

ASHWIN SANGHI'S 'THEOLOGICAL THRILLERS': A NEW DIRECTION TOWARDS ELITIZING THE POPULAR FICTION

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Abstract

Can 'theology', having always been considered as a realm of serious, studious and so called 'elite' thinkers, be mingled with a 'thriller', which has been considered as a cheap entertainment, and therefore has remained away from the 'elite' academia? Ashwin Sanghi's first novel The Rozabal Line bears the tag 'a theological thriller', combining these apparently distant terms. The same can be used to describe his two more novels- The Krishna Key and Keepers of Kalachakra, the thrillers replete with research and references from various fields like theology, philosophy, mythology, politics and even management. The result is the increased complexity of the novels which transforms a pastime reading into a serious intellectual exercise, which is obviously not everyone's cup of tea. This seems as if the popular fiction, as discriminated from classics and thus banned from high culture, is gaining better status in this postmodern era where the boundaries between so called 'high' and 'low' cultures are vanishing. Rather, a part of popular fiction is adopting high culture itself. The present paper mentions this as 'elitization' and explores the above three novels by Ashwin Sanghi to search how he has 'elitized' the so called (derogatorily) 'popular' genre of thriller.

Key Words: *Ashwin Sanghi, elitize, high culture, low culture, popular fiction, theology, thriller*

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Thriller, a sort of popular or genre fiction is naturally treated as a pastime reading and not a serious intellectual exercise. However, in recent years, a new genre of thriller has evolved, of which Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* (2003) is one of the initial instances. Entangled in a contemporary mystery, are diverse threads of Christian theology and Da Vinci's art; which makes this mystery complex to understand. An Indian author Ashwin Sanghi writes such kinds of thrillers which make the genre not merely a pastime, but an intellectual exercise. Ashwin sanghi's first novel *The Rozabal Line* (2008), which bears the tag 'theological thriller', discusses a much debated theory of Jesus Christ's post-crucifixion life in India. *The Krishna Key* (2012) is an exploration in Hindu theology, mythology and history. His most recent novel *Keepers of Kalachakra* (2017), again, is a perfect theological thriller that entangles Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, science and International politics. The intricately woven threads of multiple streams of knowledge and a huge amount of information uplifts the reading of these novels from merely being a pastime reading that satiates the need for base entertainment. The present paper mentions this upliftment as 'elitising' and aims at exploring how Sanghi's thrillers have elitised the genre thriller.

The concept of elitisation can be understood through clarifying two basic concepts – highbrow/ elite literature and popular literature. Encyclopaedia Britannica defines popular literature as

'[the] literature [which] includes those writings intended for the masses and those that and favour with large audiences. It can be distinguished from artistic literature in that it is designed primarily to entertain. Popular literature, unlike high literature, generally does not seek a high degree of formal beauty or subtlety and is not intended to endure. The growth of popular literature has paralleled the spread of literacy through education and has been facilitated by technological developments in printing.' (Britannica)

Peter Swirski's comparative analysis of highbrow and popular literature shows why popular literature normally scoffed at and why it remains beyond the reach of academia: 'The typical view of popular fiction may be summarized by two tacit equations: Popular Literature=Bad Literature (if it were good, it would not be popular in the first place), and

Popular Literature=Genre Literature (it appeals to many by being simplistic, schematic, and repetitive – in other words, by amply betraying its heritage).’ (Swirski) An assumption that the works appreciated by the majority can be nothing but cheap or shallow is responsible for such perspective. Further, Swirski categorises the charges against popular literature in four ways:

1) the negative character of popular literature creation:... unlike high literature, it is mass-produced by profit-oriented hacks whose sole aim is to gratify the base tastes of a paying audience; 2) its negative effects on high literary culture: popular literature steals from highbrow literature, thus debasing it,...; 3) its negative effects on the audience (readership): the consumption of popular fiction ... produces spurious gratification, and...can be emotionally and cognitively harmful to the reader; 4) its negative effects on the society at large: the mass distribution and wide appeal of popular fiction lower the cultural level of the reading public and encourage political, social and cultural dictatorship by creating a passive and apathetic audience...’ (Swirski)

However, post- globalisation era has brought a lot of changes in various perspectives. Basically, globalisation is a process of homogenisation, i.e. it erases the boundaries between various divisions. It is ‘the worldwide process of homogenising prices, products, wages, rates of interest, and profits.’ Sheila L. Croucher defines globalisation as ‘a process by which the people of the world are unified into a single society and function together. This process is a combination of economic, technological and socio- cultural and political forces.’ Jan Aart Scholte speaks of globalisation as ‘internationalisation, liberalisation, universalisation, westernisation/ modernisation, and deterritorialisation.’ (quoted in Vesjoki)

