

The Art of Story Telling: Perspectives on Mythology and Narrative Techniques in Ashwin Sanghi's Keepers of the Kalachakra

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ABSTRACT

'In the end we will all become stories'
(Atwood)

Stories have been an age-old way of weaving a tapestry of emotions and instilling life in characters. The stereotypical 'once upon a time' beginning, to 'they lived happy ever after' ending in the fairy tales, now stands at the periphery of the story telling genre. Post colonial writers like Ashwin Sanghi have transformed story telling in many ways. Sanghi blends history and myth in a peculiar way, thus juxtaposing fact and fiction. His stories appear easily acceptable due to his peculiar twists and scientific references that have a convincing impact on the reader. Sanghi makes use of multiple traditions and interdisciplinary narratives to create realism in his otherwise genre known as 'mytho-fiction'. This paper attempts to analyse the art of story-telling and align it with various literary theories of historical metafiction, euhemerism and archetypal criticism. The paper also initiates a discussion as to how the use of binary opposites like East versus West, Faith versus rationality, Science versus myth, reality versus belief et al brings in a more intellectual perspective towards narratives and enhances the acceptance of the writer's ideologies amongst the readers forum.

Keywords: Stories, history, mythology, narratives, fiction, truth

INTRODUCTION

Stories have been an inherent part of society since time immemorial. From bedtime stories to fairy tales, from legends and folklores to mythology, from abstract themes to science fiction, story-telling has been an art with its own nuances and intricacies.

Story is defined as, 'a description, either true or imagined, of a connected series of events' (Cambridge English Dictionary). This typically means stories have an interconnectedness between the events it talks about. This brings in a magical flow which makes the stories appear coherent and logical. Seth Godin, a famous marketing guru states in his blog, "A great story is true. Not necessarily because it's factual, but because it's consistent and authentic". Clearly, the facts of a story are not as important as much as its consistency. Facts keep changing with geographies and timelines, however the format of story-telling remains the same. Thus, the genre of story-telling never gets old; it simply keeps evolving with new perspectives and newer narratives techniques.

To remember works by Sir Walter Scott, who did not invent writing about history, but was a pioneer in the way he wrote history by

using real events and imagined characters to explore complex issues such as national identity, social change and cultural memory. In this regard, post-colonial literature is a good example. Ashwin Sanghi, a modern Indian writer also attempts to weave together history, mythology, science, religion and even politics, making his stories an interdisciplinary narrative. He alludes to the past, drawing a parallel with the present with the intent of invoking his readers to question the already accepted. Writing in a post-colonial style, Sanghi juxtaposes myth and reality, often leaving the reader surprised with the new dimensions to a story that has been widely accepted and has passed from generation to generation.

This paper mainly aims to analyze Sanghi's story-telling, in view of narratological perspectives in his novel *Keepers of the Kalachakra* (2018), one of his books from Bharat Series. He takes inspiration from Indian mythology, referring to Gods, Goddesses, symbols and motifs using them with a modern twist, thus, making it relatable to the contemporary society.

Popularly known as a mytho-fiction writer, Ashwin Sanghi's writings are characterized by interdisciplinary narratives and a reclamation of old culture. This often becomes a tool of gaining cultural identity, not necessarily hinting towards the subaltern voice. Moreover, this paper will provide an overview of how Sanghi destabilizes myth and fiction to present a convincing storyline, and reinterprets said narratives.

As Linda Hutcheon, a Canadian academic working on literary theories and criticism states, "The formal linking of history and fiction through the common denominators of intertextuality and narrativity is usually offered not as a reduction, but as a shrinking of the scope and value of fiction, but rather as an expansion of these" ("Intertextuality", 11). Sanghi brings about the expansion by touching upon various elements of the past that bring to the forefront a question of identity, cultural, a new political-social structure and a need to view the past as a teacher rather than simply accepting it as

true. As Dr. Preeti Sharma reflects in her research paper, 'this shift compels people to reevaluate the authority granted customarily to historical texts over fictional ones.'

Characterization

Throughout the story, Sanghi adheres to the use of finer details for characters, their possessions, movements and behaviour.

