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Myth versus History: An Analysis of Archetypal Motifs in Ashwin Sanghi's *The Krishna Key*

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Abstract:

Archetypal criticism is a type of critical theory that interprets a text by focusing on recurring myths and archetypes in the narrative, symbols, images and character types in a literary work. In literature, an archetype is a typical character, an action or a situation that seems to represent such universal patterns of human nature. Myth criticism and archetypal criticism are often linked with each another. In *The Language of Poetry*, edited by Allen Tate and others, Philip Wheelwright explains, "Myth is the expression of a profound sense of togetherness of feeling and action and of wholeness of living" This paper entitled "Myth Versus History; An Analysis of Archetypal Motifs in Ashwin Sanghi's *The Krishna Key*"(2012) attempts a practical analysis of the various archetypal motifs used in the novel and to explore the myth contained in it through the use of archetypes.

Keywords: Archetypal criticism, myths, archetypes, history, motifs.

"Mythology is a subjective truth. Every culture imagines life a certain way".

(Devdutt Pattanaik)

Ashwin Sanghi is one of India's bestselling conspiracy fiction writers and is an author of retelling Indian history or mythology in a contemporary context. Sanghi's third novel, *The Krishna Key* is rich in various archetypal motifs that are of eminent significance in the present world. *The Krishna Key*, accoladed as "a treasure house of surprises" is an amalgam of history and myth. The novel revolving around four murders and Ravi Mohan Saini, the protagonist and a distinguished historian who has been accused of these murders, explores the secret of the Vedic Age and the *Mahabharata*. The argument whether Krishna and the *Mahabharata* are authentic or merely a myth is one of the central concerns of the novel.

Thus, in a way, the novel is a deconstruction on our beliefs on divine. It deals with many themes from the authenticity of Krishna to Syamantaka stone. The author narrates a detailed post- Mahabharata history via the protagonist, who himself happens to be a lineal descendent of Lord Krishna being from the Saini tribe of Punjab.

The setting of the novel which varies from the ancient Lost City of Dwaraka to Vrindavan temples in search of Krishna's priceless legacy to mankind, becomes the archetypal motif 'The Quest/ The Journey', which comes under the Hero archetype. In this archetype, "the hero (the saviour, deliverer) undertakes some long journey during which he or she must perform impossible tasks, battle with monsters, solve unanswerable riddles and overcome insurmountable obstacles in order to save the kingdom". (Jung166). Coming to the practical application of this archetype in *The Krishna Key*, the protagonist Ravi Mohan Saini along with Priya in the first part and then with Radhika Singh, the police officer in the second part, dashes from the submerged remains of Dwaraka to the mysterious lingam of Somnath, then to the icy heights of Mount Kailash to the Vrindavan temples and finally to Taj Mahal, not however to save a kingdom according to the definition, but in a quest to discover the cryptic location of Krishna's most prized possession, the Syamantaka and to prevent the following murders. They overcome many obstacles during their expedition and encountered situations wherein they faced death itself. Overcoming all their trials and tribulations on their thorny path, they find out the real Syamantaka and realize that "The philosopher is more important than the philosopher's stone" (Sanghi 462).

The plot involves four seals which when brought together becomes the Krishna Key. These seals which form yet another archetype, are a relic of Krishna's ancient passport system to Dwaraka. They are motifs of a bull, unicorn, goat that have been engraved in an anticlockwise direction on the face of this seal. The unicorn is purely a symbolic animal but is of the immense importance. "There are references to a very prominent unicorn in the *Mahabharata* called *Ekasringa*, literally the one- horned, which appears as a prime symbol of Vishnu- Krishna and the Vedic knowledge he thought" (Sanghi 33), says Varshney in the novel.

Anil Varshney was a symbolist working on a project at the archaeological site at Kalibangan. Out of these four seals, one was discovered by Varshney himself at his archaeological site at Kalibangan, another one, an identical seal Varshney discovered in Kalibangan was given to Dr.Nikhil Bhojaraj, the third seal which was discovered in

Kurukshetra was given to Professor Rajaram Kurkude and the fourth seal discovered in Mathura was given to Devendra Chhedi for safe-keeping. According to Varshney, these four seals point to the direction of Krishna's most prized possession, which they believe as the Syamantaka. These seals also have a ceramic base plate that can hold them together. In the words of Varshney, "Together they constitute what can be called the Krishna Key- they can unlock the truth to the historical Krishna for future generations" (Sanghi 37).