This shows that globalised world accepts and approves of both high and popular literature equally. As a result of globalisation and further homogenisation, high culture begins to lose its hegemony and to adopt the features of popular culture. This can be seen in dressing styles, food habits, etc. Reversal of this very fact can be observed when popular culture adopts the features of high culture; the process can be called ‘elitisation’. Similarly, popular forms of literature are explored by meritorious authors and then popular literature adopts the qualities of so called high literature. As a result of postmodernism, difference between high and low culture began to diminish. Due to mass scale production, intelligentsia got attracted towards popular art forms, and in turn, popular literature shows the signs of adopting the attributes of elite/ high literature. Here, high literature denotes the genres favoured by scholarly academia as well as the works having aesthetic, content-based, complexity too difficult to understand for common readers.

Further, it is necessary to understand the concept 'theological thriller'- a term that combines two apparently distant poles: theology and thriller. While thriller is scoffed at as 'popular' or 'low' form of entertainment, theology- a systematic study of religion- is never a topic of trivial talk. Encyclopaedia Britannica defines theology as:

[A] philosophically oriented discipline of religious speculation and apologetics that is traditionally restricted, because of its origins and format, to Christianity; but that may also encompass, because of its themes, other religions, including especially Islam and Judaism. The themes of theology include God, humanity, the world, salvation, and eschatology (the study of last times). (Britannica.com)

The very themes suggest that it is a subject of contemplation, scholarly discussion; and in turn, a part of academia that confines itself to those topics or works which allegedly uplift or guide mankind toward higher goals and paths.

Thriller, on the other hand, is considered as an inferior genre because of its appeal to masses. Generally, thrillers naturally include crimes reflecting the distorted mind under the influence of primitive instincts. Besides, thrillers are published in an increasingly large quantity; the fact which raises a question on the quality. Moreover, the elements like plot, language, and message are not designed for aesthetic pleasure basically; nor the common readers expect it from thrillers. As it is not meant for aesthetic pleasure or intellectual exercise, it remains beyond the scope of academia and is neglected as a cheap means of mere entertainment.

Theological thrillers combine not only these two distant fields but also add to its complexity by including the discussion of various streams of knowledge. Ashwin Sanghi's 'theological thrillers' stimulate the diminishing of the boundaries between elite and popular literature. Rather, they cannot be categorised as 'popular' fiction as they actually include scientific, mythological, philosophical, political discussions resulted from profound research. Obviously, all these scholarly discussions are beyond reach and expectations of an average reader having the sole objective of entertainment. Only elite readers will turn to such discussions who have the ability, interest and aptitude towards these topics. This process of enhancing the complexity of a popular genre is treated here as 'elitisation'.

Sanghi's first novel *The Rozabal Line* (2007) clearly bears the label of 'theological thriller'. As he himself has shared in an interview, it is a conversion of his research into fiction. This fact clearly indicates the scholarly implications of the novel. Sanghi's account shows that writing theological thriller, as it involves religious undercurrents, is not an easy process. He published this novel initially on his own, and that too, under a nickname 'Shawn Higin's'. Before this, the novel had been rejected by 47 publishers because of the

sensitive subject matter. It deals with not only Christian theology, but also Hindu, Islamic and Buddhist theologies. It consists of philosophical discussions, psychoanalytical experiments, scientific and technological mechanisms.

A few instances will suffice to show the depth and complexity of this theological thriller. The novel talks about the prophets belonging to various regions and religions, and similarities in their lives. It talks about Jesus's whole journey and the different versions of its account. It moves in the time ranging from 3127 BC to the contemporary era. It discusses rise and expansion of terrorism, it talks of births and rebirths, it explains hypnotic therapy, historical research and so on. It unveils the intricate threads of corruption deeply rooted in institutionalised religion, the conflict between political power and religious power; it talks about Hindu and Buddhist roots of Christianity, which is quite shocking. Eventually, the novel reveals that the 'Rozabal Line' is 'the unbroken chain of the sacred feminine cult, handed down by Mary Magdalene, the high priestess of Magadha.' (RL, 380) It criticises the blindness in the institutionalised and hardcore religions:

'This light is available to all, but some are blind and cannot spot it. ... It is precisely because so many people continue to remain blind that groups such as Crux Deccusata Permuta, the Illuminati, Islamic terrorists, Hindu hardliners, Jewish fundamentalists, Aum Shinrikyo and Opus Dei continue to flourish.' (RL, 382)

The novel ultimately asserts the power of the divine feminine, and celebrated it as a manifestation of Shakti. The three major female characters- Martha, Swakilki and Alissa are shown to be the forerunners of Mary Magdalene's bloodline with Indian connections. It differently interprets the religious symbols like Star of David and Swastika, saying that both the symbols are 'same concept, just slightly different geometry!' (RL, 385) Further the novel proceeds to visit the roots of all religion which seem to be one. The original passage from the novel is worth quoting as an example of the scholarly and genius interpretations made by Sanghi.

