

Facets of Mythological Elements Depicted in Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy

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ABSTRACT

Traditional Indian literature, predominantly oral and later written, is deeply intertwined with mythology and is primarily derived from sacred texts of Hinduism such as the *Vedas*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Purana*. In recent times, there is a resurgence of interest in retelling mythological tales through contemporary literature particularly for urban readers in English, notable authors being Devdutt Pattanaik and Amish Tripathi. These writers blend entertainment and fantasy with traditional narratives, creating accessible and engaging retellings for younger readers. This paper focuses on the narrative techniques employed by Amish Tripathi in his Shiva Trilogy, which includes *The Immortals of Meluha*, *The Secret of Nagas*, and *The Oath of Vayuputras*. Tripathi reimagines ancient myths with modern sensibilities, exploring themes of good versus evil, the Law of Nature, and the philosophical underpinnings of Hindu mythology. Tripathi's work, characterized by its blend of myth, history, and science, addresses contemporary issues such as terrorism and ecological degradation, making ancient myths relevant to modern readers. The paper also examines the cultural significance of mythology in India and its role in shaping modern Indian literature. By analyzing Tripathi's works, the study highlights the enduring appeal of mythological themes and their ability to resonate with contemporary audiences, thus contributing to the broader discourse on the intersection of mythology and modernity in Indian English literature.

KEYWORDS

Indian English Literature; mythological retelling; mythology and modernity; philosophical underpinnings.

Introduction

Indian English Literature (IEL), more popularly known as Indian Writing in English, is often considered to be a subgenre under postcolonial literature. There is no denying that a literary genre of such potential must have been cradled in a site of colonial exploitation like India.

Tracing its genealogy, we may say that IEL has had a rich and diverse history of about 150 years. The first book, which was written in English by an Indian, was a travelogue by Dean Mahomet, titled *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* (1793). In its early stage, the English novels in India--- both thematically and morphologically---

were influenced by their western counterparts. *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) can be considered as the first Indian English novel, written by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay. Dhan Gopal Mukherjee was the first Indian English author to win a literary award in the United States.

Since then, Indian English literature (IEL) has emerged as the body of work by writers in India who write in the English language and whose native or co-native language could be one of the numerous languages of India. It also includes the works of writers of the Indian Diaspora, such as Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Bharathi Mukherjee, V.S Naipaul, etc.

The Indian literary legacy is primarily oral and, with the passage of time, it has culminated in written verse. Before being written down, the earliest literary works in the Indian subcontinent were mostly composed to be sung or recited, a form amenable to be mnemonically passed down through successive generations. Besides, much of Indian literature is either religious in nature or a retelling of well-known tales from the Sanskrit epics, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, and the *Puranas* which are nothing but mythological writings. Indian literature is replete with mythological tales and has a long tradition of oral and written transmission of these tales, through verse, besides a variety of media, like theatre, sculpture, and paintings. Even many scientific discoveries are stated to have been inspired from myths, besides offering amusement, enlightenment, and education to those who peruse it.

India under Pandemic vis-à-vis Growing Rapport with Mythology

It is often claimed that the youth in contemporary India, however, find philosophy boring and that they are inclined to neither reading about nor listening to oral renditions of these mythological texts. Over the last couple of

decades, however, the act of retelling mythology through literature, especially in Indian Writing in English, has seen surprisingly new developments, some rich examples being Devdatta Pattanaik's *Jaya-An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*, Sita - *An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* and the *Ramchandra Series*. Also, we cannot ignore Kavita Kane's writing about the forgotten female characters of the great Indian epics. All these writers are endeavouring to reproduce mythology by mingling elements of entertainment and fantasy. Retelling mythical tales could be a perilous endeavour and hence, writers are expected to tread ways cautiously while selecting both the characters and their stories. If misinterpreted or given a subversive stance against the 'authority', a critical propensity which Stanley Fish terms as "Interpretive Communities," (Fish, 1980) it could spark controversy and disputes among readers.

