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**Women in Aswin Sanghi's Novels *The Krishna Key*, *Chanakya's Chant*, and *The Vault of Vishnu*: A Brief Study**<sup>1</sup> **A. Suresh Kumar**

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**Abstract**

Aswin Sanghi is one of the best-selling authors in current Indian English literature. He is called the Dan Brown of India because he has written religious, mythological, and theological thrillers. He publishes his novels in a series called the Bharat Series. In Indian philosophy and culture, women have an integral role. Aswin has identified and given due weight to the female characters on par with their male counterparts in his novels. He has empowered and elaborated the characteristics of these roles so as to entertain and educate how current women should be. On the other hand, the valour displayed in the characters is laudable and a motivation even to the men who are in the paucity of audacity. Aswin Sanghi has written some fabulous novels viz. *The Krishna Key*, *Chanakya's Chant* and *The Vault of Vishnu*. He has penned female characters such as Priya Rathnani, Radhika Singh, Chandini Gupta, Suvasini, Paramajit Kurana, and Anu, which elevate the pace of the novels' plots. It is evident that the tenacity and perseverance shown by the women portrayed in the novels towards the goals they set are remarkable. He has described them in divergence. When one character strives to uphold the believed ideals, another character melts her life for the protection and integrity of the nation, while some others betray and work for the traitors. Aswin's women represent many attributes, such as purity, honesty, dedication, devotion, hypocrisy, sacrifice, mendacity, and genuineness. He throws his weight behind his female sketches as women are half of the entire creation. This paper brings out the commitment which is showcased in the depiction of female characters primarily in Aswin Sanghi's fiction works cited above.

**Keywords:** Women characters, perseverance, empowered women, Bharat series, gender representatives and backbones

Aswin Sanghi is one of the best English novelists in the current generation. He fuses history, mythology, crime, theology and Indian philosophy as integral parts of his narratives. He writes novels in a series called Bharat Series. His novels capture the attention of the readers and spur them to continue reading. His novels, *The Vault of Vishnu*, *Chanakya's Chant*, and *The Krishna Key* present some strong women characters who leave no stone unturned to achieve their goals.

*The Krishna Key* is a novel which was written by using historical, mythological and Ithihasic references. The novel begins with the self-description of Krishna. It goes on like a subplot. This is a bolstering technique used by Aswin Sanghi to create a kind of convenient condition for the readers as several current generation readers are unaware of the Ithihasic backdrop. Besides, the novel also has references in connection with the *Mahabharata*. The novel depicts powerful women characters such as Priya Rathnani, Radhika Singh, Sarla Aunty etc. that fascinate the attention of the readers and are the embodiment of perseverance. Though the characters are prime, they are ideal driven. The ideals they believe in are like breath for these characters. Another novel, *Chanakya's Chant* describes Chanakya's plans to integrate Bharat under the governance of a strong ruler. To attain his mission, he is supported by Suvasini, a minor character but contributes majorly and greatly. Readers recognize the devotion and commitment showcased by the female characters towards the believed ideals in the novel, *The Vault of Vishnu*.

This paper explores how Sanghi constructs the divergent angles in the prominent women characters such as Priya Rathnani etc. in *The Krishna Key*, the sacrifice rendered by situationally weak but mentally strong Suvasini in *Chanakya's Chant*, female resilience through Pam's character by aligning narrative action with Hankivsky's intersectional model. By doing so, the study situates *The Vault of Vishnu* within contemporary feminist literary discourse and underscores Sanghi's contribution to reimagining women as resilient agents operating within—and often against—structures of power.

### **Analysis of Aswin Sanghi's Women**

Priya Ratnani is the most influential of all the characters created in the novel, *The Krishna Key*. She is so deep rooted in the business she is involved in. Her character is found in three different variations in the novel. Initially appeared as a research scholar under the guidance of Prof. Ravi Mohan Saini. She pretends to be delicate, lovable and caring. While the novel progresses, she is transformed as Mataji. Mataji is the shadow archetype of Priya. "The shadow is the darker side of our unconscious self..." (Guerin 180). In finding the whereabouts of the four ancient seals in connection with the Krishna Key, she converts herself as an adventurous woman. While recounting the relation with Sarla Aunty, she is found as a sensitive and compassionate lady.

