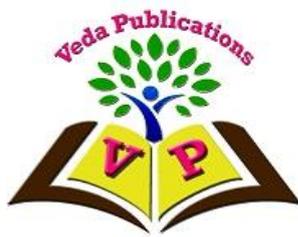


THE THREE I'S IN *THE KRISHNA KEY*: AN ANALYSIS OF THE INTRICACIES OF IDENTITY

Venkateswaran S.

(Research Scholar, Chennai)



ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is on the shades of Instigation and Invasion and the various intricacies of the concept of an Identity, as seen in Ashwin Sanghi's novel *The Krishna Key*, and will touch upon how, in the perception of the presenter, features such as plot and narration either heighten or cleverly cover the underlying complexity (and, danger?) of the idea of an Indian spirit.

Identity is a complex conception. Its politics is not new to the world; everyone is aware of what happened during colonial rule and also of what happens in neo- or post-colonial times. Some strive to "find their roots" (as it were); for others, these "roots" are granted most generously and seductively by authorities outside of themselves. Little do we realise that many of our social evils are too closely linked in a two-way web with this mesh we term "Identity"--evils such as communalism and hero-worship. An Identity therefore is a kind of invasion upon the minds of people (including the educated multitude).

keywords: *Mythology, Chant, hybridity, Bhakti*

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Any conception of one's identity is the result of a game of narratives. The entire corpus of Knowledge as we know it is a salad of narratives from various narrators to various audiences. Rene Descartes' famous saying "I think, therefore I am" is a polemic revelation which has stirred many debates. But the very idea of thinking is worth pondering upon. As many of our thinkers, theorists, and philosophers from the postmodern era tell us, 'thought' is not or need not be a distanced and abstract concept. The very essence of Knowledge (and, consequently, of thought) is Language, or, to be more precise, Narratives. Hence, taking up Descartes' saying once again, it is not incorrect to conclude that we are either what we are told to be or what we

discover—(though the discovery takes the guise of a narrative) be itself or its binary.

An Identity, then, does not always need to be something natal. We are what we think ourselves to be, and our thoughts are somehow influenced either into belief or departure by the narratives either of culture, nation, or individuals. The crucial building blocks of a culture which form the individual perspective are Mythology and History. The former is often said to initiate the individual into a corresponding culture through its play on the imagination, and the latter is stereotypically said to do so at a more rational level. Myth and History, it was thought, do not go together. After all, there was no common ground between them. Both were

stories but History was “fact” while Mythology was “fiction”! History was the unquestionable and indubitable record of facts while Mythology was a body of moral stories.

THE MULTIPLICATION OF STORIES

“Myth, memory, history--these are three alternative ways to capture and account for an elusive past, each with its own persuasive claim”-- Warren I. Susman

In our times, there is no “History”, only “Histories”. Just as there are many Mythologies and even more myths, we now have multiple histories. By this use of the plural form, we do not only mean that each culture has its own historical roots, but also that there are multiple historical accounts within a culture. Nietzsche tells us that there are no facts, only interpretations. We may say that there are no facts, only stories or narratives.

Hence the biggest problem in a country like India is to know, understand, and eventually integrate the various cultural narratives that exist in relative unity. Poet, scholar, and essayist A. K. Ramanujan titled one of his essays as “Is there an Indian Way of Thinking?”, the comic irony here might be that we do not know and can not tell, given the multi-cultural nature of the Indian subcontinent. The attempt made by most people, however, seems to be to arrive at an integrated Indian consciousness that combines all or most of the extant cultural consciousnesses.

The Indian subcontinent is one of the richest lands when it comes to historical and mythological wealth and variety. It is common knowledge that this culture (if we may be right in using the singular form of the word) contains nearly all the major religious cultures of the world. Despite colonial hangover, India seems to still hold on to her roots and the search for these roots has been an important motif in the literary output of the past decade.