In the early days of the Doordarshan (Television) in India, in the 1980s and early 1990s, it was almost a family ritual for the majority of Indian households to gather in front of the small screen to watch the televised serials of these ancient tales of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, by Ramananad Sagar and BR Chopra respectively. Bheeshma's austere steadfastness, Arjuna's valour, Draupadi's fire, Sita's beauty, Rama's elegant demeanour, were stories that breathed life, to be passed down to the next generation. Glued to the television, the young viewers would be virtually hypnotized, they would hang on to every word like it was gospel, creating their own worlds and often visualizing themselves as the protagonists. It is perhaps for these reasons that more literary works began to be based on mythical tales. The appeal of these mythological stories on the young minds and their immense popularity have

engendered a new genre of mythological thrillers, with more and more writers turning to them for inspiration. The contemporary texts under this genre of mythological thrillers, often rendered in lucid English, are quite accessible to the young generation.

The lately-concluded corona epidemic had the potential to disturb all of us by getting us pitifully isolated and disconnected from each other. It did unsettle the social, mental, physical, and emotional balance of the restrained people. The lockdown period, which cropped up like a bolt from the blue in March 2020, had undoubtedly been an uncalled-for experience for everyone. Everyone had their own unique method of coping with it.

For many, religion had become an excellent refuge or, we might say, a Hobson's choice to turn to so that they could come to terms with the anxiety of living with uncertainty in the face of this raging pandemic. The re-telecasting of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* mythology TV series had played an important role during this unseasonably long stillness. People took to drawing allusions to the incident of Sita's transgressing the 'Lakshman Rekha' in the *Ramayana* and, in turn, jeopardizing her own safety. In a similar way, during the shutdown-days, people who would cross their 'Lakshman Rekha,' i.e., the main door of their house, would put themselves into trouble. Not surprisingly, during the lockdown, Hindi entertainment channels saw a sharp increase in their TRP ratings when they started telecastin popular mythological shows like *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Vishnu Purana* and so on.

In the early twentieth century, the Scottish folklorist and anthropologist, James George Frazer has undertaken extensive studies of myths and inspired a lot of speculations among scholars. In India, Sri Aurobindo, one of the pioneering writers in Indian English, is known to have made several reinterpretations to classical

Indian tales available in our mythology. He is one of the first poets, like Percy Bysshe Shelley in English, to have given re-interpretations to myths. Sri Aurobindo, in *Savitri*, conjoins classical myth to present life and travels towards the future and the world beyond

Last two and a half decades or so, Indian writers have been turning to mythology as an important source for setting the context for their writings. Viewed in teleological terms, any mythology talks about the beginning of the world and the end of the world with poetic justice. As far as cultural heritage is concerned, mythology is a major contributor. It is the foundational base for all the religious practices that we follow. India has such diverse cultures, and in most of them, festivals are associated with the mythological happenings.

Mythical Tales in New Avatars and Gen Z

Another reason, why mythology has assumed so much significance in our world today, is that it acts as a cultural repository, a virtual store house of inspiring ideas and creations. The young generations, Gen Zs as they are popularly referred to, more particularly, try to assimilate themselves in their cultural contexts by accessing these mythological tales. The engagement of new generation with mythology has other reasons. It is often assumed that the young generation today is neither willing nor free to spend time in perusing mythological texts or other classics. They are getting acquainted with mythology in a much more modern way. New generation singers, like Abhilipsa Panda, Sachet Tandon, Parampara Thakur, Abhijit Vaghani are engaging the youth through bhajans and Shiv Tandav Stotram blended with western music. This trend is catching on, as it is proving to be successful in capturing the attention and interest of the youth in India. *Har Har Shambho* is one such examples. Inspired by it, some youngsters are getting

tattoos of gods and deities on their body and images on their T-shirts, blending fashion and folklore. Our theatre is imbued with mythology and depends on archetypes from Hindu folklore to convey its message. Modern day spiritual gurus like Jaggi Vasudeva have their web pages and interpret myths adopting scientific rationale. Travel and tourism in India have always been associated with mythology. Comics and cartoons, like *Amar Chitra Katha* series, are known for providing reinterpretations of mythological tales from contemporary perspectives. India is indeed, the country of multicultural and multilingual faiths, where worship and religion, diversity in food, clothing, practices and fashion all go hand in hand.

