

**Myth, Marginality, and Modernity: A Study of Amish Tripathi's
*The Immortals of Meluha***

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Abstract:

Amish Tripathi's *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010) reimagines the Puranic figure of Lord Shiva as the protagonist of a historical-fantasy narrative set in the fictional empire of Meluha. While ostensibly a retelling of mythic legend, the novel engages with gender inequality, caste-based untouchability, physical disability, terrorism, ecological crisis, and the ethical costs of scientific progress. This paper studies how Tripathi uses the vocabulary of myth — the Neelkanth legend, the Vikarma law, and the rivers of the Sapt Sindhu — to stage a critique of social oppression and political violence in contemporary Indian society, drawing directly on key episodes and dialogues involving Sati, Brahaspati, and the Naga people.

Keywords: Myth, Indian English fiction, gender, caste, terrorism, marginality

Introduction

Since Amish Tripathi is a devoted worshipper of Lord Shiva, his novel *The Immortals of Meluha* is all about religion and myth. He was an atheist when he was young, and returned to faith while writing his first book. The story tries to redefine terms like virtue and vice from the very beginning, and the web of legends, folktales, and Puranas blends into a unified form to give a intense perception of a time when the earth was ruled according to old values and battles were fought for pride. It is a story which captures the spirit of those previous ages in their true colour.

The author has used our classical legends as the driving force of his story. The characters are classical, and the tale, told in the third-person omniscient narrative, is a construction of naive imagination. Figures like Shiva, Sati, Nandi, Daksha and Bhadra move through an actual topography as true as human beings of flesh and blood, and the author's objectivity over the essential question of virtue and vice allows readers to form their own opinion independently.

Amish Tripathi did engineering and management from IIM Calcutta and joined the financial services as a banker before turning to writing. He belongs to a Banaras Hindu Brahmin family and got his knowledge of the life of Lord Shiva from his grandfather. He took the subject matter from the life of Lord Shiva and adopted the idea of writing the book from a T. V. show, “The Pre-Islamic Zoroastrian Persian Myth,” in which Asuras were gods and Devas were demons — a conflict of good and evil that helped him write a paper on the subject, which later turned into the adventure story of Shiva, “The Mahadev: The God of Gods, Destroyer of the evil, Passionate lover, Fierce warrior, Consummate dancer, Charismatic leader, All-powerful, yet incorruptible, A quick wit accompanied by an equally quick and fearsome temper” (8).

In *The Immortals of Meluha*, Tripathi deals with ancient India and its rich cultural heritage, rivers and cities, and tries to define the diversity in religion, languages, culture, customs and rituals. He blends mythology with contemporary social issues — the individual and society relationship, gender issues, displacement, cultural difference and identity crisis — and tries to display the social problems that affect individual and social relations: outcaste, marginalisation, class oppression, male dominance and untouchability. He also exhibits contemporary issues like terrorism, nuclear weapons crises, and science and technology, blended with History, Mythology and Philosophy.

The story is taken from the Shivapurana, in which the life of Lord Shiva and his family is narrated, though Tripathi’s version departs freely from the original. He is not alone among Indian English writers in this method. R. K. Narayan, in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, deals with the myth of Bhasmasura through the taxidermist Vasu, whose growing expectations of gaining more and more become the cause of his own destruction. Raja Rao, in *Kanthapura*, blends the myth of the Harikatha with the Freedom Struggle of India. Similarly, Amish Tripathi takes ancient Hindu mythology and deals with contemporary Indian society and its issues. In this regard, Shekhar Kapoor has called him “India’s first literary pop star” (qtd. in “Amish Tripathi”).