Ashwin Sanghi (born 25 January 1969) is one of the writers to use the above motif yet with a positive difference, made effective through the presentation and underlying plots which paint the novel with sensible subtleties His first novel, *The Rozabal Line*, was written under the pseudonym “Shawn Higgins” and is often called a religious thriller. The novel is based on the well-known

theories put forth by writers such as Holger Kersten and Nicolas Notovich--the theory the Jesus Christ survived the crucifixion, settled down in Kashmir, and was eventually buried in the Roza Bal tomb after his death. Since then it has been literary hybrids all the way till now for Sanghi. His second novel *Chanakya's Chant* is a political thriller and alternates between the Maurya period (the time of Kautilya or Chanakya) and the present political scenario.

Dr. Vishnu Bhat of Madras Christian College is known to have said that Myths display ‘layers of cultural consciousness’. What Dr. Bhat may have meant is that Mythology is the creative re-presentation of history and factual intellectual database that forms the base of a culture. As revealed in *Chanakya's Chant*, when a culture's history is considered out-of-the-box, one sees in it a myth or legend that does not fade into the obscurity of fancy but lingers and makes itself live through time. *The Rozabal Line* shows us that at times, when Mythology is taken at face value and as the creative output of a flourished culture, one sees that there are strong kernels of historical truths placed cleverly and unobtrusively among the ‘layers of cultural consciousness’, and that these kernels of truth point to a primitive unity or unified consciousness which seems to have faded into diversity as civilisation progressed. *The Rozabal Line* began what *The Krishna Key* picks up.

The Krishna Key is Sanghi's third novel; it was released in 2012 and has fascinated many readers ever since. The novel combines aspects of a crime/mystery thriller, mythological/occult thriller, and a detective novel. A report in the December 5th, 2012 issue of *The Hindu* reads:

. . . And now with *The Krishna Key*, Ashwin looks at the Krishna story. Intercutting between the 5,000-year-old story and the present, the book recounts . . . a search for a priceless artefact.

In the same article (“Offering Tantalising Alternatives”, *The Hindu*, 5th December 2012), Sanghi tells interviewer Mini Anthikad Chhibber, that he was inspired to research for and write this novel when:

At a friend's house, someone mentioned that the prophesised appearance of the

tenth avatar of Vishnu — Kalki — was very similar to the prophecies of the Book of Revelation in the Bible. That got my brain into overdrive.”

At a glance, the narrative takes the form of a regular crime thriller. A serial killer murders a brilliant linguist and this puts the latter’s friend (the de facto hero of the story) into trouble with the law. The novel picks up speed very soon and the protagonist, a professor of History whose area of research is the historicity of the *Mahabharata*, and his doctoral student find themselves transformed utterly. The professor and his soon-to-be friends enter a scenario resembling a detective story as they go on a quest to discover the fabled Syamantaka (a Philosopher’s Stone, the eponymous “Krishna Key”), and eventually end up finding it in the most unexpected place under unimaginable circumstances. And, as always, the criminals are caught and the good ones live happily ever after.

PLAIN, SIMPLE, DECEPTIVE.

ALCHEMY IN PROGRESS (*The Krishna Key*, Ch. 108 p. 464)

Our focus here is on two key concepts: firstly, the three I’s in *The Krishna Key*; and secondly, the hybridity of the Indian Identity as displayed in this novel. The three I’s are three manifestations or sources of Identity—*Invasion*, *Instigation*, and *Identification*. We will take up these I’s first. It must be borne in mind before we begin that these three factors need not necessarily be independent of each other. But more about the overlapping subsets after a few initial setting-down of basics.

The novel, from the perspective of this paper, is seen as a frame narrative. In his famous book *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, Peter Barry says this about such works:

Often writers make use of ‘frame narratives’ (also called ‘primary narratives’) which contain within them ‘embedded narratives’ (also called ‘secondary narratives’) (227).

The Krishna Key employs the mythical frame of the *Mahabharata* which is strategically cut into 108 parts and placed one-part-at-a-time at the beginning of each of the 108 chapters. As the *Hindu* report rightly points out, the overt narrative

“[Intercuts] between the 5,000-year-old story and the present”. History, it is said, repeats itself. Interestingly, as is revealed much later in the novel, myths and legends recur just as inevitably. To sum this last idea up, we may use the words of the “hero” of *The Krishna Key*.

