

Historiographic Fiction as a Postmodern Tool to Criticize the Contemporary Indian Politics: An Analysis of *Chanakya's Chant* by Ashwin Sanghi.

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Abstract- *One of the distinguishing features of literature is its ability to interconnect various schools of studies and discourses for a better understanding of the events which happen in the society. This paper particularly specializes in this aspect of literature that it makes a postmodern harmonious intermingling of history and literature, for a political awakening of the readers by analysing the novel Chanakya's Chant by Ashwin Sanghi and tries to find this particular intermingling nature of history and literature and its use as a postmodern tool to criticize the nature of contemporary Indian politics. By blending the two parallel stories of the two protagonists from two different eras- Chanakya and Gangasagar Mishra, Ashwin Sanghi foregrounds historiographic fiction as a postmodern tool to criticize the Indian political scenario by comparing and contrasting the ancient and the modern Indian politics. The book offers a return to the ancient cultural heritage of India with its religious beliefs, mythical tradition, and its customs. The history of ancient Bharath and the history of Chanakya repeats itself in the postmodern era with a slight change in terms of the cultural context. Through the use of historiographic fiction Ashwin Sanghi criticizes the postmodern Indian politics to develop itself as an independent entity, which continues to follow the traditional methods of rules put forward by the greatest leaders of Ancient Bharat. This paper tries to prove that the novel, as a historiographic fiction, puts light on the modern Indian political situation by repeating Chanakya's strategies through his postmodern avatar Gangasagar Mishra, who happens to be a postmodern Indian political persona trying to preserve the historical past by recreating it in the contemporary Indian cultural context.*

India's cultural roots can be traced back to the ancient terrain of the subcontinent with its rich social, political, cultural and literary heritage and are highly praised and portrayed in most of the modern and

postmodern Indian English literary texts. Indian English literary texts enjoy the pride of place among the world literature when it comes to the narrative technique and the treatment of it, the traditions and the mythical past of India and the mastery of the Indian writers to depict their nation as it is. One of such postmodern Indian English writers, Ashwin Sanghi, who demarginalises the concept of India in his books which mainly have historical, theological and mythical thematic frameworks.

As a writer of historiographic fiction, Ashwin Sanghi, in this novel, makes use of the rich historical, mythical, religious, intellectual and cultural richness of ancient India and makes the readers immersed in the art of retelling history to fit it into the modern cultural context. The ancient historical past is being recreated in the postmodern era by presenting parallel stories of the two protagonists of the novel Chanakya, the Indian legend and Gangasagar Mishra, a person who belongs to the present day generation in India. This paralleling of stories, generations, ages and the people, suggest the parallelism that the author intended to depict. As the blurb of the book, *Chanakya's Chant* says:

The year is 340 BC. A hunted, haunted Brahmin youth vows revenge for the gruesome murder of his beloved father. Cold, calculating, cruel and armed with a complete absence of the accepted morals, he become a the most powerful political strategist in Bharath and success in uniting a ragged country against the invasion of the army of the demigod, Alexander the Great. Pitting the weak edges of both forces against each other, he pulls off a wicked and astonishing victory and succeeds in installing Chandragupta on the throne of the mighty Mauryan Empire. History knows him as the brilliant strategist Chanakya. Satisfied and a little bored-by his success as a kingmaker, through the simple summoning of his gifted mind, he recedes into the shadows to write his Arthashastra, the 'science of wealth'. But history,

which exults in repeats itself, revives Chanakya two and a half millennia later, in the avatar of Gangasagar Mishra, a Brahmin teacher in small town India who becomes puppeteer to a host of ambitious individuals- including a certain slum child who grows up into a beautiful and powerful woman. This wily pundit- who prays on Greece, venality and sexual deviance- bring about another miracle of a united India.

The plot, with the stalest clichés and innovative techniques, proves itself to be a manifestation of the author's desire to recreate the rich ancient past with its mythological significance by making use of historiography as a tool. This stylistic tool paves a way for the reader to compare and contrast the political history of the ancient Bharath and the present day Indian political scenario. The distinction seems obvious as it presents the two parallel stories by giving an emphasis to historiography and the mythical cultural artifacts.

