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RETELLING OF MYTHS IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION

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Abstract

Twenty first century is witnessing a generational change in Indian fictional landscape. We have left our borrowed attire and want to learn and write more about our own cultural roots. The Indian literary market today is dominated by the novels dealing with the mythical past acquainting people with the mythological treasure of India. A very interesting thing about this era is that the profile of the writers has also significantly changed. Amish Tripathi is a celebrated contemporary author famous for his Shiva Trilogy. Tripathi comes from a non-literary background. He is an IIM Calcutta graduate who actually wanted to be a historian. This paper will explore Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy. It is the study of remarkable response received by Tripathi's works of fiction that are based on Indian mythology. He has used mythology and drawn parallels to the present. The varied interpretations given by him facilitate the readers to relate these stories to their day to day challenges of life. The paper focuses on examining how this version of ancient texts reinterpret the mythical past, and how the author utilizes myth creatively for coming to terms with the predicament of the present.

Keywords: Fiction, Mythology, Amish Tripathi, Shiva Trilogy, Contemporary

Introduction

Mythology has always fascinated writers. It has proved to be an inexhaustible mine of knowledge for researchers and a source of inspiration for writers from centuries. Myths have been an integral part of the human psyche. The writers across the world refer back to their conventional mythology to address contemporary issues by reinterpreting the past in the light of the present. According to M.H. Abrams "A myth is one story in a mythology – a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives."

Some of the greatest Postcolonial Indian English writers have made use of Indian myths and legends in their prose and fiction. Many literary works serve as excellent examples of the revitalization of myth. It is worthy to note that it is often myth that gives power and vitality to some of the greatest works of literature. Girish Karnad's Hayavadan, Yayati, Nagamandala, R.K

Narayan's *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* and Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* are some examples of writers who have explored emotional, metaphorical, historical and symbolical appeal of myths.

The trend of successful novels having mythological content started in 2003 with Ashok Banker's best selling eight- volume *Ramayana Series* that earned him international acclaim. The commercial success of Banker's novels indicated the interest of the people in the mythical past. Many writers followed the tradition initiated by Banker and today, the novels that are retellings of the Indian mythological stories top the charts. Krishna Udayshankar's *The Aryavarta Chronicles* relates mythological characters with human situations and sensibilities. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her *The Palace of Illusion* revisits the *Mahabhrata* from the perspective of Draupadi. Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast Queen* is an example of popular literature that weaves threads of sexuality and feminism in the narration of myths. Some of the famous authors who have gained a lot of fame for their works involving Indian myths come from non-literary background. Amish Tripathi is an IIM graduate; An entrepreneur by profession Ashwin Sanghi is an MBA from Yale School of Management whereas Devdutt Pattanaik is a doctor. Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* recreates Shiva, Sati, and other related mythological characters as humans, Ashwin Sanghi's *The Krishna Key* goes back and forth in time, from Krishna's life (from his birth to death) and to contemporary times, when a killer believes himself to be the Kalki avatar, and Devdutt Pattanaik's *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of Ramayana* explores *Ramayana* from Rama's abandoned queen's perspective. All these works are the excellent examples of the use of myths by these management geniuses to provide guidance in the fiercely competitive modern world.

This paper aims to explore Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* which comprise of three novels. Tripathi's well-structured novels reinterpret and modernise Indian myths that appeal to the modern Indian reader. The story has been made so realistic that the readers don't have to willingly suspend their disbelief. The scientific explanations provided by

author make it eminently believable. His heroes are quite above ordinary mortals but they are not supernatural beings. Tripathi talks about their heroic deeds which are not incompatible with science. The paper also shows that how awareness, education and exposure has led the contemporary readers and the writers to understand the profundity of Indian myths and legends and to seek their appeal in the present age. Indian English writers are reworking on the Indian mythological subject matter to make significant expressions that has now become an essential part of the contemporary Indian literature in English.

Amish Tripathi is a well-known Indian author who has achieved name and fame for his *Shiva Trilogy*. His *Shiva Trilogy* comprises of three novels *The Immortals of Meluha*, *The Secret of the Nagas* and *The Oath of the Vayuputras*. His first novel *The Immortals of Meluha* was published in February 2010, the second novel *The Secret of Nagas* appeared in August 2011 and the third novel *The Oath of Vayuputras* was published in February 2013. Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* was the fastest selling book series in Indian publishing history.

He is an IIM graduate and has worked for 14 years in the financial services industry, in companies such as Standard Chartered, DBS Bank and IDBI Federal Life Insurance, before starting his writing career. He originally wanted to be a historian but he chose a career in finance. His books are based on religious topics since he is a devoted worshiper of Lord Shiva.. Tripathi says that he gathered most of his knowledge of Hindu theology and religion from his parents and grandfather who was a Sanskrit scholar and a Pandit in Banaras. He believes that religiosity and liberalism go hand-in-hand.

His modern perspective is based on historical, linguistic, cultural study as well as imagination. His *Shiva Trilogy* is a mythical fantasy based on the reconstruction of several Indian legendary characters and stories drawn from *The Ramayan*, and *Shiv Purana*. He is more of a story teller than a writer who has blended mythology with fantasy and reinvented the Indian Myths. Tripathi humanizes his characters before deifying them. He recreates Shiva, Sati, and other related mythological characters as humans. Amish

Tripathi has selected the most charismatic of the Indian gods- Shiva as his protagonist. He has presented Shiva as a mortal human being of flesh and blood, who walked on this earth and rises himself up to the level of a god by his deeds. Shiva's search for the meaning of evil and his acceptance of being the destroyer of evil as Neelkanth, is the theme that runs throughout these three novels.