The professor (Ravi Mohan Saini) announces suavely to his students in Chapter 2 of the novel

Many of you see [the *Mahabharata*] as a collection of stories based upon the wisdom of ages but you do not see it as an actual historical account.

And as he explains further, our perceptions of the epic are drastically changed. However, the underlying connection and impact of this history-myth bond and the theme of Identity are our major interests here.

The first of the novel’s three I’s is *Invasion*. History determines the identity of the nation, culture, and the individual. It is full of examples of how nations and cultures were made and broken due to invasions. American President Barack Obama writes “The worst thing that colonialism did was to cloud our view of the past” (*Dreams From My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, July 1995). Yes, by “Invasion” we are here referring to the forced subduing of colonised cultures by the colonisers—what Harrichand Itwaru terms a “*psychological mutilation of the minds of the colonised*”.

Although *The Krishna Key* comes with a disclaimer stating that authenticity is not to be expected or assumed regarding the historical information given in the novel, the shocking details which it presents are highly significant. This is in a sense, Historiographic Metafiction. The following are a few dialogues in which the ‘narrator’ gives us information on the past and how that past was “Invaded” and “looted”:

“So the western scholars were interested in propagating Christianity rather than serious historical research” asked Taarak.

“Yes”, said Maataji, “Western scholars who studied Hindu literature were initially convinced that the Krishna story had been borrowed from the life of Jesus Christ. . . . Another scholar, Albrecht Weber. . . .concluded that the Vedic concept of the incarnations of God was borrowed from the idea the Jesus Christ was the Son of God”

"So we were accused of having plagiarised the Bible?" asked Taarak. "Yes" (Sanghi, *The Krishna Key* 181).

This is a conversation between the soon-to-become serial killer Taarak Vakil and his mentor "Maataji" alias Priya Ratnani. One is reminded of Ralph Waldo Emerson's saying "*All history becomes subjective; in other words there is properly no history, only biography*".

Another interesting and similar exchange is this:

"What?" said Priya incredulously, "you mean to say that Ghazni was not after riches? That he did not attack because of his hatred for idol worship? That his objective was only to take away the Syamantaka?"

"Well, he certainly wanted those other things too. But he specifically wanted the stone. After all, Ghazni himself was a descendant of Krishna" said Sir Khan (340).

The above exchange is between Priya Ratnani in her youth (before she enrolls as Saini's doctoral student) and the intriguing don Sir Khan. The last line of dialogue is what interests us most in this context.

According to the novel, the inhabitants of the so-called Vedic culture had flourished by the banks of the now-only-mythical river Sarasvati; as Anil Varshney (Saini's friend and the first of those who are murdered in the novel) asks in Chapter 7, "*Wouldn't you say its time the Indus Valley civilisation was renamed the Sarasvati civilisation?*". As the river began to dry up, we are told, some of these inhabitants moved westwards towards Mesopotamia and other such regions while those that stayed behind were named by modern historians as the Indus Valley civilisation. The Vedas and other ancient texts have evidence for this theory, and also proof against the western and modern historical theories concerning an Aryan invasion.

Sir Khan's statement about Ghazni makes perfect sense when one considers all this; if one sees the story of Krishna as being real and as a historical account (the novel proves it), it is not unlikely that the people who migrated to the west after the drying up of the Sarasvati were the survivors of the great flood which consumed Dwaraka (Krishna's legendary kingdom) and, subsequently, Ghazni's ancestors!

The Mughal sultans (most of them at least) invaded and plundered the Indian subcontinent; but they could only destroy the bare stone structures and loot the wealth from temples. But it was under British colonial rule that the Indian identity (as it were) received its worst blow. This is revealed by Priya/Maataji's words to Taarak Vakil which we have already quoted. History, Myth, is there a difference anymore?

History is a myth that all men agree to believe in --Napoleon Bonaparte

All these invasions are at political and social and religious levels. There is a far more efficient and subtle Invasion which determines one's individual conception of oneself. It is the Invasion of an individual's mind. This brings us to our second I: *Instigation*.