The story goes back and forth between the present day and 2300 years ago, the time of Chanakya. The first chapter is about Chanakya the son of Chanak, a well-educated Brahmin who was killed by king Dhanananda of Magadha. In order to take revenge upon the king he goes to Takshila University and becomes an Acharya. Because of his intelligence and knowledge he makes so many political strategies and succeeds in uniting the disintegrated royal regions of India as United Bharath. By manipulating the situation and the people around him, he succeeds in uniting the country against the invasion of Alexander the Great and his army. By making his disciple Chandragupta Maurya as the king, there comes the beginning of Maurya dynasty in India.

The author brings about the idea of historiographic narrative in a postmodern perspective by showing a repetition of this history, the history of the ancient political kingmaker of India two thousand three hundred years later by reviving the cunning political kingmaker Chanakya in the avatar of Gangasagar Mishra, a Brahmin teacher and the modern representative of Chanakya. This modern Chanakya in the new avatar is being presented as a puppeteer who trains dedicated and ambitious budding youth like Chandni, an ordinary Indian village girl who gets all the opportunities to be a powerful controller of the states to have power and to exert it over the nation with the help of a sort of magic. This modern India,

being ruled by these political kingmakers happens to be a dissociated terrain from the Ancient Bharath and becomes a landscape suitable to suppress the citizens mentally, physically, psychologically and emotionally in its depicted form as a feasting ground. Even though he was using, reviving and incarnating Chanakya for the upliftment of a woman, he had political strategies in the deeper ends of his mind and this particular deed, the revival of Chanakya, committed by Gangasagar Mishra cannot be justified.

Like Chanakya, Gangasagar was also very intelligent. He lost his father when he was a boy and in order to support his family, he worked with a wealthy trader of his locality, Agarwalji. In his search for finding a site for construction business, he went to Patna, the state capital of Bihar. There he found a granite stone with Sanskrit inscription upon it. It says:

Adi Shakti, Namoh Namah, Sarb Shakti, Namoh Namah; Prithum Bhagvati, Namoh Namah; Kundalini Mata Shakti; Mata Shakti, Namoh Namah....

It's an ancient Sanskrit mantra extolling the virtues of feminine energy....So what does this chant mean? Asked Gangasagar. Primal Shakti, I bow to thee; all-encompassing Shakti, I bow to thee; that through which God creates, I bow to thee; creative power of the kundalini; mother of all, to thee I bow. [And, this means] four thousand days you shall pray four hundred chants every day. Chanakya's power is yours to take Chandragupta, to make or break. If there's a lull, start once more. King must be queen, to be sure. Suvasini's curse shall forever halt if you can cure Chanakya's fault (Sanghi, 32).

After this Pandit Mishra chants this mantra and becomes the modern Chanakya to repeat history. This very idea explores how the protagonists Chanakya and his modern avatar Gangasagar Mishra, with their cold, cruel intentions, cunning strategies and intelligence achieve their goals. Both of them are being presented as very efficient political kingmakers who are not directly ruling their country, but through their highly efficient disciples- Chandragupta Maurya and Chandni Gupta.

By interweaving history and fiction on the same platform Ashwin Sanghi exhorts those aspects of literature which take interdisciplinary standpoints to make the readers aware of the boundless feature that it possesses. Here it can be considered that "literature and history were considered the branches of the same

tree of learning, a tree which sought to interpret experience, for the purpose of guiding and elevating man” (Hutcheon 105). By using this history fiction interface Ashwin Sanghi makes his readers aware of their rich historical past with its cultural heritage and the changes which came to this superior cultural past in the postmodern skeptical society. The historiography which Ashwin Sanghi uses in this novel, follows the features of “historiographic metafiction” developed by the postmodern feminist critic Linda Hutcheon. In historiographic metafiction the plot makes use of the technique of metafiction. But in Chanakya’s *Chant* Ashwin Sanghi uses the technique of metafiction in a different manner that there is no writing within writing, but history within history and makes it historiographic. He uses history as the shaping force of the modern society and enacts historical processes by presenting a microcosm which generalises and concentrates.

