



Historiographic Metafiction, Paratext and the Politics of Retelling in the Bharat Novels of Ashwin Sanghi

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Abstract— *This paper approaches Ashwin Sanghi's Bharat Collection not primarily as an instance of mythological fiction, as most existing criticism does, but as a body of historiographic metafiction in Linda Hutcheon's sense: fiction that is at once self-consciously artificial and insistently anchored to verifiable historical and mythic referents. Reading Chanakya's Chant, The Krishna Key and The Ayodhya Alliance through this lens, the paper identifies a recurring palimpsest structure in which a modern character or plot is laid, almost stencil-like, over an ancient one, so that the present is legible only as a repetition or completion of the past. It further examines the paratextual apparatus author's notes, bibliographies, acknowledgements of historians and archaeologists through which Sanghi stakes a rhetorical claim to historicity that his fiction's postmodern self-reflexivity simultaneously destabilises. The paper argues that this tension between claimed authenticity and acknowledged invention is the central, productive contradiction of Sanghi's project, and that it is this contradiction, rather than mythological content alone, that accounts for both his popular success and his ambiguous critical standing as the writer often labelled 'the Indian Dan Brown.'*



Keywords— *historiographic metafiction, Ashwin Sanghi, palimpsest, paratext, Linda Hutcheon, self-reflexivity, Indian English fiction, Chanakya's Chant*

I. INTRODUCTION

Ashwin Sanghi is routinely described in the Indian press and by his own publishers as an author who blends “history and mystery” the phrase used, for instance, as the title of a widely circulated interview in which Sanghi discusses his research method a formula that captures the genre expectations his readers bring to the Bharat Collection but says little about the specific formal mechanism by which that blend is achieved. Popular accounts of his work tend to stop at content-level description: they note that he “weaves historical events and mythological stories into his novels” and that his style relies on “multiple perspectives and timelines” and “incorporation of real historical and mythological texts,” but they treat these as inventory items rather than as parts of a coherent formal strategy. This paper proposes that the strategy is best understood through the critical vocabulary

of historiographic metafiction, and that attending to it shifts the interpretive question away from what myths and histories Sanghi retells the question that has dominated existing scholarship on his mythological content, including the euhemerist and ‘Bharati Fantasy’ readings that situate him alongside Amish Tripathi and Anand Neelakantan towards how his fiction manages the always-uneasy relationship between its claim to historical truth and its status as invented narrative.

This distinction matters because Sanghi's own public self-presentation actively courts the ambiguity the paper investigates. In interviews he emphasises a research process that can run to six or nine months before a single chapter is written, and his novels close with author's notes that carefully separate documented fact from narrative invention; yet the plots those notes accompany are unabashedly speculative, hinging on causal links between

ancient events and modern conspiracies that no historian would endorse. A purely content-focused account of Sanghi's mythological borrowings cannot explain this dual gesture of scholarly claim and open invention, because the gesture is not made at the level of content but at the level of form in the way each novel is structured, framed and footnoted. Historiographic metafiction, as a critical term coined precisely to describe fiction that performs this doubled relationship to the historical record, therefore offers a more precise instrument than genre labels such as 'mythological thriller' for analysing what Sanghi's novels actually do.

The paper proceeds in four stages, drawing its primary examples from three novels spanning the length of Sanghi's career *Chanakya's Chant* (2010), *The Krishna Key* (2012) and *The Ayodhya Alliance* (2025) chosen because each pairs a well-documented historical or scriptural source with an explicit, structurally foregrounded modern parallel. The paper first outlines Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction and considers its applicability to popular, rather than strictly literary, postmodern fiction, a question Hutcheon's own account leaves more open than is often assumed. It then identifies a recurring 'palimpsest' structure across these novels, in which ancient and modern characters are mapped onto one another almost point for point, such that the modern plot becomes legible only as an overwriting of the ancient one. Third, it examines the paratextual devices author's notes, bibliographies, and public statements about research method through which Sanghi asserts historicity even as his plots foreground invention, treating these paratexts as evidence in their own right rather than as mere marketing. Finally, it considers the gendered and national dimensions of this palimpsest structure, before concluding with an assessment of what the historiographic-metafiction lens contributes that a purely mythological reading of Sanghi's fiction does not.

II. HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION AS A CRITICAL FRAME

The term historiographic metafiction was coined by the Canadian theorist Linda Hutcheon in her 1988 study *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, and elaborated further in her contemporaneous essay of the same name.