Each of the major characters of the novel is somehow involved in a process of narration. The embedded narrative (that is, the "present day" story) has two characters with narratives of their own (these are the "narrators" within the novel in the fullest sense). They are the scripters of two individual plots (both of these rooted in the novel's main quest) which intersect as the characters (the "audience" of these two "narrators") take their course. A narrative is an invasion upon vacuum, and this is the primary cause of instigation.

There are three tiers of the narrator-listener chain in the novel. The first consists of Anil Varshney, Dada Rahim, Sarla, and an unnamed monk. The second tier consists of Saini, Sir Khan, Priya/Maataji, and Radhika Singh (in the order corresponding to that of the first tier). The third is somewhat intermixed with the second--it consists of Priya (influenced by both Saini and Khan), Sampath Sharma/Taarak Vakil (influenced by Maataji/Priya), and Rathore (who is Sub-Inspector to Inspector Radhika Singh).

Anil Varshney gives an antique seal to his best friend Ravi Mohan Saini and tells him that there are three other similar seals with three other trustworthy people, and a base plate which completes the puzzle. He then goes on to talk about the Sarasvati civilisation and tells Saini that the rest will be revealed that evening. Varshney is murdered and the seal which he had kept with himself is stolen,

and the blame falls on Saini. This, however, is a mere spark to the transformation of Saini from a brilliant professor of History to a fugitive/detective who embarks on a quest both to unveil the mystery behind the four seals and to prove his innocence. The Instigation behind Saini's transformed identity occurs before the murder takes place. The presence of Varshney is a haunting one in the novel. Varshney's narration of his theories, and his "script", is what Saini plays in, tries to understand, and eventually becomes. Varshney's character is very similar to Sir Khan's in that both of them are the two most powerful narrators whom we see in the novel.

Sir Khan was born to an amazingly knowledgeable tinsmith and Krishna-devotee in the village of Besnagar in Madhya Pradesh. "His mother had named him *Kanha*" (350). Since birth, he grows under the constructive influence of his father who tells him about "*Khamb Baba*" (an iron pillar) which is situated at the heart of the village and which contains an inscription made by a Greek historian which talks of Krishna. This inscription, discovered by a Western scholar, *Kanha* is told, proves that Krishna existed before Christianity came into the global picture. Soon, communal riots break out in the village and *Kanha* is forced to flee with a treasured ceramic base plate entrusted to him by his father. He is found by Dada Rahim in Delhi and is initiated into the business of snagging wallets. He is now rechristened as "Khan" since, as Dada Rahim says "You won't be Muslim simply by adopting a Muslim-sounding name!" (356). As their business progresses, they enter various other illegal businesses and soon Dada Rahim jestingly begins to call Khan "Sir Khan" (364). Thus this once-timid-and-innocent boy soon becomes one of the most infamous dons in his trades under the instigation provided by Dada Rahim.

Sanjay Ratnani is an honest lawyer and loving father whose life is transformed drastically when his daughter Priya's vulnerability surfaces. Priya is motherless and hence looks upon her de facto guardian 'Sarla Aunty' as a mother figure. Sarla Aunty brings the young girl into the intense kind of Krishna *bhakti* which would have tremendous repercussions in the latter's life and mind. Priya kills Sarla Aunty's abusive husband at one point of time. Sarla Aunty because of her love and affection for Priya takes the

blame before stabbing herself. The police are called but this only does more harm than good. Priya breaks down and her father makes up his mind to make sure that she never has to undergo such experiences ever again. Thus he is forced to conduct suits in favour of criminals who pay him heavily for his services. And this is how Priya is brought into contact with her most efficient 'scripter': Sir Khan.

Sir Khan re-ignites Priya's Krishna-bhakti by telling her that there is a rare artefact believed to have been left behind by Krishna for posterity. The rest of Khan's narration is the very same as Varshney's. Thus Priya is pushed into the same quest as Varshney, and consequently Saini. She is persuaded by the suave don to forgo her original dream of becoming a teacher of History, into becoming "Maataji" (Mother) to a young lad named Sampath Sharma.