In the first part of the novel, the protagonist assumes that the four seals point to *Swastika*, a prime symbol of Hinduism and of Vedic origin. The *swastika* could be seen as an archetype because it too "represent such universal patterns of human nature" and "it's root lies in the 'collective unconscious' of mankind" according to Karl Jung. Though it acquired a lot of negative connotation over the world during the Nazi regime, it is extremely holy among the Hindus. The word 'swastika' derives from the two Sanskrit words, 'su' meaning good and 'asti' meaning life or excitement. Thus, the overall context of the symbol is connected to peace, good health, prosperity and happiness.

Though Ravi Mohan Saini seems to be the leading figure in the novel, one must acknowledge the integrity that Krishna is indeed the real hero. This revelation is because the novel is itself a voyage towards finding the historical Krishna and the legacy He left behind. Krishna's narration of his own story (from birth to death) and His account of the Mahabharata war which run parallel to the main story line adds to this verdict. Krishna Himself emerges as the 'archetypal scapegoat' wherein the hero "must die to atone for the people's sins and restore the land to fruitfulness" (Guerin 166). Krishna's birth itself had the purpose of killing Kansa, His maternal uncle and to restore peace in land. This is best evinced in the novel as, "Kansa was dead. The arena was filled with cheers as joyous crowds cheered Balarama and me for ridding over their evil ruler" (Sanghi 123). Assassination of Kansa enabled Krishna to unlock His parents Vasudeva and Devaki, and Urgesena, the old chieftain, Kansa's father whom Kansa had locked up for years. Krishna also reassured His devotees that He will appear as the final incarnation of Vishnu- the Kalki avatar- in Kaliyug, an age when people need Him most.

Krishna could also be seen as the archetype of 'The Wise Old Man' during the Mahabharata war. According to Carl Jung, "the old man always appears when the hero is in a hopeless and desperate situation" (Jung 217). The manifestation of Krishna being 'The Wise Old Man' is apparent when he gave the sermon to the confused and dejected warrior, Arjuna-

the sermon being called as the *Bhagavad Gita*. Krishna elucidated to Arjuna who was overwhelmed by seeing his uncles, cousins, teachers in the battlefield, the duty of a Kshatriya, his dharma, the concept of soul and the qualities of a true yogi. Krishna narrates it as “Knowing that the soul cannot be destroyed- it is never born and never dies- how can you possibly kill?” asked I to the troubled warrior” (Sanghi 303)

Priya, Saini's doctoral student who turned out to be the Mataji in the second- half of the novel is an archetype of 'The Terrible Mother' or 'The Bad Mother'. In yet another view, Mataji is the shadow archetype of Priya. “The shadow is the darker side of our unconscious self...” (Guerin 180). In the first phase of the novel, the reader tends to believe that Priya is a brilliant disciple of Saini who is trying to be with her Professor at all worse times. Later, in the novel the reader confronts the reality that she is the Mataji, the master- brain behind all those cold- hearted murders only with a shudder in the mind. Only difference was that, Taarak Vakil committed these cold- blooded murders on her advice. The reason she provides for these blood- thirsty assassinations is that according to her, Anil Varshney and his murdered friends were doing the works of a Satan. In her words, “They are trying to dig up the eighth avatar of Vishnu while the tenth is far more important” (Sanghi 211). In her mission to make India the cradle of civilization, she uses Taarak Vakil, whom she convinces that he is the real Kalki avatar- only because her boss, Sir Khan cannot wait for the real avatar to come.

Taarak Vakil, who executes all the murders in the name of Lord Vishnu grows up believing that he is the Kalki avatar, but, he is just a serial killer. The Kalki avatar could be perceived as an archetype especially in the present age of Kaliyug. Though the mission of Kalki avatar would be to destroy evil and to purify the earth once more, Mataji uses Taarak in the name of Kalki only for pernicious objectives. However, Taarak Vakil is but only a serial killer who by chance happens to have connections with Kalki avatar. Like the Kalki avatar who is supposed to be born in a village called Sambhala to Vishnuyasa and Sumati, Taarak too was born to parents who bear the same name of that of the Kalki's. Taarak too had a parrot named Shuka just like Kalki would have; the only difference is that Kalki's parrot would be a divine gift from Lord Shiv. Also, Taarak has a surgical scalpel like Kalki would have a bright dazzling sword- Ratna Maru. All these accidental correlations between Kalki and Taarak made the path towards evil easier to Priya, whom Taarak calls “Mataji”, and her boss Sir Khan. This is best evinced in the following lines where Priya assigns Taarak his duty. “You are the Kalki avatar and shall banish wickedness from this world”. “But what

shall be my mission? Asked Taarak. “To show the world that the cradle of civilization was right here in India! To guide the misbelievers to show them the errors of their ways! Exclaimed Mataji” (Sanghi 180).