Myth, History and the World of Meluha

Meluha is a kingdom of India, set up long ago by Lord Ram, the greatest king that ever lived. Its Suryavanshi rulers face catastrophes as its primary river, the well-regarded Saraswati, is gradually drying to extinction, and they face terrorist attacks from the Chandravanshis of the east, who have joined forces with the Nagas, a cursed race with physical deformities. King Daksha invites the tribes of North India and Tibet to settle in his land, among them the Gunas, whose leader Shiva is a courageous fighter and dancer. On their first night in Srinagar, the Gunas fall ill with fever, but Shiva alone is unaffected, and his throat turns blue. The Meluhans declare him the Neelkanth, their prophesied saviour. In Devagiri, Shiva meets and eventually marries Princess Sati, a widow living the socially marginal life of a Vikarma, in defiance of the law that forbids such a marriage. As Shiva travels through Meluha, he learns of Somras, the elixir that grants long life but drains the

Saraswati, and after Brahaspati's mysterious death in an attack on the Somras factory at Mount Mandar, Meluha goes to war against the Chandravanshis — a war that leaves Shiva questioning his own assumptions about who is truly “evil.”

The Individual, Society and the State

Amish Tripathi tries to define the freedom of choosing one's profession according to one's own will. Every Meluhan has a chosen profession, represented by an animal symbol tied to the shoulder, selected according to skill and interest rather than birth alone: Ayurvati belongs to a Brahmin family but works as a doctor, since Brahmins may work as lawyers, teachers, or priests according to their own interest. Yet this freedom coexists with a rigid caste structure in which one caste cannot do another caste's job, so that a Kshatriya may not trade at the marketplace and a Shudra may not enter the trades of other castes. Bhadra explains this to Shiva:

And they have Vaishyas, who are craftsmen, traders and business people, and finally the Shudras who are the farmers and workers. And one caste cannot do another caste's job.' 'Hang on,' said Shiva. 'That means that since you are a warrior, you would not be allowed to trade at the marketplace? (28)

Amish Tripathi also tries to reveal the importance of a democratic system reminiscent of modern India's own ideals. Passing through Punjab, Shiva sees how the Meluhan system of governance, known as Ram Rajya, gives all individual equal rights and duties as decided by Lord Ram. He believes if the whole society is aware of its duties, nobody needs to fight for individual rights, since everybody's rights are automatically taken care of through someone else's duties. Bhadra tells Shiva:

They were a slightly serious people, but unfailingly polite and civil. It seemed to be a flawless society where everyone was aware of his role, played it perfectly. They were conscious, nay obsessive, about their duties. The simple truth hit Shiva: if the entire society was conscious of its duties, nobody would need to fight for their individual rights. Since everybody's rights would be automatically taken care of through someone else's duties. Lord Ram was a genius. (35)

Tripathi also explains the role of tradition in the development of culture, through which the individual is identified in society. Discussing the future of his tribe with Bhadra, Shiva learns that among the Gunas the chief holds supreme authority and no member dares oppose his decision, unlike the Prakratists, where the chief must listen to whoever is the loudest voice in council. Bhadra smiles:

No we are not. You are the chief now. The tribe lives and dies by your decisions. It cannot be corrupted by any other influence. We are not like the Prakratists, where the chief has to listen to whoever is the loudmouth in their council. Only the chief's wisdom is supreme amongst the Gunas. That is our tradition. (27)

Nandi explains to Shiva why the Gunas should accept the Meluhan offer of land and security in exchange for taxation and obedience to the law: “His tribe would have to live by the law of the foreigners. They would have to work every day for a living. That’s better than fighting every day just to stay alive!” (2). This is the same bargain the Meluhan government offers more formally elsewhere: “Our government has an offer for the immigrants. You will be given fertile land and resources for farming... Meluha offers you a lifestyle beyond your wildest dreams. We ask for nothing in return. Just live in peace, pay your taxes and follow the laws of the land” (2).

