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## CASTLE AND CRISIS IN ASHWIN SANGHI'S *THE KRISHNA KEY*

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### Abstract

*This study looks into the features of time and space in a postmodern Indian English novel. It is crucial to understand the meaning of temporal and spatial indicators and references in order to understand a narration. This study aims to explore the portrayal of chronotope in the chosen novel. Bakhtin's literary theory of Chronotope is chosen for this study because it is yet to be used to analyse an Indian English suspense thriller novels. Most studies that applied Bakhtin's literary theory of Chronotope are modern literary works. To date, there are very few studies that have applied this theory on postmodern literary works and even fewer that have used it to analyse Asian literary works what more suspense thrillers. This study has picked out a few of the time-space indicators from the novel *The Krishna Key* by Ashwin Sanghi in order to explore them according to Bakhtin's literary theory of Chronotope as he discussed in his essay *Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel* in his essay collections, *The Dialogic Imagination*. The concepts discussed in this study are the chronotope of the castle and crisis / threshold.*

**Keywords:** Chronotope, castle, crisis, threshold, suspense.

### Introduction

In the past, the epic of Mahabharata was made available mostly through comics and verbal communications passed down from one generation to another. Today, Indian Postmodern authors of English novels such as Ashwin Sanghi and Christopher Doyle tell the story of Mahabharata from a different view point. The focus of this study is to explore the portrayal of Chronotope in Sanghi's *The Krishna Key* (2012). Sawai (2015) claims that Indian fiction writers may retell mythology because they may relate the ancient past to the present. This can also be seen through Sanghi's writing style in *The Krishna Key* (2012) where events of the past and present are told concurrently that time and space of the two different time and places could be blurred for readers. *The Krishna Key* (2012) is an anthropological thriller. This novel follows a history professor who has to prove his innocence against a murder that he was accused of. It revolves around the Mahabharata historical events and portrays the biography of Lord Krishna in his own words, in parallel to the story-line.

### Bakhtin's Theory of Literary Chronotope

Bakhtin's theory of literary chronotope was not translated into English until 1981 and only included the modern and postmodern novels in the early 20th century. Bakhtin (1981) defines chronotope as the:

*"intrinsic connectedness of spatial and temporal relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. It expresses the inseparability of space and time. In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection axes and fusion of indicators characterises the artistic chronotope". (Bakhtin, 1981: 84-85)*

The above quotation means a narrative (for Bakhtin) is predominantly made up of a fictional world that is created by chronotope with chronotope; it is not just made up of events and dialogue. Chronotope is a way of understanding a story because it frames the outline of a plot; also, Bakhtin considers it as a "bridge" from the story time-space to the real world (Lawson,

2011). Initially, Bakhtin's literary chronotope was created as an analytical instrument to establish general categories in the history of western novel. However, today it is used as a conceptual tool to enrich various fields such as narratology (Scholz, 2003), reception theory (Collington, 2006), cognitive approach to literature (Keunen, 2000), and gender studies (Pearce, 1994). For Bakhtin, time and space form a central unity, similar to the reality of human experience (Bemong & Borghart, 2010). Basically, Bakhtin concludes that narrative texts are created of a certain fictional world or chronotope (Bemong & Borghart, 2010). The concept of chronotope is portrayed in *The Krishna Key* (2012) as Sanghi presents the plot in such a way that the fictional world is very much related to the historical events that took place in India. Almost all of the chronotopes that Bakhtin described in his essay "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel" from his collection of essays, *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981) have been identified in this novel. However due to constrain of length and time, this article reports only the minor chronotope of the castle, and crisis/threshold.

### The Castle

Bakhtin claims that "The castle is saturated through and through with a time that is historical in the narrow sense of the word, that is, the time of the historical past... and is a constant reminder of past events" (Bakhtin, 2011: 246). The chronotope of the castle is identified in *The Krishna Key* (2012) when the protagonist, Ravi Mohan Saini explains about the Taj Mahal to another character, Radhika Singh. The Taj Mahal's architecture (space) and history (time) is explained in this scene where Saini explains how the Taj Mahal was once a Hindu raja's palace "that was given to Shah Jahan so that he could create a final resting place for his queen" (Sanghi, 2012: 432). He also goes on to explain the symbols on the Taj Mahal:

*"It's not merely a crescent with stars, as is the usual Islamic symbolism. Yes, the crescent is indeed present, but above it is a water pot containing bent mango leaves with the leaves supporting a coconut. Do you see what I am saying?"* (Sanghi, 2012: 426)

The excerpt above shows the symbols that many people may overlook or may not even know. Saini also concludes after a lengthy explanation about all the symbols on the Taj Mahal that it "represents Hindu-Muslim creative energies at their very best!" (Sanghi, 2012: 440). To the contemporary reader, this is a new information. We have always related the Taj Mahal to Mumtaz Mahal and Shah Jahan and that it is a symbol of love till today. It is one of the tourist attractions in India; however, this particular scene in the novel breaks down the historical detail of the Taj Mahal which leaves the reader questioning or rather wanting to know more about it.