"We were not wealthy enough for me to be sent to boarding school and hence my father would leave me with our neighbour, a kind lady called Sarla Auntie. Sarla Auntie became a substitute for my mother. She would cook breakfast for me, walk me to school, help me with my homework and tuck me into bed at night. I would be

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fast asleep when my father returned from work and he would carry me into our apartment, thanking Sarla Auntie profusely for taking care of me.” (236)

Apart from all the shades mentioned, she is portrayed as a cruel woman to eliminate the one who seeks and attempts to get the information about the things belonging to the Lord Krishna.

“She exclaimed as she used her left hand to plunge the knife that was hidden in the folds of her sleeve into her operative’s stomach. As his body crumpled to the ground, she knelt down beside him and whispered into his ear, ‘There was a reason why I asked you if you wanted to know more. Too much knowledge is always a curse, son.’” (42)

Behind every illustration of her character sketch, there is only a motif of having an impeccable and devotional idealism towards Lord Krishna which she possesses as a precious heirloom.

“I had not forgotten Sarla Auntie’s dying words —to worship Krishna each day—and I continued the practice. The result was that I became strong, self-reliant and fervently devoted to preserving the dignity of Hinduism and the Vedic way of life.” (241)

When she meets Sir Khan, a mafia don and prominent client of her father, she gets the clues about the history of the Lord. Thus, she joins as a teacher of history in a school where Tarak Vakeel studies and becomes a doctoral student under the supervision of Ravi Mohan Saini. In her expedition, she moves on the elimination of the people who try to unveil the secrets of Krishna. The murders of Anil Varshney, Nikhil Bhojaraj, Rajaram Khurkunde and Devendra Chedi are the testimonies for that. She pursues higher education in history since the subject bestows opportunity to bring out the hidden and covered issues. In one of the contexts, she shares her agony with her disciple Tarak Vakeel about the intentional burying of the greatness of Indian History by the western people.

“For generations, our land has been invaded by foreigners,’ said Mataji to young Taarak after school one day. ‘The Greeks, Huns, Mongols, Arabs, Portuguese, French and English plundered India of its wealth. It shall be your responsibility to right these historical wrongs. To show the world that the cradle of civilisation was right here in India! To guide the misbelievers and to show them the errors of their ways!’ exclaimed Matai. ‘The English rascals came to India and propagated the myth of an Aryan invasion.’” (177 -178)

In *The Krishna Key*, Priya, initially introduced as Saini’s doctoral student, is later revealed to be Mataji, embodying the archetype of “The Terrible Mother” or “The Bad Mother.” She also represents Priya’s shadow archetype, the darker unconscious self (Guerin 180). Mataji emerges as the mastermind behind a series of murders, carried out by Taarak Vakeel under her guidance. She justifies these killings by claiming that Anil Varshney and his associates were engaged in satanic work, attempting to uncover Vishnu’s eighth avatar while neglecting the significance of the tenth (Sanghi 211). In her mission to establish India

as the cradle of civilization, Mataji manipulates Vakeel into believing he is the true Kalki avatar (Babu).

Another important character that fascinates the interest of the readers is Radhika Singh, the IPS officer who focuses on the series of murders connected to the seals found in the archaeological site in Rajasthan. Her heart giving nature to her ideals makes her renowned in the department. Her husband, Hari Singh is killed by two terrorists in her presence when she is an ordinary woman. The very incident transforms the ordinary woman into an extraordinary abler. With her perseverance, Radhika Singh becomes a terrifying officer and she is called Sniffer Singh in the department.