Gender, Vikarma and the Body Politic

Amish Tripathi demonstrates social law as a tool of oppression of women through the character of Sati. An individual who has sinned in a previous birth, according to Meluhan belief, lives the life of a Vikarma; Sati, whose husband died and whose child was stillborn many years ago, has lived a life of Vikarma ever since through no fault of her own, permitted to offer puja only once a year despite being the king’s daughter. Nandi voices the novel’s own scepticism about the law:

That sounds pretty ridiculous to me. A woman could have given birth to a still born child simply because she did not take proper care while she was pregnant, or it could just be a disease. How can anyone say that she is being punished for the sins of her previous birth? (93)

The same logic of pollution extends to the physically disabled. Purvaka, a former general who loses his rank after going blind, becomes a Vikarma along with his son Drapaku, and when he touches Shiva’s feet in gratitude, Shiva is told he must undergo Shudhikaran, a purification ritual, for having been touched by him: “It’s not obstinacy. Honestly, how can it harm me if I happened to touch a wrong man, who I might add still loves his country despite the way he has been ostracized and ill-treated?” (200). A similar incident occurs when Shiva dances with Sati and is told he has been polluted and must go for Shudhikaran, and again at a Yagna ceremony in Kotdwaar, where Tarak, an ultra-conservative immigrant who considers himself a moral policeman, objects to Sati’s presence and challenges her to a trial by fire, Agnipariksha, invoking the precedent of Lord Ram’s own wife:

I am a Meluhan. It is my right to challenge anyone breaking the law. A dhobi, a mere washerman, challenged Lord Ram. It was his greatness that he acceded to the man’s objection and renounced his wife. I would urge the Neelkanth to learn from lord Ram’s example and use his brain while making decisions. (226)

Something in Sati finally snaps at the insult to Shiva, and she invokes the trial herself rather than submit further: “The entire congregation was stunned into silence. But not Sati. Something inside her snapped. She had tolerated too many insults for too long... I invoke the right of Agnipariksha” (226–27), and goes on to defeat Tarak.

Tripathi extends this critique of social exclusion to the Naga people, born with physical deformities that Meluhan orthodoxy reads as punishment for the sins of a previous birth. Nandi explains to Shiva that the Nagas are “cursed people... born with hideous deformities because of the sins of their previous births... they have tremendous strength and skills. The Naga name alone strikes terror in any citizen’s heart. They are not even allowed in the Sapt Sindhu” (59) — even as the narrative later reveals individual Nagas capable of loyalty and courage that belie the fear attached to their name.

Faith, Flexibility and Social Stability

Tripathi also explores the philosophical balance between flexibility and stability that a healthy society requires. Individual flexibility allows a warrior’s son to become a businessman if his talent lies elsewhere, and a Pandit tells Shiva, “No child knows what the professions of his birth-parents are. He is independent to pursue what his natural talent inspires him to do” (209). Stability, meanwhile, gives individuals freedom from daily threat: “Stability allows a person the freedom of choice. People can pursue their dream only when they are living in a society where survival is not [a] daily threat” (209). Yet change imposed too quickly by others is experienced as threatening, “almost as much as the fear of death,” and “too rapid a change causes instability” (210) — a warning extended through the Vasudev’s account of a once-exceptional warrior who, disabled by disease and unable to accept his diminished status, becomes “frustrated about what he perceives as injustice” and a threat “to society as a whole” (210–11).

This same tension between individual will and social order underlies the novel’s treatment of faith. When Ayurvati first sees Shiva’s blue throat she falls at his feet, crying, “My Lord! You have come! The Neelkanth has come!” (23), and King Daksha later assures Shiva that as the Neelkanth he can override any law he wishes: “You can change the law if you wish. You can override it. If you decide to take my daughter’s hand, my lord, no power on earth can stop him” (277–78). Brahaspati, the Meluhan chief scientist, is troubled by this same blind devotion: “Our entire society is based on the rule of law and we are not meant to blindly follow anyone. We are expected to solve our problems ourselves and not hope for miracles from a solitary man. What has this man done to deserve such blind faith?” (196). Between Daksha’s uncritical devotion and Brahaspati’s scepticism, the novel stages a debate about the dangers as well as the comforts of religious faith in a society under threat.