The physical description builds a perception in the minds of the reader even before the character is fully introduced. For instance, Petrov, the Russian representative of the IG4 group, is introduced with certain character aspects,

Petrov was a beefy man who looked like he worked out at the gym for several hours each day. On his head was a mop of reddish hair that seemed to be thinning in places. (Sanghi 15)

Petrov lit up his Belomorkanal... (Sanghi 16)

The character is crafted in a typical way that engages the audience and also aligns with Propps' 'dispatcher', one who propels the hero to go on his quest thus driving the plot. The hero, Vijay, a smart and intellectual researcher from IIT Delhi is introduced with a typical description of someone who would not be interested in physical beauty but rather be disheveled and unkempt.

'He was habitually unkempt, his shir hung sack like on his thin frame while even his glasses looked like they hadn't been cleaned in day. His hair was specked with dandruff and his shoes seemed like they would give up on him at any moment. (Sanghi 17)

Stanley Fish in his collection of essays titled, 'Is there a Text in Class?', writes about how characters come alive only by the act of reading the text. Petrov, Vijay, Shmidt, are all characters that are interpreted by the reader; hence discarding Foster's theory of discreet 'round' and 'flat' characters. Sanghi builds his characters and their idiosyncrasies in way to let the story have no definite meaning; like Fish says, "There is no such thing as meaning sitting around in a book waiting to be mined like a physical object. Rather, everyone who comes to a book finds exactly what they were looking for in the first place".

Science and Mythology

While mythology talks of flying Gods and Goddesses, science tries to give it an explanation by discussing the atoms, molecules and gravity part of it. Vijay, the IIT scholar starts his class by introducing Vedanta, literally meaning the end of Vedas. Quantum physics and Vedanta may seem poles apart, the truth is both are attempts to understand the underlying reality of the universe. (Sanghi 18)

'I can see each one of you as particles or solid matter before me what we call reality is the combination of the observer and observed. We seem to create our reality (Sanghi 22)

Sanghi, a meticulous researcher seeks to bring a scientific twist to many claims of mythology. His explanations appear to be true and valid in this boomeranging world of faiths and beliefs. However, it's the art of story-telling which makes his theories acceptable to the reader. Sanghi's style reminds us of Stanley Fish's focus on how the stylistic and formal features of a text like syntax, word choice, structure shape the reader's, emotional, and cognitive response as they read, rather than treating the text as a static object with fixed meaning. Hence, we can say that the writer and his narrative techniques do not always propagate in a linear direction; the meaning of the text can be dynamic, thus opening different avenues of thoughts and interpretations. It was always said that story telling is an art which not all can master. Oral or written, the style of narration matters the most. By recognizing that words and text can evoke powerful emotions, Fish's reader response theory encourages a deeper exploration of how narratives influence cultural and social contexts. The impact extends beyond individual readers to societal attitudes, as literature can mobilize empathy and provoke discussions around shared human experiences, ultimately reflecting and shaping societal values.

Another important parallel drawn between Om chants and gravitational waves suggests a strong link between science and

mythology, thus giving way to newer perspectives.

Harvey, 'the short and podgy Irish-American', team director working on gravitational waves describes to his old friend Judith, a key member of the IG4 agency that was investigating the mysterious killings across the world states,

We can convert gravitational waves into sound! We can actually *hear* gravitational waves. The sounds of the universe!' Indian sages used to meditate on a sound, Om, that they claimed was the primordial sound that accompanied the creation of the universe.' (Sanghi 105)

Sanghi's narratives are an attempt to show the contemporary reader the convergence of all aspects of the universe, ranging from signs and symbols to concepts of gravity, string theory and even the cyclical nature of time. It describes a universe of interconnectedness, cycles, and holistic unity.

Later in the story, the wise old Brahmananda explains to Mikhailov, the presence of 'Akashic Records', which are 'a compilation of all human experiences, actions, reflections, intentions, feelings, thoughts and words ever to have happened anywhere and everywhere in the universe.'

While myth and folklore are notoriously difficult to define, Sanghi, attempts to adopt a style of 'realism', juxtaposing story telling and the art of convincing, with theories of science playing the background. Sanghi's engagement with religion, especially Hinduism and Buddhism in this novel is inseparable from storytelling.

Motifs and Symbols

Mythology inevitably comes with symbols and motifs. Each pattern, each design inherently hinting towards a culture or a custom or a mythic truth, which needs to be unearthed yet. Ashwin Sanghi, adroitly bridges science and symbols, showing them to be deeply entwined for a purpose; the purpose can however be known to a few. Vijay, when ushered into the Milesian Lab facility, sees a 'colossal sculpture of a

dancing Nataraja encased inside a pinecone shaped structure' (Sanghi 108).