Hutcheon's foundational formulation describes the mode as encompassing "*well-known and popular novels*" that are "*intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages*" (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 5). Two features of this definition deserve emphasis for the present argument. First, Hutcheon explicitly locates the mode within "well-known and

popular" fiction rather than confining it to an avant-garde literary elite, which licenses the extension of the term, attempted in this paper, to a commercially oriented conspiracy-thriller writer such as Sanghi rather than restricting it to the more obviously experimental novelists Salman Rushdie, Michael Ondaatje, John Fowles, E. L. Doctorow, A. S. Byatt and Umberto Eco among them through whom the category is most often illustrated in the critical literature. Second, the definition insists on a paradox rather than a compromise: historiographic metafiction does not moderate between fiction and history by softening its claims to either, but holds the two claims that the text is self-consciously invented, and that it is nonetheless bound to a real historical record in simultaneous and unresolved tension.

Hutcheon elsewhere characterises this tension as a form of 'installing and then subverting' conventions of both realist historical fiction and pure textual self-reflexivity, so that the boundary between the two is repeatedly drawn only to be blurred. Canonical instances of the mode identified in the subsequent critical literature the novels of Rushdie, Ondaatje and Eco prominent among them tend to enact this tension at the level of narrative voice: through unreliable or multiple narrators, through explicit authorial intrusion questioning the reliability of the very history being narrated, and through footnotes, bibliographies or invented documents inserted to parody the apparatus of professional historiography. It is this voice-level self-reflexivity, more than the fact of historical reference as such, that most criticism treats as the diagnostic feature of the mode, and it is also this feature that appears, at first glance, to be largely absent from Sanghi's prose.

Sanghi's fiction sits at a productive distance from this canonical, voice-centred model. His narrators are not unreliable in the modernist or high-postmodern sense; his prose does not foreground doubt about what happened, does not stage competing versions of the same event, and rarely interrupts its own storytelling to comment on the constructedness of history as such. Read only at the level of sentence and narrating voice, then, Sanghi's novels would seem to fall outside Hutcheon's category altogether, more properly classed with the straightforwardly realist historical thriller than with the self-conscious historiographic metafiction of Rushdie or Eco. Yet this paper argues that Sanghi's novels reproduce the defining Hutcheonian paradox at a different level of textual organisation the level of structure rather than voice. Each Bharat novel insists, through its dual-timeline architecture, that a specific historical or mythic event actually occurred substantially as narrated, while simultaneously admitting, through author's notes, acknowledgements and interviews,

that the causal chain connecting that ancient event to the present-day conspiracy plot is the novelist's own invention. The self-reflexive admission of fictionality that Rushdie or Ondaatje builds into the sentence, in other words, Sanghi builds into the seam between his two timelines and into the paratext that frames them.

Sanghi's fiction is, in this sense, best described as historiographic metafiction adapted to or transplanted into the register of the popular conspiracy thriller. This generic transplantation helps explain two otherwise puzzling features of his reception: the mass readership his novels command despite tackling material (Vedic cosmology, Zoroastrian migration, Mauryan statecraft) that might seem to demand a more literary register; and the relative inattention his fiction has received from academic critics trained, by the very canon Hutcheon helped establish, to look for metafictional self-reflexivity in the sentence and the narrating voice rather than in the architecture of the plot and the apparatus of the paratext. The remainder of this paper develops that structural and paratextual analysis in detail.

III. THE PALIMPSEST STRUCTURE: MAPPING THE PAST ONTO THE PRESENT

The clearest instance of this structural self-reflexivity is Chanakya's Chant, in which the ancient narrative of Chanakya's tutelage of Chandragupta Maurya is mapped almost point-for-point onto a contemporary narrative of the political fixer Pandit Gangasagar Mishra grooming the politician Chandini Gupta for supreme office. The modern characters' names echoing 'Chandragupta' and gesturing towards Chanakya's own legend signal to the reader that the two plots are to be read as versions of a single recurring pattern rather than as separate stories linked by theme alone. A comparable, if less onomastically explicit, mirroring structures *The Krishna Key*, where the contemporary investigators' path through clues embedded in Krishna's biography effectively re-enacts, in decoding form, the mythic narrative itself; and *The Ayodhya Alliance*, where the modern seekers Aditya Pillai and Somi Kim occupy the structural position of contemporary claimants to a secret first entrusted, in the ancient strand, to Lakshmana by the dying Ravana.