“Radhika Singh had begun her career as a teacher of history, geography and civics at the Mayo College. Born in small-town Ajmeer, she had been heart broken when her husband, a commandant in the Border Security force, had been shot dead by two Jaish-e-Mohammed terrorists. Not only had Radhika courageously attempted to defend her husband, she had also succeeded in stabbing one of the assailants, thus leading to his capture. Widowed at the age of just thirty, Singh had been seething with anger at the blows life had dealt her. Awarded the Kirti Chakra for her bravery by the President of India, Singh joined the Indian Police Service, one of the first few women to do so. Singh had won the gold medal in the state police shooting championship, beating policemen and male commandos in the process. Now a veteran in the police force, Singh was usually referred to as ‘Sniffer Singh’ among her colleagues for her beagle-like ability to follow a scent to its source.” (21& 22)

Owing to her sheer commitment to eradicate criminals in the society, she stops showing minimal kindness towards the culprits and suspects. While reading the novel, readers view her as a regular police officer who chases the criminals. However, her devotion to catch Ravi Mohan Saini and Priya is appreciable.

“Inspector Radhika Singh is out to get you, and trust me, when she decides to go after someone she usually succeeds. They call her Sniffer Singh in the police force. So why don’t you tell me the real story, huh?” said the gruff Ratnani.” (52 -53)

To err is human. It is a saying proven many times. On knowing Ravi Mohan Saini’s non-affiliation to the brutal murders, she feels guilty with her behaviour. She appreciates his ideology and attitude. Later, she begins her gargantuan responsibility to attain the mission.

Aswin’s another character that values the ideals in the novel appears in the form of Sarla Auntie who shares motherly love to Priya Rathnani in her childhood.

“Sarla Auntie became a substitute for my mother. She would cook breakfast for me, walk me to school, help me with my homework and tuck me into bed at night. I would be fast asleep when my father returned from work and he would carry me into our apartment, thanking Sarla Auntie profusely for taking care of me.” (236)

Sarla Auntie, who is married to a ruffian and alcoholic, is childless. It is due to the assault on her by the rough natured husband.

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“She had been married to an abusive drunkard of a husband via an alliance arranged by her poor parents. He had beaten her so viciously on the first night that her womb had been rendered incapable of bearing life. Sarla would shower affection on me.” (236)

She is a pious woman. It is a fact that many women, who are born in the sacred land, respect the traditions being followed in our country. Sarla Aunty is on par with such women. She is ill-treated by her husband several times. As an ideal wife, she tolerates her tormentor.

Her devotion is the purest of the pure. She is like a Mirabai to Krishna. Her devastated life has only a light like delight; Krishna. She devotes her dilapidated life to the service of lord.

“Sarla Auntie was a devout Krishna Bhakt and she would, without fail, perform her daily prayers to Lord Krishna every morning. She asked me to keep Krishna in my heart permanently. She said that the world was an evil place and that her solace in life had been Krishna and I. She made me promise that I would worship Krishna each day.” (236)

When Priya is molested by her husband, she is saved by Sarla Aunty. Unable to bear seeing the torture to Sarla Aunty by her drunken husband, Priya stabs him. On seeing the defending attempt made by Priya, she gets astonished. Later, she changes Priya’s dress, advises Priya to believe in Lord Krishna and worship him with her pristine heart. Because of being a culture respectful and having the intention of protecting the life of Priya, she commits suicide.

“When he reached there, he saw that Sarla Auntie and her husband were both lying dead on the floor, the husband due to a stab wound in his back and Sarla Auntie with a self-inflicted wound to her stomach—with the knife still in her hand.” (237)

Ashwin Sanghi’s *Chanakya’s Chant* is another fabulous work that highlights the great endeavours of women. As we go through the novel, the contributions of the women characters are not as great as the deeds of both Ganganagar Mishra and Chanakya. But there is substantial importance for the great endeavours and the sacrifices put in by the female characters. The actual chant is about the importance of women.