### The Crisis / Threshold

According to Bakhtin, the chronotope of crisis / threshold is "highly charged with emotion and value... and is connected with a decision that changes a life.... It is the main places where crisis events occur, the falls, the resurrections, renewals, epiphanies, decision that determine the whole life of a man" (Bakhtin, 2011: 248). There were more incidences that relate to the chronotope of the crisis / threshold, as *The Krishna Key* (2012) is a thriller where the protagonist is constantly in a state of conflict till the end of the novel. The excerpt below is taken from the scene where the protagonist, Saini meets one of his old friends who also has a seal given by their murdered friend. As the protagonist explains the significance of the many historical elements, the police shows up to arrest him and his student, Priya when Priya reacted. Here the chronotope of crisis / threshold is identified.

*"Keeping the gun pointed at Rathore, Priya shuffled over to the desk on which Chhedhi's seal lay. She picked it up and placed it in her pocket. 'What are you doing, Priya?' whispered Saini in panic. 'We may be fugitives but we're not criminals. Don't do anything that may jeopardise your life.' 'Oh, shut up and spare me the lecture!' snarled Priya, her suddenly fiery eyes drilling into Saini's. 'I'm not your delicate doctoral student anymore, Professor Ravi Mohan Saini! I'm fed up of your persistent whining. It's better that you accompany the police to the lockup. That's the only place where you'll be safe!"*

*Saini was stupefied. The transformation in Priya was incredible.” (Sanghi, 2012: 233)*

The excerpt above shows the turning point in the novel, where we see Priya showing her real colour as the villain or in the novel known as the ‘*Mataji*’. This is a good temporal and spatial indicator as Priya waited for the right moment to make the move. She followed Saini all the way, up to the point she thought she had all the information then she made the choice to flee with all the seals leaving Saini to be with the police. This incident changes the course of the story where after this the police realizes that Saini is indeed innocent. However, knowing Saini is innocent does not end the novel, as now they have another conflict to solve - to get the artefacts and to know where those seals lead to. To the contemporary reader this is only partial release of suspense as they come to know who the mysterious “*Mataji*” was. However, the reader would still want to know what exactly the Krishna Key is. Here, suspense is used throughout the novel as there are many codes to be broken in order to solve the riddles. What adds to the suspense in this novel is the intertextual reference to the epic Mahabharata and other historical events, where the actual spatial references still exist in India; for example the Somnath temple which according to the legend Prabhas Patan, “it is the very place where Krishna breathed his last” (Sanghi, 2012: 265). The Somnath temple has also been built and destroyed many times in history. Another example of the crisis / threshold chronotope is found as shown in the excerpt below when Priya talks about her baby-sitter of many years before when she was a young girl. She talks about an incident that happened in Sarla Auntie’s house. Sarla Auntie tried to save her from her drunk husband. Priya having watched Sarla Auntie being beaten, attempted to defend her and accidentally killed him.

*“One day, when my father was still at work and Sarla Auntie was in the kitchen warming up my dinner, her husband staggered in, pissed out of his mind. He stared at me lecherously and lunged at me, trying to grab hold of my breasts. I fell down and he fell on top of me. He started unzipping his trousers so that he could rape me, when Sarla Auntie came running in and desperately struggled to*

*pull him off me. He got up and swung his right arm viciously, catching her on her lower lip, which immediately began to bleed. He swung her around, and twisted her arm behind her back until I thought it would snap, while his other hand grabbed her hair and pulled her head back.... I ran into the kitchen and grabbed a knife that was lying on the counter....I held it tightly in my hand, ran behind Sarla Auntie’s evil husband and plunged the knife as deep as I could in his back. He screamed in agony. Unknowingly, I had penetrated his lung and hemothorax. I watched as he fell to the ground, blood gurgling from his mouth.” (Sanghi, 2012: 236-237)*

Here we can see the role Sarla Auntie who is belongs to an older generation who submits to her husband no matter how abusive according to the cultural norms at that time. Priya on the other hand, who belongs to a younger generation, driven by survival instinct, decided to protect and defend herself and Sarla Auntie, but she also unintentionally killed him. Priya also explains that the incident and everything that followed that incident made her stronger and self-reliant in the present day. It is a good reflection point in relation to the cultural relevance and connection. It also shows the crisis of women’s roles and the threshold that modern women try to cross.

### Conclusion

As the study is still on going, the researcher hopes to identify and explore more motifs or chronotopes as discovered by Bakhtin. Although this study does not claim to make any new discoveries in terms of the spatio-temporal studies, the researcher believes that new discoveries could be made if it is applied with other theories. A chronotope delivers a noteworthy meaning to the space-time indication and may be a good source of guide in understanding the space-time references in a narration. This study gives a new perspective to the whole literary style of writing. Besides that, future writers can also apply the time-space technique in their development of plots.

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