The journey towards Krishna Key or the Syamantaka is an yet another archetype called ‘The Initiation’ where “the main character undergoes experiences that lead him towards maturity”. In the novel, not only the protagonist Saini, but Radhika Singh who accompanied Saini in his expedition attains a spiritual maturity. The Syamantaka is a transformative isotope that can transform a given element to another. The novel however concludes that Syamantaka is in the space between inner shell and the outer shell of the dome of Taj Mahal, irrespective of the dispute that continues now. Saini provides the reason for the location as, “The Taj Mahal is a sacred tomb and cannot be desecrated. Moreover, the Syamantaka is located in the secret panel between the inner and outer shells of the dome and that place is impossible to reach” (Sanghi 463).

Though desperate over the fact that the Syamantaka or the philosopher’s stone- one that is said to have the alchemical properties of turning lead into gold, cannot be reached, they realize that the goal of alchemy is about transforming oneself into a better man. The myth of Syamantaka does not get unfolded in the novel; because Saini, the protagonist, does not discard that it might have magical properties. Saini concludes that just like an idol in a temple has special powers not due to the stone, but because of the philosopher who uses it. “The power came from the millions of devotees who believed that it indeed has the power to transform their lives” (Sanghi 464).

Finally, they came to the realization that “The stone is irrelevant; it is the transformation that it brings in the person who meditates upon it that is much more relevant. The philosopher is more important than the stone!” (Sanghi 464).

Realizing this, Saini and Radhika move on happily as they found out their soulmates in each other. The author expresses the alchemy in progress as, “If there was a miraculous transformation to be observed, then it was the one that he was seeing right before this very eye” (Sanghi 464). Thus, in a way, the novel is an archetype of spiritual initiation.

Ashwin Sanghi also uses a lot of number archetypes in the novel. He points out the significance of numbers such as 8, 108, 9 and 7. Among Hindus, 108 is a very sacred number. It represents the universe infinity and so they have one hundred eight Gods to worship. The novel best explains this as follows:

According to the sages, zero is nothing. One is the beginning. Eight is everything. 18, 108, 1008- and other numbers like these- represent the very beginning to the very end! He said. 'Eight is supreme. That's why Krishna was the eighth child; the eighth avatar of Vishnu; and was born on the eighth day of Rohini (157).

Similarly, number nine too is of utmost importance in Hinduism as it represents wholeness. Through a mathematical calculation, Priya demonstrates to Taarak the magical element in number 9. This truth could be read from the lines;

If you multiply 9 by anything, the answer is always 9 when you add the digits together. This is the reason why 9 represent God. Thus, we have *navaratri*, *navagraha*- nine planets to be worshipped. "God multiplied by anything is always God, since God is all there is (158).

Number 7 is the symbolic representation of the world. The Hindu scriptures declare that our earth is but one in a series of seven planets. The importance of number 7 varies from Gayatri Mantra, where seven worlds are mentioned in Mundaka Upanishad, where there is a reference to seven tongues and seven forms of Agni. The prominence associated with number 7 is effectively portrayed in Hindu marriages where the newly married couple walks seven steps together around the sacred fire. So, we have seven chakras, seven notes of melody that together form *om*, seven forms of energy, seven rivers (*saptasindhu*), seven sages (*saptarishi*) and seven oceans (*saptadweep*).

Besides the number archetypes, the use of Indian mythical archetypes such as Krishna, Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiv find a gaudy expression in *The Krishna Key*. According to Dattatreya Siva Baba, a scholar mystic,

Gods, goddesses, angels, demi- gods, siddhas...have been an important forces and part of every culture and tradition of the world. Though not visible to the naked eye, these archetypes can be felt, sensed and experienced when the mind is silent and calm. It is this faith and strong belief that people had for years and centuries that make these archetypes all the more powerful and strong.

To conclude, the novel is replete with myriad number of archetypes that are relevant even to this day. But, there are still unexplored areas like the scientific aspects of

Mahabharata and its weapons. The novel upholds questions concerning general truths whose answers are not yet found. It asks questions like “Did Syamantaka really exist?”, “Is Krishna a myth or a real person?”, “Did He leave behind a priceless legacy to the mankind” etc. Though the author has culled information from various authenticated sources in his novel, it doesn’t prove where the cryptic location of Syamantaka is and doesn’t unfold the myth of Krishna too; a question that baffled everyman from the beginning. Moreover, this is a fiction that is drawn from the imagination of the author!

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