“Adi Shakti, Namonamah; Sarab Shakti, Namonamah; Prithumbhagvati, Namonamah; Kundalini Mata Shakti; Mata Shakti, Namonamah ‘which means ‘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,’ the school master said smiling. ‘It’s the ultimate recognition of female power.’ This Chant underscores the importance of women.” (33)

The novel has two timelines: one set in the days 2300 years before, and the other in the present day. In the former, the protagonist is Chanakya and it deals with his revenge, patriotism and the machinations he uses to install Chandragupta as the emperor on the throne of Magadha. The other has an old professor of history whose name is Ganga Sagar Misra.

He is the present-day embodiment of Chanakya. As the curse is on him, he wishes for the glory of a slum girl, Chandini Gupta. While reading the novel, we come across the women characters Chandini Gupta and Suvasini.

Suvasini is the character that demonstrates perseverance and instrumental to achieving the target in the novel. She is Chanakya's childhood crush. As the tyranny forces, she remains the mistress of Rakshasa, who is the minister of Dhanananda. She is integral in creating differences between Dhanananda and Rakshas.

“I love you,’ said Suvasini to Rakshas, ‘but the king has put me in a very delicate position, darling. He wants me to become his queen.’

‘Is that what you also want?’ he asked cautiously.

She put her arms around his neck and whispered into his ear, ‘You know what happens when you and I are in bed together. Do you really think he'd be able to satisfy me?’

‘But once he has his eyes on a woman, he gets her at any cost. No one can argue with

him—he's the goddamn king! How are we going to handle it?’ demanded Rakshas.

‘I shall be clear with him. If it means my head, so be it,’ said Suvasini.” (213 - 214)

Later, she speaks fascinatingly when she is intimate with the king, Dhanananda, as Chanakya instructs her to help him.

“I love you,’ said Suvasini to Dhanananda as she gently ran her fingers through the king's hair as he rested his head on her lap, ‘but your prime minister has put me in a very delicate position, sweetheart. He wants me to be his wife. You know how I love what we have between us. You also know that I really don't care for your power or wealth. I simply adore you, my lord.’

‘What I like about you, Suvasini, is that you can be a caring mother in the morning, a doting sister in the afternoon, and a whore at night!’ he coarsely muttered. She shuddered inwardly and closed her eyes.

‘I shall be clear with him. If it breaks his heart, so be it,’ said Suvasini.” (214)

She pretends as she is pleaded by her childhood friend and the one whom she loves deeply, Chanakya. Even after having redemption to Magadha from the mean ruler, Dhanananda, she doesn't get emancipated and remains a captive. She obviously abdicates her life for an accomplishment which empowers India, eliminates the foreign invaders and provides stability to the nation with the strong rule of the Mauryan Dynasty.

“‘You have something for me?’ asked Jeevasiddhi. She nodded as she handed over two silken pouches to him. One contained a ring with the royal insignia of Dhanananda. The other contained a ring that had been given to Rakshas by his father and bore his family crest.” (216)

Even at the end, when Dhanananda is eliminated and Chandragupta ascends the throne of Magadha, the pitiful condition of Suvasini remains unchanged, as she is treated as one of the dearest to the kingdom of Dhanananda; she is house-arrested. Despite her conversation with Chanakya, he confirms it in tears for the well-being of the dynasty.

“Suvasini looked around the room. It was windowless but comfortable—clean, airy, and well furnished. She tried opening the door, but it was locked from the outside. She sat down on the bed and began sobbing quietly. What sort of wretched life was this? To be used by Rakshas, abused by Dhanananda and misused by Chanakya?” (425)

Thus, Suvasini becomes a pawn in the hands of the political masters. Despite knowing the dangers in the operation, she extends her help to her childhood friend with an unwavering belief. Eventually, she remains a perennial prisoner with some comforts.

The protagonist of the novel, *The Vault of Vishnu* is Paramjit Khurana, who is known as Pam in short. The idea of resilience has become crucial in the fields like psychology and public health. It is usually seen as the ability to overcome challenges and bounce back from hardship. However, Dr. Olena Hankivsky argues for a more complex view. Her work considers how different social factors (like race, class, and gender) play a role in a person’s ability to endure challenges. Dr. Hankivsky’s approach to resilience focuses attention on different social advantages, all come together to influence how people face and overcome challenges (Hankivsky et al. p. 56).