Table 1. The palimpsest structure: ancient figures and their modern mirrors

Ancient Strand	Modern Mirror	Shared Function	Novel
Chanakya, the strategist-mentor	Pandit Gangasagar Mishra, the political fixer	Architect of a ruler's rise from obscurity to supreme power	Chanakya's Chant
Chandragupta Maurya, the chosen ruler	Chandini Gupta, the mentored politician	The protégé who inherits the mentor's design for power	Chanakya's Chant
Krishna, the strategist-avator	Contemporary investigators decoding his legacy	The past life read as an instruction manual for the present	The Krishna Key
Ravana, keeper of the Dvaitalingam secret	Aditya Pillai and Somi Kim, present-day seekers	Guardianship and pursuit of forbidden or lost knowledge	The Ayodhya Alliance

This palimpsest technique performs the core operation of historiographic metafiction identified by Hutcheon: it 'installs and then subverts' the boundary between the historical and the invented. The ancient strand is presented with the trappings of historical or scriptural authority, while the modern strand, built from wholly fictional characters, borrows that authority by structural resemblance rather than factual claim. The reader is thus asked to hold both a historicist and a fictive attitude towards the same underlying pattern precisely the double consciousness Hutcheon identifies as constitutive of the mode.

IV. PARATEXT AND THE RHETORIC OF AUTHENTICITY

Sanghi reinforces this double consciousness through an extensive paratextual apparatus. His novels characteristically conclude with author's notes distinguishing historically attested material from invented plot elements, and his public statements consistently emphasise a lengthy, near-scholarly research phase by his own account, six to nine months of research preceding any writing that lends his fiction the rhetorical authority of non-fiction even as the plots themselves remain openly speculative. This paratextual strategy can be read as a popular-fiction analogue to the scholarly apparatus (footnotes, bibliographies, archival citation) that historiographic metafiction in its literary-canonical form

often parodies or partially adopts; where a Rushdie or an Eco tends to deploy such apparatus ironically, Sanghi deploys it largely in earnest, as a genuine warrant of diligence aimed at a readership that, as his publishers' own marketing repeatedly stresses, wants to feel it is learning real history and mythology while reading a thriller.

The effect is a peculiar and commercially productive instability: the paratext asks to be trusted as scholarship, while the plot openly announces its own invention. Sanghi's frequent designation in the Indian press as "the Indian Dan Brown" captures exactly this instability, since Brown's fiction is popularly associated with precisely the same claim-and-disclaim relationship to historical and religious fact that this paper identifies as Sanghi's structural signature.

V. GENDER, NATIONAL ALLEGORY AND THE LIMITS OF THE PALIMPSEST

The palimpsest structure is not ideologically neutral. In Chanakya's Chant, the substitution of a female protégé (Chandini Gupta) for the historical Chandragupta Maurya while retaining a male mentor figure in the Gangasagar Mishra role stages an implicit argument about the persistence of older, patriarchal structures of political tutelage even as the gender of the ruling figure changes the pattern of power is shown to be more durable than the identity of any single actor within it. More broadly, because each Bharat novel ties a mythic or ancient secret to the present-day fortunes of the Indian nation-state its politics in Chanakya's Chant, its defence capability in The Ayodhya Alliance the palimpsest technique functions as a form of national allegory, in which the recurrence of ancient patterns in modern plots implicitly naturalises a continuous, essentialised national character stretching from itihasa to the present. This allegorical dimension is where the historiographic-metafiction lens developed here most directly complements, rather than replaces, existing euhemerist readings of Sanghi's mythological content: the palimpsest is the formal technique, and the civilisational-continuity thesis is the ideological payload it delivers.

VI. CONCLUSION

Reading Ashwin Sanghi's Bharat Collection as historiographic metafiction rather than as mythological fiction alone brings into focus a structural signature the point-for-point mapping of ancient figures onto modern ones, reinforced by a paratextual rhetoric of scholarly authenticity that is easy to overlook when criticism focuses only on which myths a given novel retells. This palimpsest technique allows Sanghi's fiction to claim historical

seriousness and to enjoy the freedoms of invention simultaneously, a double move that this paper has argued is the true source of both his mass popularity and the persistent critical uncertainty about how seriously to take his historical claims. Future work might extend this analysis through close comparison of Sanghi's author's notes across the full Bharat Collection, tracking how explicitly he demarcates fact from invention as the series' civilisational ambitions grow, and through comparative study of paratextual strategy across other practitioners of the global historical-conspiracy thriller.

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