The manner in which the author applies historiography makes the novel postmodern in its real sense and the readers can see the postmodern quest for knowledge in the case of Chanakya and Gangasagar Mishra. Chanakya leaves Magadha for acquiring knowledge and he becomes a student of Takshila University and succeeds as a learned person who studies *Arthashastra* the theory of wealth. His modern avatar Gangasagar follows the path of his Ancient counterpart and is in a constant search for knowledge to enhance his intelligence. Somehow the metafiction feature comes as the embedded story and this different use of metafiction also makes the novel a postmodern one. By employing innovations even in the postmodern features *Chanakya’s Chant* stands itself as a highly experimental piece of art and as an innovative cultural artifact in terms of postmodern philosophy, the novel discloses chances for analysing the intermingling aspects of the interdisciplinary nature of literature. With the use of multiple truths, rejection of the grand narratives, postmodern skepticism, rejection of moral values, a pastiche of events, upliftment of women and postmodern disillusionment in the Indian society *Chanakya’s Chant* proves itself to be a postmodern literary innovation.

The author also exemplifies historiography as a tool to criticize the present day Indian politics by making use of the history of Chanakya and his most cunning political strategies in accordance with the present day condition of Indian politics Those strategies which

were used by Chanakya to manipulate his surroundings and to take care of the political situations reiterates itself with some diversifications and variations only in the physical appearances of the political kingmakers. These physical diversifications of the protagonists are appropriate to their cultural age and significantly point at their crooked intelligence and talents. This cultural diversification is the only difference in the two portrayed histories or the parallel stories. The connection between these two protagonists comes when Gangasagar, in his attempt to “possess the power to make or break empires, finds the marble inscription of Chanakya’s *Chant* and becomes a mighty Chanakya embodying all his political intelligence. The age, the characters, the situation and the culture-all have changed. The ancient Bharath followed the ruling system of monarchy, and in the modern times it is replaced with ‘clear’ democracy. In spite of all these changes, one thing remains unchangeable, the ‘crooked’ strategies. The two histories, the two cultural environments and the two political eras of the novel shows the distortions and the diversifications happened in the political situations and suggests that they have changed entirely, but the strategies remain the same.

Both these political kingmakers have their own standpoint. They use the best method to manipulate the situation. In the ancient Bharath, Chanakya’s political moves were shaped by his revenge towards king Dhanananda on the murder of his father Chanak. But in the case of Pundit Mishraji the exact reason for his political engagement is not mentioned, but the readers can assume that it is for material gain and for the possession of power. Gangasagar Mishra postdates himself as the one who chooses to be in power and craves for power, fame and material gain and he directly moves towards politics and makes a contrasting situation from one in the past times. Gangasagar’s this beginning is presented through his creation of a political party and Sanghi clearly criticizes it in a sarcastic way and says,

He was the president of the Akhil Bharat Navnirman Samiti- abbreviated to ABBNS by journos who could never quite remember the entire name. Panditji had launched the political outfit several years earlier and it had grown from a fledgling struggling non- entity into a mainstream political party that few could ignore (13).

This present day Indian political scenario shows that the leaders make a political party for their own

benefit and the followers are not sure of it at all. They are not sure about even the name of that party. Pandit Mishra describes it that, "In India, untidy democracy, politics and business shall always need each other. The former is about power but needs money to realize it and the latter is about wealth but needs power to create and sustain it" (56). During his days as the apprentice of Agarwalji, he becomes aware of the political, economic and material condition of India and manipulates the situation. In order to enter into the mainstream Indian politics and to make ABNS a great political force, Punditji tries to make a candidate from their party in the coming election for the post of the Mayor of the city and, he says, "The mayor is elected through the system of a single transferable vote....The early bird gets worm but it's the second mouse that gets the cheese! I don't need Ikrambhai to be the favourite-merely the second favourite" (62).