Our colonial masters were also deeply fascinated by our rich folklore and mythology. There were some groups of people or scholars whose mission was to unearth the rich literary-cultural legacy of India; celebrated Indologists like Sir William Jones and Max Mueller took the onus of translating Indian texts. There were numerous mythological books translated by these western Indologists. The *Manusmriti* was translated from Sanskrit into English in 1794 by Sir William Jones. These translations helped our white masters to understand Indian culture and myth and helped them revive interest in these texts, initiating the process of questioning and investigating into Indian myths and mythology. They took to questioning beliefs related to incarnations, various customs and traditions. After such questioning there was an attempt at proving or validating how all those customs and traditions had got a solid scientific base. For example, they were looking extensively into the scientific use of putting a bindi or that of fasting. All these phenomena influenced literature deeply. Postmodernism spread roots in India roughly in the 1980s. In a typically skeptical vein, the aficionados of postmodernist discourses began inquiring

into the epics, and one could see a fast-burgeoning paradigm shift in the general outlook towards mythology.

As discussed, reinterpretation of the mythical stories, such as the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, and other prominent Indian epics, can be defined as a common practice in the Indian literary field when observed from the contemporary perspectives. The important element or the motivation behind the need to retell age-old stories of heroic men and sacrificial women is that, with the changing times, one must also change the perceptions rooted in tradition and culture. To separate the Indian culture and tradition from the mythological epics can be difficult, as there has been an inherent and strong bond between them. When the question of cultural values arises, as a society, there is a collective need to associate everything with the characters portrayed as the reflections or epitomes of what a man should be in a society or how a woman should behave as the embodiment of docility, frivolity or selfless sacrifice. The study also throws light on one of the possible driving factors behind the retelling of the mythological stories: the changing course of reader habit in the contemporary setting.

Intricate Narrative Patterns

This paper aims to study intricate narrative patterns that run through the neo-mythical fiction of Amish Tripathi throughout his novels. Tripathi has played with the conventional narrative structure and character of our centuries-old myths. The revered God is portrayed as a tribal leader. His Shiva Trilogy consists of three books: *The Immortals of Meluha*, *The Secret of Nagas* and *The Oath of Vayuputras*.

The Immortals of Meluha is the first book of the Shiva Trilogy. The novel sets a vivid backdrop, which becomes the setting for the trilogy with a modern touch. The book introduces the protagonist, all the major characters and most of the minor

characters in the narrative. The narrative revolves around the story of a common man whose karma (action) turns him into a God. *The Secret of Nagas* is the second book of the Shiva trilogy, a book which focuses on Shiva's battle. As the title suggests, this book reveals many secrets and suspense.

Tripathi's understanding of the educated, empirically sound, and scientifically informed readership of the twenty-first century is evident in the way he treats myth with history and science. His blend of the puranic history of Shiva's life, with historical fact and scientific truth recasts our contemporary predicaments of life such as terrorism, ecocide, war on terror and the posthuman stride of humanity (Adishesiah and Hildyard, 1-13). The first of the trilogy, *The Immortals of Meluha*, represents the ancient Indian culture to the readers. *The Secret of Nagas*, the second book philosophizes the concept of good and evil, as perceived in Indian society. The last of the trilogy *The Oath of Vayuputras* argues, to a great extent, that any culture or nation that ignores the Law of Nature tends to degrade, while the one that follows the Law of Nature leads its nation towards enlightenment. Amish lends a comprehensive dimension to his synthetic mythology by using mythical themes such as the battle between good and evil, mythical narrative-epic form and finally mythical characters in Shiva trilogy.

Evil is the thematic core of the trilogy and it makes Amish a modern-day mythologist and places him in a long tradition of interpreters and re-interpreters of ancient Hindu stories. In *The Oath of Vayuputras*, the protagonist, Shiva, learns that the real evil is somrasa. It was the reason for plague and the people of Branga were affected by the plague. It made the majority of the Branga to leave their land and settle in Kashi. The birth of Naga babies was also credited to somrasa, as it resulted in manipulation of cells at a very high rate which led to their

deformities and outgrowths. Brahaspati also explains to Shiva that the huge consumption of water required to manufacture somrasa has resulted in the depletion of the river Sarasvati's water.

Everyone is God

One of the main themes of this trilogy is the belief that "Everyone is God". Especially, the second novel explains the presence of a god in each and every human being (Har Har Mahadev):

"A man becomes a Mahadev when he fights for good. A Mahadev is not born as one from his mother's womb. He is forged in the heat of battle, when he wages a war to destroy evil" (*The Secret of the Nagas*, 344).

