). However, for those believing in the emergence of a Hindu nation at the end of colonialism, the term soon came to imply

both political and religious connotations. As Vaibhav Purandare mentions, “[f]or believers in a Hindu Rashtra it was, and is, the earliest and clearest delineation of their theory of Indian nationhood, inextricably linked to the country’s purported Hindu ethos and history” (Purandare 2019, p. 154).

- 2 In the original usage of the word, "pandit" or "pundit", synonymous with "Purohits", refers to a Hindu who is almost always a Brahmin. A pundit is known to have memorized a substantial portion of the Vedas and is well-versed in Sanskrit (Cush et al. 2008, p 587; see Hiemstra 2021).
- 3 The term *dharm* originates from the Sanskrit root Dhr-, implying "to hold or to support", and is related to the Latin *firmus* ("firm", "stable"). From this root, it takes the meaning of "what is established or firm", thus, what is considered to be "law" (Olivelle 2009, p. 70). In this regard, *dharm* has something in common with "morality as well as religion" (Hacker and Davis 2006, p. 482). In other words, *dharm* guides the actions of a person both in the personal and the public realm. At the same time, quite contrary to traditional belief, this established law is not based on "the will of a personal god or gods" but on the experiences of the aged, wise Brahmins (Hacker and Davis 2006, p. 487). Human thoughts and actions in accordance with the Vedas (the written texts), as well as the ability to make wise choices without personal interests and in accordance with the wisdom that comes from continuously reading Vedas, are the key aspects that determine *dharm*. Not only is *dharm* important for this world but also attached to it are the ideas of salvation and transcendence from pain and suffering within this world (Hacker and Davis 2006, p. 483). In other words, *dharm* is what one must do (actions) in this world to receive salvation in the other world. (see also Cush et al. 2008, pp. 182–83).
- 4 Originating from the Sanskrit word *moksha*, also called *mukti*, *vimukti*, *moksh* implies liberation, freedom, or salvation from "being trapped in the endless cycle of birth and death" (Cush et al. 2008, p. 504). In order to reach full self-realization and ultimate freedom from the endless cycle of death and rebirth, one has to follow certain Brahminic purity laws and prohibitions in order to become disconnected from the material world and prepare oneself for such "liberation" "as the final goal of life". In this respect, ultimate *moskh*, in the eschatological sense, already starts in this life (see Sharma and Bharati 2000, p. 187; Anderson 2012, p. 275)
- 5 Max Weber defines power as the possibility of an individual to achieve his or her will even against another’s will (Weber 1978). Situating himself with Max Weber’s notion of power, Robert A. Dahl defines power as a relationship between people whereby "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" (Dahl 1957, pp. 202–3). Both Weber’s and Dahl’s definitions conceive power as an ability based on a clear decision-making process and perceived through the outcome of those decisions. In contrast to Weber and Dahl, for Bachrach and Baratz (1962), power is exercised when "A devotes his energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process to public consideration of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous to A" (p. 948). Rather than a positive and enabling agency, this notion of power acts as an inhibiting and restrictive force that prevents the decision-making process or the use of free will from any group or individual whose interests and actions are contrary to the interests of A. In all these cases, power is understood within an "actual, observable conflict" (Lukes 2005, p. 27).
- 6 The terms *satyug* and *kalyug* originate from the Sanskrit words *satya yuga* and *kali yuga* respectively. To understand their meaning within classical literature, it is important to first understand the term *yuga*. In popular use, it refers to "‘world-ages’ (kalpas) made up of four yugas". Although various Puranas give various accounts of these yugas, in Visnu Parana, each Mahayuga (Day of the Brahma) consists of a "Kṛta or Satya-yuga lasting 1,728,000 human years, a Treta-yuga lasting 1,296,000 years, a Dvapara-yuga lasting 864,000 years and a Kali-yuga lasting 432,000 years". Puranas describes *satyug* as a time when "*dharm*" and truth were complete and four-footed. In contrast, in the other three yugas, *dharm* was deprived of one foot, and through theft, falsehood, and fraudulent merit was diminished by one-quarter. Furthermore, it is said in the Visnu Purana that the *kalyug* will end with the apparition of Visnu’s Kalki-avatara, who will defeat the wicked and liberate the virtuous, and initiate a new *satyug*. In this regard, *Sacred Games*, through the character of Guruji, uses the notions of *kalyug* as a time of darkness and sinfulness, largely manifested in the present day socio-political chaos, while *satyug* is an age of truth that will be manifested in the future once the *kalyug* has been destroyed (Cush et al. 2008, pp. 1043–44).
- 7 The term "guru" is of tremendous significance within Hindu tradition. Originally referring to a "venerable man who performed the various Vedic rites for a young boy", a guru has come to signify "a host of personal teachers learned in a particular scriptural or secular subject". The relationship between a guru and his disciple is of the utmost significance in Hindu tradition (Cush et al. 2008, p. 280).
- 8 The term "ashram" is the Anglicized version of the Sanskrit word "Ashrama" that denotes two meanings in ancient Indian literature: a "hermitage", and a religious way of life. Within Brahmanical, Jain and Buddhist sources, it is used in its first meaning, i.e., most commonly as a hermitage (Cush et al. 2008, p. 48).
- 9 See Note 7.
- 10 In Hindu mythology, Brahma is one of the gods in the sacred Hindu triad (Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva) who "created the universe out of pre-existing primeval matter". His particular roles are to set "the process of creation in motion and to function as the first expression of individuality (ahamkara)" (Cush et al. 2008, p. 112). The purpose of chanting this mantra is primarily to become one with the Brahma, not to become Brahma himself.
- 11 In this way, Gaitonde reasserts the uniqueness of his narrative within the larger metanarratives of pure destruction and annihilation that Guruji had laid down before him. This is indeed visible when, at a later stage, Guruji’s voice keeps controlling Gaitonde’s mind after his death, while Gaitonde constantly tries to violently silence Guruji’s voice.