When the curious Vijay asks Schmidt about, why the Nataraja statue, he replies, 'the dance of Shiva is nothing but the dance of subatomic particles. Moving, morphing, and transforming'. (Sanghi 112)

And further, 'There is neither creation nor destruction'. Only appearance and disappearance'.

Yet again, Sanghi brings his reader to the debate of reality versus fiction. What we see is only we want to see, and literature helps us in doing so. Northrop Frye considers literature as 'conscious mythology' that constructs a world of its own and which reveals the signs and symptoms of the real world in which we live (120-122)

Mythology

Amma, the administrator of the orphanage is introduced as character who masters the art of story- telling. Her style of narration, and the story she narrates in the novel brings out the 'ideological investment which tries to expose the assumption behind the myth' (Sharma)

Amma loved gathering the kids and narrating to them mythological tales from Hindu epics. the children listened breathlessly to their foster-mother's almost dramatized tales of the derring- do of heroes of the past. (Sanghi 50).

Sanghi, deliberately shows Amma narrating the story of Ravana, from the Ramayan, an epic which persistently prevails in Indian society. Amma tells her children how Ravana was initially a devotee of Brahma and then later, went on to worship Shiva. With a boon of being invincible against Gods, demons, wild beasts and spirits', Amma pictures him as a compassionate and capable king, yet with a weakness for women, that drives him into abducting Sita. The whole Ravana story, his journey of being who he was and his final downfall is a way of showing myths a reflection of the society we live in. Psychoanalytical theories often claim myths to be a symbol of the desires and passions in

human beings, which remains eternal and goes on from generation to generation.

Another reference to the Mahabharata occurs when the wise old sage, Brahmananda explains to Mikhailov, the story of Abhimanyu and the analogy of the man today.

Abhimanyu knew how to break into a military formation known is the *chakravyuh* but he did not know how to get out of it. All of us are leading the life of Abhimanyu. We enter the physical world kicking and screaming and then later no clue of how to extract ourselves from it so that we may have a bird's eye view of the formation. We are fish in the tank. (Sanghi 176)

Brahmananda, by virtue of his analogy wants his disciple to understand the complexities of human life. This mirrors Sanghi's post-colonial thought, showing the colonized are stuck in a well, trying to voice their concerns, trying to get rid of the colonial baggage; the tool being re-telling of the past and showing 'truth' as multiple, layered and contextual. Ernst Cassirer, a German philosopher in his monumental philosophy of symbolic forms proposes that a "myth is a form of thought" and the rise of myth in post- modern literature in particular is due to the belief in "destiny". Sanghi, uses his form of thought when he selectively chooses particular myths to highlight how these tales can explain science, truth and reality, being cognitive forms with diverse meanings.

For literary critics, references like these would imply the primordial existence and prevalence of mythological incidents in the contemporary society. Sanghi, as a writer also indulges in retellings for the purpose of re interpretations and an attempt to re cast the truth. Roland Barthes in his book *Mythologies* states how myths can lead to an ideological inversion of society (142). The mythological stories are a way to build narratives around the socio- cultural aspects of the society, bringing a modern and dialogical perspective. Sanghi makes a serious attempt to combine all disciplines, blend them with mythology, and present an altogether new narrative. Dipesh

Chakrabarty, the famous Indian historian known for his subaltern and post-colonial studies states, "In postmodernism the authors see the possibility of multiple narratives and multiple ways of crafting these narratives" (99). Hence, the text has fluidity; while illuminating voices and experiences from the so-called historical past. And in doing so, narratology functions as a key factor, to validate the theories given by the author.

CONCLUSION

Ashwin Sanghi's retellings of the past, mythology in specific is an art that goes beyond story telling. Like the theory of Euhemerism, (comes from the Greek philosopher, Euhemerus) that treats myths not as supernatural, unreal fabrications and concocted stories, but as "history in disguise", Sanghi uses his poetic license to fabricate, create and construe mythology and history as not just written texts but stories that can be re told and exaggerated. Although post-colonial literature claims to be the voice of the sub altern, a means of reclaiming the suppressed narratives and gaining freedom from the chains of the colonial rules, it also comes out as a new form of story-telling. Mythic archetypes reframed through scientific metaphors, overlap of science and mythology, questions over faith and rationality and the use of intertextuality to explain historic events, clearly make Sanghi's *Keepers of the Kalachakra* not just a piece of narration but a story that embodies cultural identities and questions old paradigms.

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