'In Judaism, Abraham is the father of the Israelites, blessed and chosen by God. Historians have placed Abraham at around 1950 BC. Jews and Christians alike believe they are descendants of Abraham's son, Isaac. On the other hand, Muslims believe they are descended from Ishmael, Abraham's other son. ... Who exactly was Abraham? According to the Book of Genesis, Abraham was the son of Terah, who was from Ur in Sumer. In Hinduism, you have Brahma and his consort Saraswati. Isn't it possible that Abraham and Brahma were one and the same person?... ' (RL, 386)

The novel also discusses the essential goodness in all religions and sects- 'there is something good to be found in all faiths... The problem has never been belief but deliberate misinterpretation and misuse of it.' (390)

The narrative structure is so complex for an average reader. The blurb of Rozabal Line says, '[it is] a thriller swirling between continents and centuries, Ashwin Sanghi traces a pattern that curls backwards to the violent birth of religion itself.' Along with a complex subject matter, such continuous shifts in time and place necessitate studious attention to every minute detail in the narrative, which leads it away from popular formulaic nature and introduces the reader to scholarly elitism.

Another elitist feature of the novel lies in its end notes and references written in a style quite similar to a work of research. Sanghi's extent of research clearly reflects through 209 points under 'Notes, Acknowledgements and References'. The select critical responses, too, will show that despite being a thriller, it is far beyond the bounds of the genre.

Sanghi's another novel *The Krishna Key* (2012) is more a mythological thriller than a theological one. Yet, it may fit into this category, as it deals with some of the subtle religious concepts like *avatar*. This concept is assessed on account of a youth who is brainwashed and trained to believe himself to be Kalki, the last *avatar* of Lord Vishnu; and is made to 'eliminate' the researchers who are about to explore the truth behind the convenient presentation of history. What he does in fact is nothing but a serial killing. This examines the religious constructs rooted in personal interests, criminal tendencies and selfish mindsets. The novel is replete with many historical, mythological, mathematical, archaeological and scientific details. Like his other novels, this novel, too, attempts to discover the hidden correlation between religion, rituals, faiths on one hand and science, technology and modern thought on the other hand.

Long discussions among the characters (who themselves are eminent scholars and exceptionally intelligent) provide a space to weave this knowledge in various fields across the plot. An example follows here which reveals the search for linkage between religion and science. Mataji- a central character, showing the parallelisms between an image of a Shiv Lingam and an aerial view of Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, discusses the implications of this similarity between a religious symbol and a nuclear research centre.

'The water from the Shiv Lingam is not drunk [as holy water] for precisely the same reason as the water from a nuclear reactor is not potable- it is charged water. ...[M]ost Shiv temples are always found near source of water... because Shiv lingams- just like modern day reactors- need water for cooling the core.' (KK, 40)

Another example is: 'Our mythology tells us that Brahma took birth from the umbilicus of Vishnu. Was it just imagination or was it indicative of the fact that Vedic people knew of the presence and significance of stem cells in the umbilical cord?' (KK, 189)

Further, it also highlights the similarity between a nuclear explosion and a passage in Bhagavad Gita quoted by Oppenheimer when first nuclear bomb was tested successfully. (KK, 40-41) The novel, at another place, mentions the researched dates of Krishna's life, which derive from planetary calculations and further analyses them to see 'whether archaeological finds [of Dwaraka] are in sync with them.' (KK, 60)

The whole story revolves around the search for the Syamantaka gem, i.e. the Krishna Key, in the course of which a series of murders takes place. Various assumptions and interpretations and the consequent discussions are the elitist elements of this novel. Defining the historicity of the Mahabharata is also an issue dealt with in this novel, through well-researched archaeological, historical and scientific explanations and evidences. E.g. If Brahmastra is assumed to be a nuclear weapon, its radioactivity will be traced in the northern regions of India. Referring to Oppenheimer's reaction after the first atomic bomb was tested, the novel raises questions in this regard- 'Was Oppenheimer giving us a clue that the technology for atomic energy could already have existed? Should we take that the Mahabharata seriously or should we dismiss it as science fiction of an earlier era?' (KK, 120)

It interprets Krishna's time as the 'entire agricultural way of life', as 'the name Krishna is derived from Krishi' and this culture's dependence on cow 'eventually transformed all parts of society.' (KK, 167) the novel also provides various references of studies done on this culture. E.g.