This strategy works as the strategy used by Chanakya to make different rulers and Punditji's real political intelligence is revealed to the readers in his technique to make "an instant hero out of" (77) Ikrambhai. This was one of his earlier strategies through which he becomes a mighty Chanakya. In order to make his political party, ABNS more stronger, he makes some "crooked" methods. For that matter he makes an underworld don as the Mayor of the city of Kanpur. The author makes a contrast between this present day political concept and the concept of Ahimsa proposed by Mahatma Gandhiji. In his school he asks his students about the Gandhian philosophy of Ahimsa and Chandini answers to that question. His next political movement is his cunning decision to make Chandini as an adopted child. A feature of Indian political behavior can be seen here is, religion plays a great role in the lives of the people. Most of the rural, uneducated voters select a candidate on the basis of his or her caste or religion. As a leader who is well aware of this situation Panditji makes Ikrambhai to adopt Chandni to "achieve three things. Firstly, the cost of her education abroad shall be borne by Ikrambhai. Second, Ikram will see her as a daughter and natural political successor. And third, it will give her universal acceptability in India -a Hindu girl with Muslim parents. Wonderful political combination" (80).

This political strategist also makes use of the college students of India for the development of his political party. This incident happens when Chandini returns

from England after her education at Oxford University. Chandini meets some students like Kashyap from Lucknow University, Brijmohan Rai from Allahabad University, Iqbal Azmi from Aligarh Muslim University, and Girish Bajpal from Banaras Hindu University. These men are staying in their university earning multiple degrees, so that they contest elections. Gangasagar made this "Because if [the]young men control the Students' Union activities, the ABNS- control the youth, a key to constitute in the state's power balance"(145). Even though he was employing political strategies upon the people and his disciples, Gangasagar had a concern for the weaker sections of the society that it gets revealed to the readers when he tells to Chandini that, "I want you to meet a few of the farmers. Get them to make you their spokesperson. Then I want you to AIT outside the gates of that proposed plant and announce that you are going on an indefinite hunger strike-a fast unto death- until the plight of these poor unfortunate farmers isn't remedied!"(147).

The ancient Chanakya gets revived because of a curse and this revival, which is imaginary, seems to be authentic as it represents and voices out the significance of gender equality. Suvasini cursed him as she flung herself down on the bed and wept and said:

... because I love you, I shall offer you a means to redemption. Several thousand years from now, if someone meditates upon a mantra, he shall be able to use it to advance a woman....If the chant is record four hundred times a day for over four thousand days, the orator shall have Chanakya's powers to actualise another leader-so long as it's a woman. In the new age, Shakti must trump Shiva!

Gangasagar Mishra becomes this modern Chanakya and through this highly innovative postmodern and traditional thought, Sanghi makes history repeat once again. Religion and superstitions are also represented in the novel, and thereby he gives an importance to the aura of Indian mythology. In *Chanakya's Chant*, Sanghi takes a theme from Chanakya's Principles, describes it in an ancient setting and then applies it to a modern political theme. This theme comes in a perfect union with the postmodern dilemmas of the modern times. Through an innovative presentation of the postmodern history of Chanakya which repeats itself with some postmodern deviations, Sanghi criticizes the inability of Indian politics to change

with time or develop itself by standing apart from the past political strategies. The Indian social, political and cultural scenario have changed that the time has changed into the postmodern era. New innovations and technologies arise in the modern world, the rule has changed from dynasty to democracy. But the modern leaders are still following the ancient political strategies put forward by Chanakya and other intellectuals of the ancient Bharath. This particular idea has a positive turnover also. That is Sanghi glorifies the Indian value which respects the rich cultural heritage of its past. Through an innovative use of the postmodern technique of historiographic metafiction Sanghi brings out the attitude of an Indian mind to glorify the intellectual past of India which is great enough to stand as rich as the so called ancient European intelligentsia offering a wide range of ideas for the readers to explore while his intention was not to be didactic but to entertain.

REFERENCES

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- [2] Sanghi, Ashwin. *Chanakya's Chant*. Westland ltd, 2010.