

REIMAGINING HISTORY IN ASHWIN SANGHI'S *THE ROZABAL LINE*: A NEW HISTORICIST PERSPECTIVE

DR. RAJASHRI BARVEKAR

Asst. Professor
Department of English
Shivaji University, Kolhapur,
(MS) INDIA

ANJALEENA SONI

Research Scholar
Department of English
Shivaji University, Kolhapur,
(MS) INDIA

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses Ashwin Sanghi's The Rozabal Line through the perspective of New Historicism, focusing on the novel's reimagining of the life of Jesus Christ in India and the historicity within the account of relationship between different religions of the world and its consequences in the contemporary socio-cultural structures. Through the fusion of creative imagination and various diverse, debated and deliberated historic information present in the global domain, Sanghi's narrative interweaves historical investigation, religious symbolism, and popular fiction to contest historical discourses. He also explores the perspective of hegemony, where information and its dissemination is manipulated to restrain cultures. Applying theoretical concepts from Michel Foucault and Stephen Greenblatt, that history is not an objective truth but a constructed narrative, shaped by power, discourse, and cultural biases; this study explores how the novel functions as a cultural artifact that questions the permanence of history and explores the subjectivity and variability in its nature.

Key Words: Reimagining, History, New Historicism, Subjectivity, Variability, Power, Culture

INTRODUCTION

Ashwin Sanghi's *The Rozabal Line* is a controversial and provocative reinterpretation of religious history, positing that Jesus Christ did not die on the cross but survived, travelled to India, and died in Kashmir where he is buried in a shrine in Rozabal, Srinagar. Drawing from both Eastern and Western religious traditions, Sanghi's novel fuses history and fiction to create a narrative that interrogates accepted historical accounts which are exploited and

DR. RAJASHRI BARVEKAR

ANJALEENA SONI

1 Page

controlled by religious structures, power, and cultural identity. This paper uses the New Historicist framework of reimagining history to explore how Sanghi uses the fictional medium to subvert dominant religious and historical discourses and offer an alternative view of global religious history. New Historicist Michel Foucault and Stephen Greenblatt argue that history is not an objective truth but a constructed narrative, shaped by power, discourse, and cultural biases. Thus, reimagining history in literature as per Foucault reflects a discourse shaped by institutional power (e.g., church, state) and as per Greenblatt, Literature and history are intertwined texts; both reflect and shape cultural ideologies.

Reimagining Jesus in India: Fictional History as Counter-Narrative

A central claim of *The Rozabal Line* is that Jesus travelled and lived in India. He framed Christian thought on the basis of Hinduism and Buddhism and survived the crucifixion after which he travelled back to India, living his final days in Kashmir. This idea is rooted in theories from works such as Holger Kersten's *Jesus Lived in India* and Nicolas Notovitch's *The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ*, which Sanghi references and builds upon in the novel.

Through the following extracts from the novel, it is examined that Sanghi opens a space for imagining a different historical trajectory, one that is merged, cross-cultural, and deeply unsettling to orthodox Christian narratives. By weaving this alternative history within a thriller format, Sanghi ensures the mass appeal of his argument while engaging with a serious cultural discourse on the origins and transformations of faith.

'The Muslims and Buddhists do not share commonalities. The Muslims used violence and battles to convert Buddhists to Islam. This was never the case with Christians. They could be considered honorary Buddhists! It's truly sad to see that Christians decided to forget their roots and wander further and further away from Buddhism.' (p. 10)

The dialogue above challenges dominant historical narratives by recasting early Christianity as closer to Eastern traditions like Buddhism, rather than as a faith opposed to them. This reinterpretation subverts the Western Church's official historical narrative, which typically positions Christianity in doctrinal opposition to Eastern spiritual traditions.

The scrolls told the story of a boy called Issa, born in Judea. The story went on to explain that sometime during the fourteenth year of his life, the boy arrived in India to study the teachings of the Buddhists. His travels through the country took him through Sindh, the Punjab and eventually to Maghada...where he studied the Vedas, the Hindu texts of knowledge...began learning the Buddhist scriptures in Pali...Thereafter he headed home to Judea via Persia. (p. 10-11)

The above textual reference describes Jesus' 'Issa' journey to India and back to Judea which is not a part of any Christian text. It also explores the possibility of western religious structures reframing history to control sacred texts.

... St. Thomas died on 21 December, AD 72... Thomas had arrived in Cranganore, just thirty-eight kilometres away from Cochin, India, in AD 52... Sometime before his arrival in southern India, he had been at the court of King Gondophares... The apostle, Thomas according to his own words in the Acta Thomae, had been able to meet and reunite with his master, Jesus, who was also present at the wedding, looking quite well and surprisingly relaxed for a man who had been crucified! (p. 72-73)

In this narrative, Sanghi blurs the boundary between historical documentation and fictional narrative, Sanghi's fictional reimagining questions how religious and historical institutions have shaped collective memory through exclusion and repression of alternative truths. Thomas Didymus who gained sainthood later meets Jesus in the north-west kingdom of King Gondophares in India. The western history showed no such record which the writer says was revealed as truth in the year 1854 by Sir Alexander Cunningham, the first director of the Archaeological Survey in India and he identified that the *Acta Thomae* was no longer a work of fiction but a true historical work.