'Yet another scholar, Dr F Lorinse, carried out a translation of the Bhagavad Gita but instead of admiring it for its original wisdom, he compared it to the New Testament and concluded that the Gita had mostly been inspired by the Bible!... But luckily, the big break in favour of Krishna's antiquity came from a book called Indica- written around three hundred years before Jesus Christ...' (KK, 179)

The novel also attempts to find the parallels among various cultures with reference to researches. The passage is worth reading from the original.

'We know that the Saraswati river started drying up around 3200 BCE. The result was splitting up of the Saraswati civilisation, which had flourished along its banks. Some people moved eastward towards the Ganges and some moved westwards- in the direction of Sumeria. This resulted in the westerners being

called Asuras and those who remained within Vedic territories being called Devas... Those who reached Tigris- Euphrates valley continued to remain moon-worshippers... The subsequent language of the region- Avestan- was virtually identical to Sanskrit. The region's future religion- Zoroastrianism- produced religious books called the Gathas that contained passages that were identical to verses from the Rig Veda.' (KK, 146)

The novel is replete with the references of many interesting theories such as, Mount Kailash is not natural, but a man-made mountain; Tajmahal was originally a Rajput temple, and so on. It discusses the historic details of Somanath temple. While discussing it as a nuclear reactor, it talks in detail about the whole process of nuclear transmutation. Ultimately, the novel reaches a philosophical conclusion that surpasses all transient concrete aspects. The search for the Krishna Key, i.e. the Syamantaka gem, ends at Taj Mahal, and the protagonists realise that

'it is the goal of alchemy is transformation from lower forms to higher forms, ... but it is the uninitiated who think that this means transforming lead to gold. On the contrary, alchemy is about transforming yourself- a better person. The stone is irrelevant, it's 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!*' (KK, 460)

Inclusion of complex theories, scholarly discussions, illustrations, and bibliography make this thriller much more than a fiction, an intellectual exercise.

Keepers of Kalachakra (2017) is the most recent novel by Sanghi. It involves an entangled web of Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic theologies. The novel also attempts to seek scientific explanations of religious facts on the backdrop of international terrorism, and specifically, that of the 'clash of civilizations' in the present world, as predicted by Samuel Huntington. The central part of the narrative is set in the virgin Himalayan lands. Thus, it simultaneously deals with theology, physics, environment, international politics, and so on.

The central narrative starts with a complex discussion by an IITian professor, Vijay Sundaram, on equivalence between Vedanta and quantum theory. The very discussion concludes on the note that they 'both are attempts to understand the underlying reality of the universe. [therefore], A good scientist has to be a philosopher and a good philosopher must also be a scientist.' (KoK, 22) This very discussion directs the reader towards the central theme, i.e. to find a common ground between science and spirituality. The tone is furthered by an extensive discussion by Sage Brahmananda who talks about Akashic

records, i.e. 'vibrational records of each and every individual soul in the universe and the journey that it undertakes.' (KoK, 38) This whole discussion is an intelligent mixture of science, religion and philosophy. A few intelligent exercises are made such as defining Ramayana's date with the help of internal literary evidence, astronomical evidences and oceanography studies. (KoK, 41)

The novel further goes on discussing many topics in Hindu and Buddhist theologies such as significance of various symbols like Nataraja, Om (and its connection with the sound of gravitational waves), 'Tibetan Book of Dead', Kalachakra Mulatantra, power of Rudraksh, myth of Shambhala- a utopian island supposed to be fictional, power of yoga and meditation and so on. It connects religious concepts with scientific inventions as well. E.g. the concept of Yamaj (existence of interconnected individuals) is connected with the interdependence of Yin and Yang as well as that of Shiv and Shakti; which is proven by 'discovery multiples', a scientific invention.

Another concern of the novel is that of Islamic Jihad and international terrorism. A direct reference is made to Samuel P. Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* in which he predicts that 'cultural and religious identities would be the main reason for global conflict in the post cold war world... The biggest challenge we face is the prospect of clash of civilisations becoming an all- out war between Muslims and the rest of the world.' The direct inclusion of such a theoretical and academic concept is surely a sign of elitisation.

Similar to the other novels, *Keepers of Kalachakra* is, too, an elite thriller having numerous references in various fields of research, in-depth discussions on different streams of knowledge, followed by an extensive list of references.

Ashwin Sanghi's theological thrillers, to sum up, use a variety of techniques for elitising the thriller. Major techniques explored by him include- complex and multi- layered themes, strong base of meticulous study, use of illustrations, extensive bibliography, intricate narrative structure with continuous shifts in setting, inclusion of long scientific, logical, historical and philosophical discussions, and a web of interdisciplinarity of various streams of knowledge. Having their roots in theology of Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Buddhism, Sanghi's thrillers invite the readers for conscious contemplation over various problems surrounding the contemporary mankind, and uplift, i.e. elitise the genre of thriller.

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