With these considerations in place, it is reasonable to conjecture that this idea that a person's real identity is God, is also something pertinent to James Campbell's analysis of the Hero Quest Myth tales, which is the most chiselled manifestation of myth to most of us, as readers.

The essence of Hinduism is contained in the Vedanta, the theological and scientific doctrine of Hinduism. There are five core features of Hinduism; Karma-Action is one of them. It is similar to the rules of action and reaction in Newton's law. Any act and its corresponding result are basically governed by the law of karma. Tripathi's Shiva is not an incarnation of God. He is not God-become man, but man-become God. Shiva is elevated to the divine pedestal because of his good deeds and karma. The following lines from the text will explain the concept in more inviting detail:

"Now who the bloody hell are the nagas?" asked Shiva

"They are cursed people, my Lord," gasped Nandi. "They are born with hideous deformities because of the sins of their previous birth's. Deformities like extra hands or

horribly misshapen faces" (*The Immortals of Meluha*, 59).

Maika system and Vikarma system also make the writing more interesting. Amish unravels the plot's riddles at the ideal pacing, engaging the reader's interest. Such a sort of writing is said to fall into the category of 'epic fantasy' which is the sub-genre of popular fantasy fiction. This trilogy talks about the Law of Nature, Law of Karma. However, it combines the narrative excess with philosophical debate. One cannot help noticing the way the first impressions about the major places are marked in the narrative. Each city is distinguished by certain distinctive architectural styles. The three books of the series are the sole proof of the skill of Amish in crafting different modes such as fantasy fiction, adventure and thriller fiction into the genre of mythology.

As far as characters are concerned, Amish's *Shiva Trilogy* is based on the reconstruction of several Indian mythical characters and stories drawn from the *Shivpurana*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Mahabharata*. The trilogy deals with the story of Shiva from a humanist point of view; it is the celebration of an epic hero, Shiva, and his journey. The three books in the trilogy--- each depict a distinct stage of the protagonist's journey. *Immortals of Meluha* projects the transitional phase of the protagonist from a Tibetan immigrant to Mahadev. The elevation from a mere immigrant to God of the God is also something related to the Hero Quest Myth, which is the most adorable category of myth to most people. *The Secret of Nagas* follows the adventurous quest of the protagonist 'Shiva'. The third book of the trilogy, *The Oath of Vayuputras* speaks about his symbolic representation of mythical characters. In the Hindu mythology while Sati or Parvati represents marriage and motherhood, Kali stands for destruction. Kali and Sati are not the same persona with different manifestations; rather, they are the same face with

different persona and identity. Here, the mythical tale of Sati's penances for Shiva is transformed into Shiva's quest for love. Ganesh, whom Tripathi refers to as "Lord of the People," is arguably the subject of the most intriguing interpretation of the related mythical tales (*Secret of the Nagas* 29). In India, Ganesh is also known as Ganpati. It is a relevant transcreation, however. Vasudeva plays an important role in the novels to serve as stimulants to Shiva. In their conversation Vasudeva and Shiva both rise to self-consciousness. In their roles, Vasudeva is informative whereas Shiva is investigative.

Conclusion

The Shiva Trilogy makes the bold claim that it is a fusion of fiction and history that explores "the rich mythological heritage of ancient India." Commercially speaking, the Shiva trilogy has been and still endures as a huge success. It has garnered critical attention from several Indian reviewers and even those from beyond. Amish Tripathi presents the several models of heroism- Shiva, the great hero, Sati the wise and brave warrior, Parvateshwar, the traditional knightly quest hero, Nandi and so on. In revisiting Shiva's story, Tripathi has cautiously woven into one the archetypal plots and projects. He suggests that Gods are the configuration of incredible people who have accomplished a wide range of battles and become legendary, leading to their being worshipped and loved as divine beings.

Amish Tripathi depicts Shiva as the archetypal hero who is elevated to the divine pedestal owing to his good deeds and karma. In an age that is shaped by science and technology, most modern writers realise the importance of mythology in order to give "shape and significance" to our contemporary reality. The use of myths in modern literature highlights the classical tone of our age. Myths have a symbolic value in literature.

T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is perhaps the most representative of such modernist works which weaves into the poem's structure classical mythology, Christian folklore, Buddhism and even Indian Upanishadic views. Tripathy accomplishes it with elan through his singular, iconoclastic journey.

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