In line with Michel Foucault's assertion that history is a construct shaped by discourse and power, Sanghi's dialogue between Vincent and his aunt and between Professor Terry Acton and Vincent in the novel cited below, challenges the monolithic authority of church history and state-sanctioned narratives.

'The Bible says it is appointed unto men to die once, and after death comes judgement.'

'Listen, Vincent, I know I will always be the eccentric, esoteric, Eastern philosophy-espousing crazy aunt to you, but isn't it possible that what you have learnt so far is not the whole truth? Isn't it possible that there are things that you are yet to learn?' (p. 44)

'The Roman Catholic Church tried Galileo in 1633 and held that his view of the planets revolving around the sun were rubbish. Can you be certain that the present view on reincarnation will not change at some time in the near future? There are several non-canonical texts in the Nag Hammadi finds, the Dead Sea Scrolls, as well as Gnostic gospels, that do, in fact support reincarnation.' (p. 90)

The author here through his characters and narrative questions the power, truth and control of canonical texts and their philosophies within the current complicated cultural global thought

and concept of *gnosis*. Such moments in the narrative reflect Sanghi's attempt to collapse the binary between East and West, between biblical truth and historical inquiry and opens the line of thought towards the concept of personally experienced knowledge. His novel challenges the monolithic authority of church history and state-sanctioned narratives as Vincent questions various truths about Jesus' life, death and resurrection,

So why were crushed myrrh and aloe vera used on Jesus after he was taken away from cross? And why did the soured-white-vinegar sponge smell of opium and belladonna? Why was Pontius Pilate willing to give the body of Jesus to the influential Joseph, even though Roman law did not allow those sentenced to crucifixion to be given a burial. (p. 106)

This quote encapsulates a central New Historicist concern: that history is not objective or absolute, but contested and ideologically produced. Sanghi's narrative becomes a site of resistance, proposing alternative histories and questioning institutional truths. The Characters of the novel question the very truth behind the Crucifixion of Jesus and the alternative truth behind it to reimagine and recontextualise the history documented in the past.

Thus, with reference to the below textual references, the Jesus of this novel is a man shaped by many worlds and his relationship with India is worth exploring more than what is documented by the west, echoing the New Historicist claim that identity and meaning are constructed in relation to the cultural and historical forces surrounding them.

The Bible, of course, stopped there. This document however went further:

Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Issa, who married Mary Magdala. Isa and Mary had a child by the name of Sara, who was born to them in India but was later sent to Gaul with her mother. Issa remained in India, where he married a woman from the Sakya clan on the persistence of King Gopadatta and had a son, Benissa... (p. 139)

Vincent realised that the connections between the lost tribes of Israel and the present-day population of Kashmir were much more significant than had ever been discussed by Western scholars. (p. 175)

Below, Sanghi exposes the explores the perspective of deliberate altering of historical truth to maintain power structures within socio-religious structures. This was even systematically constructed by Jesus about his own life.

In 1780, Karl Friedrich Bahrdt had suggested that Jesus had quite deliberately enacted his death on the cross, using drugs that were arranged by the physician Luke. He had done this in order to ensure that his followers would reject the possibility of his being a political messiah and instead would

embrace the more desirable alternative of his being a spiritual messiah. (p. 177)

The subjective restructuring of events to create or control the thought, belief and nature of a culture is explored to expose the need to revisit, reimagine and explore historical truths through various sources.

CONCLUSION

The Rozabal Line is more than a thriller; it is a liberal attempt to rethink the boundaries between myth and history, faith and fiction. Through a New Historicist perspective, the novel can be seen as a cultural text that challenges the hegemony of orthodox religious and historical narratives and reasserts the role of literature in shaping public discourse. By reimagining Jesus as a traveller and eventually residing in India, Sanghi invokes alternative historical traditions often marginalized or dismissed by mainstream historiography and to question contemporary truths. In doing so, he foregrounds the idea that history is not an objective recounting of the past, but a discursive formation shaped by power, ideology, and cultural context.

Drawing upon Michel Foucault's view of history as discourse regulated by institutional authority, the novel illustrates how dominant religious and political structures construct and sustain historical "truths." In contrast, Sanghi's narrative functions as a counter-discourse, destabilizing received knowledge and legitimizing subaltern perspectives. Through this fictional revisioning of Jesus's life and the merging of Christian, Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist traditions, *The Rozabal Line* participates in a postcolonial effort to reclaim indigenous voices and challenge Eurocentric historiography.

From Stephen Greenblatt's standpoint, where literature and history are understood as co-textual and interdependent, Sanghi's novel exemplifies how fiction can reflect and reshape cultural ideologies. It negotiates the space between the historical record and cultural memory, suggesting that both are subject to reinterpretation and reconfiguration. The novel's interweaving of myth, esoteric knowledge, and global history encourages a re-evaluation of how religious and historical narratives are constructed, disseminated, and preserved.

In line this view, *The Rozabal Line* stands as a compelling example of how popular fiction in India reimagines history not simply for entertainment but as a mode of cultural critique. It reveals how historical fiction can serve as a vehicle for challenging dogma, interrogating identity, and re-envisioning national and spiritual legacies. Through a New Historicist perspective, Sanghi's work asserts that history is not a static archive but a living text, continually rewritten in response to the present. This thesis has sought to demonstrate how such reimagining contributes meaningfully to contemporary cultural discourse, urging readers to reflect critically on the past in order to better understand the complexities of the present.



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