Regarding the condition of Pam in the novel one agrees the disadvantages she has. To find out the secret, she gathers her capabilities and has a solution for the problem of the nation. Though she has her father alive, she leads her life without the company of her father. Initially, she is found in Indian Air force and she wants to be a combat pilot. Due to the malfunctioning in a Mig -21 flight, she gets injured. Owing to this mishap, she is deputed to work at the DRDO, Delhi. This decision becomes a heart breaker and feels that her rising wings are clipped.

“Pam had been one of the female cadets admitted into the Indian Air Force, one of the most female friendly wings of the armed forces. Pam had flown support sorties in several combat zones and had risen quickly through the ranks. Unfortunately, a last- minute ejection from a Russian MiG air craft had left her with flexor tendon injury in her left hand.” (10)

It is argued that to understand resilience truly, we need to consider the bigger picture of social inequalities, including those related to race, gender, caste, sexuality, disability, and other dimensions of identity. The core centre of Hankivsky’s resilience lies in intersectionality, highlighting how different types of oppression can intersect and produce unique forms of disadvantage and marginalization (Hankivsky, p.8-12). When Pam is chosen for the mission of discovering the truth behind the abnormal agility of the Chinese soldiers at the Dokhlam, she is not considered by Gen. Jai Thakur for the responsibility. Still, she is not meek to obey his opinion and demands for she requires to move on the job and takes the

most important decisions on her own. The following quotes denote how effective and tenacious her attitude is while taking decisions.

Pam is not scared and doesn't feel suppressed when she is assigned the task of finding the truth. So, she asks directly what she requires. 'I am not a scientist', she countered, "I'll need to discuss these issues with relevant technical experts. I can be the one who analyses data that emerges from them, but I cannot become them' (26).

When she feels she wants a clue to crack the issue, she wants to send an expert team to the place of the ambush, so she doesn't intimate the matter to any higher official. 'This investigation could really do with his help..... She needed Mark's help irrespective of Thakur's approval or disapproval. And irrespective of how it might complicate her life' (26). She strongly believes in the equality of men and women with respect to the ability. She states defiantly, 'I refuse to allow my gender to define my capabilities' (5). 'She continued staring at the photograph of her father, her own reflection merging with his face. Why did I lose you so early? Are you looking at me from above, Papa? Are you proud of me? She heard footsteps.... took a deep breath and entered the conference room" (23). We can see her emotional resilience.

Pam is not an ordinary officer or woman as well. When a mission is assigned to Pam, she doesn't let it unfinished. We can understand her resourcefulness when she deals with Dev. Right through the novel, the readers identify and admires her chivalrous nature besides appreciating her resilience.

"You can call me Pam. I really need your help, Dev". "Am I laying it on too chick?" She wondered 'I have been given an assignment by my editor to track down Dr. Rao. If I don't succeed, that's the end of my job.'

"Is the academy still in operation? asked Pam. 'I would have suggested having dinner to chat about this but am travelling for the next few days.' (86)

As an investigative officer, she does not bother about her safety and security. Apart from that when she suspects, she directly asks anybody. The best instance for this feature in her is her inquisitive conversation with the VTK (Venkata Tirumala Kumara Mangalam)

"How did you know that there was a GPS chip in the Pallava coin I gave Dr Rao? Pam asked flatly. I didn't tell anyone. 'I certainly don't recall mentioning it to you'

VTK looked wary.

"And Mark told you?" asked Pam

'Yes' replied VTK emphatically." (279 - 280)

Another impressive female character in the novel is Anu, a 65-year-old lady, Anu. She is dextrous in traditional martial arts such as Silambam and Kalariyapattu. She is an ideal daughter. Her respect and love towards her daughter is really impeccable.