- <sup>12</sup> In *Mahabharat*, Ashwatthama is the son of the guru Dronacharya. Despite being a poor child, he has been given power over all beings, and has the celestial weapon called Narayanastra. During the war of Kurukshetra, he fought along with the Kauravas against the Pandavas. He became *chiranjivi* [immortal] after receiving a curse from Lord Krishna (Choudhary 2020). It is said that when he was born he cried like a horse, hence, he was given the name Ashwatthawa, which implies the sacred voice related to that of a horse (Internet Sacred Text Archive 1999).
- <sup>13</sup> All three parts of his name are derived from Hindu mythology: an important Hindu deity, Ganesh implies “Lord of the people”. The word “Eknath” means a poet or saint, and “Gaitonde” refers to a cow-headed person. In relation to the last name, Gaitonde, it is important to remember that the cow has a central position in Hindu mythology. It is certainly considered one of the “most sacred animals” and is “identified with the nourishing character of Earth as the Great Mother” (Cush et al. 2008, p. 698).
- <sup>14</sup> Considered one of the most important sacred literatures in Hinduism, Puranas, for almost two millennia, have provided a “literary/oral instrument for communicating the central aspects of the Hindu culture from the elite to the mainstream of society and back again. Hindu Puranas are divided within the tradition into eighteen “Great Puranas” and eighteen “Lesser Puranas” (Cush et al. 2008, p. 634).
- <sup>15</sup> “Apasmara (literally, ‘forgetting’) is the name of the demonic being identified in Hindu mythology with epilepsy” (Cush et al. 2008, p. 38).
- <sup>16</sup> Within the field of literary theory, Harold Bloom coined the term “anxiety of influence” to describe the anxiety, uncertainty and ambiguity that a young poet undergoes while writing, as a result of the pressures that the existing literary tradition and the presence of literary giants may exert over him. The parallelism between the young poet and the elder poets of previous generations with a large literary contribution can be drawn between the omnipresence of stories, legends and myths that form a large pre-existing tradition and the stories that emerge later (see Bloom 1973).

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