Science, Ecology and Political Violence

Brahaspati, the chief inventor of the Meluhans and a Vasudev Pandit, represents the scientist’s ideal service to society, yet he is also the character most aware of the cost of Meluha’s prosperity. Somras, the elixir that grants immunity and long life, is manufactured at Mount Mandar using the waters of the Saraswati, and Brahaspati grows troubled by its effect on the dying river. He tells Parvateshwar simply that he will not accompany the party further: “Well, the new chemicals that I had ordered have arrived. I was considering going back with the consignment to Mount Mandar so that the experiments can begin as soon as possible. If we can get this right then the consumption of water for making the Somras will

reduce drastically” (240) — before disappearing in the explosion that follows, apparently at the hands of the Nagas.

Tripathi repeatedly stresses the importance of rivers to Indian civilisation. Devagiri sits on the bank of the Sindhu, considered the mother of the Indus Valley civilisation, and Brahaspati tells Shiva that India is known by the name of its seven great rivers, the Sapt Sindhu: “Villages, and later cities, grow on the banks of these rivers. Thus, our land of the seven rivers, Sapt-Sindhu, was born out of the destruction of the Sangamtamil” (184).

Terrorism is one of the novel’s most insistent contemporary concerns. Meluha’s Suryavanshi rulers face repeated attacks from the Chandravanshis and their Naga allies, and Shiva himself is attacked on at least three occasions — at the temple of Lord Brahma, on the road back from Mount Mandar, and while travelling in convoy, when Sati is seriously wounded. Jattaa warns Nandi of one such attack: “Avoid the road via Jratak giri. The[y] suffered a terrorist attack last night. All the Brahmins were killed and the village temple was destroyed. The terrorists escaped as usual before any back-up soldier arrived... When in Lord Agni's name will we fight back?” (36). Tripathi insists that the terrorists do not belong to any caste, religion, sect and area and their only purpose is to slay innocent people — a reminder, after the Koonj battle in which Sati is nearly killed by a Naga arrow, of the indiscriminate human cost of political violence.

This same anxiety about mass destruction runs through the novel’s account of modern weapons of war, which Tripathi frames as capable of destroying entire armies within a few hours regardless of numerical strength, so that every Chandravanshi family loses someone in the final battle — a concern that echoes present-day fears about nuclear weapons and other instruments of mass destruction. Shiva’s own certainty about who counts as “evil” does not survive this war: having assumed the Chandravanshis to be an evil people, he comes to recognise, once the fighting ends, that he had misjudged an unfamiliar way of life, and that the war was “the consequence of his wrong perception” — the result, ultimately, of bad political intentions rather than of any real moral distinction between the two peoples.

Tripathi extends this cultural relativism to the physical texture of Swadweepan life itself, which strikes Shiva’s Meluhan companions as alien even in its architecture: “The Swadweepans, unencumbered by the strict rules and building codes, created houses that were expressions of passion and elegance... Everything was painted bright — from orange buildings to parrot green ceilings to pink!” (373).

Conclusion

The Immortals of Meluha uses the architecture of Puranic myth to house a set of thoroughly contemporary anxieties. Through Sati’s confinement within the Vikarma law, the exile of the Naga and the disabled Purvaka, the drying of the Saraswati, and the corrosive effects of Somras and war, Tripathi builds a narrative in which legend becomes a vehicle for

social critique rather than an escape from it. The novel's idealisation of Ram Rajya, its portrait of a meritocratic caste order shadowed by rigid exclusion, and Shiva's own gradual disillusionment with easy categories of good and evil together suggest that Tripathi's central achievement is to make an ancient story do the work of examining a present injustice — continuing, in a distinctly popular register, the project that earlier Indian English novelists like R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao pursued through myths of their own.

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