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“The old man was enjoying a simple meal of idli, sambar and coconut chutney. The meal as usual had been cooked with care and served by his daughter, Anu, a sixty-five-year spinster.” (62)

Anu doesn't disappoint her father. She knows about the great mission her father does, She values her father's life more than anything else. “Appa, please don't misunderstand. I am quite happy to live in Kanchi. But I think that living in a city like Chennai would be more practical at your age. Medical attention for one” (63).

She is a spinster right through her life. She is dedicated to her non-agenarian father. Although she is interested in Dev, who is her father's right hand and cheats her father, she buries her interest in him for good. She looks after her father like a child. She finds her happiness in serving him. Despite her father's disagreeing with her, without any complaint she is compliant without him. Aswin hires the attitude and characteristics of Antigone and Electra who take care of their old and blind fathers, Oedipus Rex and King Agamemnon.

The novel has one more important female character called Jaya. She is introduced as a RAW operative. She is a polyglot. Only because of her qualification of being a polyglot, she is included in the RAW. While observing her past, it is very important to note the role of General Jai Thakur who channelizes her towards the Pro Chinese ideology. Projected as bigwig in the matter of Security Wing, General Thakur easily influences Jaya, an excited and enthusiastic student of JNU, Delhi. When she is a graduate at JNU, Delhi, she meets him and gets motivated by him.

“Thakur was invited to give a lecture at JNU about India's defence strategy. One of the young ladies seated in the first row had been starry eyed Jaya, who thought that idealism could win any battle. She had approached Thakur hesitantly after the lecture to get autograph which led to an innocent cup of coffee at a restaurant.” (295)

The frequent meetings with Thakur make her swallow the ideals that flourish the very same idealism.

“They began spending their evenings at the unused guest house of one of the Thakur's friends, reading Mao, Lenin, Marx and Engels.” (295)

Once intrigued by the ideals, she becomes a daring lady who takes part in the countless adventurous operations in various countries. Her inclination and aptitude towards learning languages turn out to be a big advantage for her. As she is so fond of her Chinese supportive attitude, she misleads PAM when she approaches her about the translation of the manuscript given by Dr. Raja Rao. It is because of Jaya, whom the Chinese calls her Shengli, the Buzhang gets the information of the third potion called Pishinou which neutralises the negative impact of the two available potions Viz. Bahamao and Shipo. Though she is an anti-Indian operative in the Indian secret agency, she tries to propitiate her believed ideals. She even remarks the same that support her ideology.

“The life of a spy was always risky but that didn't matter to Shengli. There were those who became spies for money, excitement or ambition. But Shengly did not fall

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into any of those baskets. Shengli was a spy because of Idealism. Those with deeply held beliefs are often willing to die for their ideals.” (45)

### Conclusion

Aswin Sanghi's Creation of women characters unique in their style of their portrayal. The women characters in the novel, *The Krishna Key* are unique in their behaviour. The portrayal of the character, Priya Rathnani is multi-faceted and the character is the real game changer in the plot while other female characters the effective pillars. The sacrifice and support rendered by Suvasini towards her childhood friend and believed companion, Chanakya is crux in the novel, *Chanakya's Chant*. Though her character is a minor one in the novel, her intervention brings a substantial difference in the narrative. Jaya, who mingles with the destructive forces, works for achieving goals set by the Chinese as she is misguided by General Thakur, who is the mole in the hierarchy of Indian defence system. While the protagonist, Pam and Anu are the embodiments of positive ideals, Jaya gives her heart and soul to the wrong path which is shown and encouraged to use her expertise to put in. Dr. Olena Hankivsky's framework of resilience recognizes the role of social identities in shaping people's experiences in overcoming challenges, it provides us with a valuable lens to analyse Paramjit's character. This shift in literary representation reflects a broader societal transformation where Indian women are increasingly asserting their rights and challenging conventional norms in both personal and public spheres, moving beyond traditional portrayals of self-sacrifice towards identity formation and self-respect (Ghatak, 2023). On the whole, As John Ruskin says" Shakespeare has no heroes – he has only heroines" is the statement that may be applied to the female characters of Aswin Sanghi. The characteristics of the female characters make them backbones of the novels.

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