Sampath Sharma is the most important character in the novel from the point of view of our current topic (Instigation). He is an extremely timid young boy who is abused by his teacher. Priya 'adopts' him as her pupil and re-christens him as 'Taarak Vakil' (Taarak meaning 'saviour', and Vakil meaning 'lawyer') which is an anagram of 'Kalki Avatar'--the tenth incarnation of Lord Vishnu. He is persuaded into believing that he is Kalki, the destroyer of evil, who has come to cleanse the world. We may recall the dialogue between Maataji and Taarak quoted earlier: that exchange is one of a long list which culminates in Taarak

...allowing himself to believe in the righteousness of Maataji's cause. He silently vowed to do whatever was needed to make her happy (183).

And that he must "set right historical wrongs".

Interestingly, Taarak and Sub-Inspector Rathore are similar in the essence that both of them are characterless characters. They gain their "Identity" either through multiple role-playing or mere obedience. Taarak, being the instrument of a schemer, takes up different roles to keep track of Saini and his movements. He remains faithful to Maataji till the end. Most importantly, he is convinced by authority outside of himself that he is something which he might not actually be.

Quite similar to Priya's initial role is that of Inspector Radhika Singh. Originally the wife of a Border Security Force Commandant named Hari Singh, Radhika's character is instigated into transformation when her husband is assassinated by a pair of terrorists.

The flames of her husband's pyre died down, but her despair and anger didn't (297).

She becomes a stern police Inspector and is initially pitted against Professor Saini whom she thinks to be the murderer of Varshney and two other scientists. She later becomes a part of Saini's narrative as she is introduced to the actual murderers. Her instigation, thus, is from a more non-Krishna source. She becomes a representative of the law and her motives are merely to get the wrongdoers arrested. What happens to her in other respects is mere coincidence. This is not, however, to say that she has no connection with Krishna. In many ways, Radhika is the 'red herring' in the novel. Since both she and Maataji are shown counting beads on a rosary. Since Maataji's identity is not revealed till long into the story, one tends to assume that she is Radhika.

Finally, in the mythical frame of the novel, Krishna becomes the instigator. One may recall the most well-known passages of the *Bhagwad Gita* where Krishna speaks of the immortality of the soul and the concept of Dharma to Arjuna. Here, Krishna is the narrator-instigator, and Arjuna understands his identity as a Kshatriya and human being through this narration. The significance of this recognition is that the embedded narrative of the novel has many Krishnas and Arjunas. For instance, "Sir Khan" is an anagram of "Krishna"; the names of the five people who possess the four antique seals (Varshney, Saini, Bhojaraj, Kurkude, and Chhedi) are modernised versions of the names of the five chief Yadava tribes. Scripters-scripted, instigators-instigated, some in a likeable way, others in not so likeable ways--but Instigation/scripting nevertheless.

As we can see, despite the apparent individuality of the characters of the embedded narrative of *The Krishna Key*, it is not hard to notice their essential hybridity. This brings us to our third and last topic of discussion--*Identification*, and the concept of hybridity as shown in the novel. In the

process of finding the exact location of the Syamantaka, the characters unknowingly end up finding themselves. Subtle hints are dropped throughout the novel stating that none of our external and impersonal aspects such as name or nationality or communal identity or religious and historical beliefs is free from those of others. More importantly, the novel brilliantly brings out the truth in the belief that all the cultures of the world have one common root. This hybridity and the identification of it are brought out in two shades in the novel.

The most obvious instances of Identification in the novel are the various factual (possibly also pseudo-factual) data that runs throughout the novel. The four seals which must be obtained in order to discover the location of the "Krishna Key" are almost identical. They contain the image of a hybrid creature that has the heads of a unicorn, bull, and goat in anticlockwise order. The base plate that holds these seals together (the plate originally owned by Sir Khan and much later bought at an auction by Varshney's corporation) is the plate of cultural consciousness. When these four individual yet identical seals are placed in the right order into the base plate, they form a Swastika (the most common Vedic symbol). The meaning of all this may be derived when we pay attention to certain other facts brought out in the novel.

As people from the Vedic civilisation known as the Sarasvati civilisation moved westward, it may well be believed that they spread out further west and were the ancestors of other modern-day cultures. This is so because there are many common traits between the Vedic religion and Islam and even Christianity. For instance, Saini says, the name "Abraham" is very similar to the name "Brahma". The Kaaba at Mecca was the shrine of Hubal (the Arabian moon-god) prior to the advent of Islam. Hubal, it is said, was very similar in nature and depiction to the Hindu god Shiva.

The two most important facts that the novel brings out to demonstrate this essential oneness of all traditions despite their innate variety are the facts about the Taj Mahal, and the spiritual truth behind the inseparable nature of Shiva (destruction) and Vishnu (creation). The last eight chapters of the novel

may be called the Taj Chapters since they take place in and around the premises of India's most well-known monument. As always, the novel brings out facts about the marble building which very few of us know.

The Taj Mahal, according to the novel, was originally the palace of Raja Man Singh of Agra which was given 'willingly' to Shah Jahan for the burial of Mumtaz Mahal. The pinnacle of the monument is a combination of an inverted lotus, a coconut, and a kalash, besides the crescent moon which is considered an Islamic symbol. The novel ends with the assumption that the space between the inner and outer ceilings of the monument is where the Syamantaka is kept. The designs on the pavement leading to the Taj Mahal contain six-pointed stars which are powerful symbols in Hinduism. The stars represent the meeting of the male and female reproductive symbols--more precisely, these stars represent the union between Shiva and Shakti, the Creative and Destructive. Thus, the stars and the Mahal might be said to be symbols of the union of apparent binaries.

A recurring idea in the novel is that Shiv (the destructive principle) and Vish (The creative principle) are one and the same. This union of apparent binaries may be connected with the novel's plot through the number 894. It is the total of the two most important numbers in Vedic and Islamic traditions (108 and 786 respectively). The architecture, astronomy, and numerology of Vedic civilisation centered on the digits 1, 0, and 8, and the number 108 as such. The Arabic system known as the *Abjad* tells us that the sum total of the numerical values of the letters in the first verse of the Quran (as per the *Abjad*) is 786. Lastly, and most interestingly, the Arabic equivalents of 7, 8, and 6 can be written together to create a mirror image of the Sanskrit/Hindu 'Om'. The geometry and symmetry behind the auspicious number 108 reoccurs throughout the novel. Here we recall the number of chapters as well as the 108-part division of the great epic.

The four seals, then, represent four individual traditions. The base plate is something like a salad-bowl where different ingredients are mixed and yet remain unique. Most significantly, these seals

form a Swastika when placed within the base plate in the right order. Connecting this with the various instances of cultural unity in diversity, we may conclude that this represents the essence of the Indian consciousness. When Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and other religions are not independent of each other, does it not mean that we are, like the beasts imprinted on the seals given by Varshney to Saini, hybrids?

To sum up all this, we may quote a line from Varshney's cryptic letter to Saini which acts as the latter's script:

"Cast aside hatred and learn to love . . . you seek the stone that turns lead to gold, but verily do not find; look instead for the faithful stone that can truly transform your mind."

Saini and Radhika realise that the Syamantaka was never really a stone outside of them; it was the mind's eye (the mind's 'I') which can understand and transcend hybridity and see it as a fact and not a limitation.

Nothing of me is original. I am the combined effort of everyone I've ever known. --Chuck Palahniuk (*Invisible Monsters*).

The Krishna Key is an exploration into both individual identity, and a larger national or universal conception of an identity. The play of narratives in this search is quite clear. We are brought into contact with colonial meta-narratives, individual scripted narratives and religious and pseudo-factual information which (since they produce some new effect upon the minds of individuals) is yet another narrative. Seeing I to I and yet another I, we can conclude that alchemy is in progress, only this time, the alchemist is both the ingredient and the final product!

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