First novel of this series The Immortals of Meluha is set in 1900 BC. The novel introduces Shiva as a tribal leader of Guna tribe, who in order to save his tribe from blood thirsty Pakratids, accepts the invitation of Meluhan Captain Nandi and migrates with his tribe to Meluha – a near perfect empire of Suryavanshi kingdom ruled by Emperor Daksha. Here Shiva and his tribe are administered somras - a divine drink that expands the life span of Meluhans many times. By drinking somras Shiva's throat turns blue and excited Meluhans declared him 'Neelkanth'- their fabled saviour, who will destroy the evil and save Suryavanshi's. From here begins the journey of Shiva as a destroyer of evil.

Shiva then is taken to Devagiri – capital of Meluha where he meets Emperor Daksha and his daughter Sati, who is a vikarma – the carrier of bad fate. Shiva accepts his destiny as Neelkanth, dissolves the vikarma law and marries Sati.

He visits Mount Mandar to meet Suryavanshi scientist Brahaspati and learns about manufacturing of Somras and its benefits. Daksha also informs him about the crises that Suryavanshi rulers were facing. Their primary river, Saraswati, was slowly drying to extinction. They were also facing devastating terrorist attacks from the evil Chandravanshis who had joined forces with the Nagas, a cursed race with physical deformities. On their return to Devagiri they face Naga attack where in a battle Sati is injured badly and Nagas also destroyed Mount Mandar killing many inventors and leaving no sign of chief scientist Brahaspati. Enraged Shiva declares war on the evil Chandravanshis at Swadeep, a fierce battle is fought between Meluhans and Swadeepans in which Meluhan's prevail. After defeating Chandravanshis's Shiva learns from Swadeepan princess that they were just different, and being

different is not evil. Here in Ramjanm bhoomi temple of Ayodhya a Vasudev pandit challenges Shiva to find out what is evil. Vasudevs were the tribe left behind by seventh Vishnu, Lord Ram. The novel ends with Shiva noticing Sati being stalked by a Naga near a tree.

The second novel The Secret of the Nagas opens with the fight between Shiva and Naga. In the search of evil Shiva with Sati travels following Nagas. Their son Kartik is born and Shiva and Sati meet Naga princess Kali and Lord of the Naga people Ganesh. Kali turns out to be Sati's sister and Ganesh her son. They both were abandoned by her father Daksha because they were born Nagas. Surprised Sati and Shiva travel with Kali and Ganesh to Naga capital Panchvati, to know their secret. Kali, the Naga queen, guides them but while they are on their way, they are attacked. They believe Daksha to be behind this attack. However, thereafter they discover that Bhrigu was the mastermind behind this attack, as he did not want Shiva to discover Somras as evil. They are able to escape this attack and reach Naga capital. The book ends with a great surprise for Shiva as, he finds Brahaspati, alive and teaching in a classroom.

The third novel The Oath of the Vayuputras opens with the meeting of Shiva and Brahaspati. Shiva comes to know about the ill effects of Somras. Brahaspati explains that Somras production consumes large amount of water from Saraswati resulting into its depletion. He reveals that the waste generated in the process of making Somras resulted into the spread of disastrous plague. Also, the birth of Naga babies was due to Somras because the continuous use of Somras by parents resulted in the multiplication of cells at a very high rate in the babies which lead to their deformation.

Shiva then travels to the hidden city of Ujjain and meets Chief Vasudev Gopal, who tells Shiva about Vayuputras – an ancient tribe left by the previous Mahadev. Shiva meets them and finds that since his childhood he was trained by his uncle Manobhu to rise as Neelkanth - the destroyer of evil when the "evil" arises. . Shiva here concludes that the Somras was the greatest evil of the age. Shiva declares somras as the greatest evil of their age and decides to stop the usage of Somras. He declares a holy war against Meluha as it was the

centre of manufacturing the Somras. Meanwhile Daksha conspires against Shiva and frames a peace treaty to entrap him but in Shiva's absence Sati with Nandi goes to attend peace treaty and discovers the truth. She fights the assassins valiantly, but is killed at the end. Enraged by this incident, Shiva decides to use the Pashupati astrato finish Devagiri – the capital of Meluha that also has Somras manufacturing units hidden beneath the city. Shiva ends Devagiri with its Somras manufacturing units.

In the epilogue, Shiva retires to Mount Kailash where Nandi becomes his favourite, as he fought bravely to save Sati. Ganesh, Kali and Kartik become renowned Gods for their chivalry and prowess, all over India. Bhrgu continues teaching and collates his knowledge in a book named Bhrgu Samhita. Sati's death is not forgotten and she is later renowned as Goddess Shakti, and her ashes are spread throughout India at fifty one places later known as Shaktipeethas.

Siva Trilogy chronicles the journey of Shiva from Man to Mahadev. It focuses upon the idea that when a man fights for good, he becomes Mahadev. Tripathi's Shiva is a tribal leader with heroic qualities. He is a fierce warrior as well as a trained dancer, who listens to his conscious and accepts his fate as a destroyer of evil. Tripathi also portrays Sati and other important characters as brave warriors. His Sati is a warrior princess who leads a life of untouchable, until Shiva marries her. Amish portrays Kali and Ganesha as Nagas, who were born with deformed bodies. Kali's extra pair of hands and Ganesha's face that resembled to an elephant were due to regular consumption of Somras by their parents. The search for the meaning of evil is the theme that consistently runs through these three novels. Shiva is first led to believe that the Chandravanshis and Nagas are

evil. But he discovers that they are not so. Through the course of action of the novels he discovers that good and evil are sides of the same coin. Evil is not a person but a situation. The story tries to rationalize the magical element of the Shiva myth.

Amish Tripathi has become eminent for his fascinating blend of myth and history, narrative style and magnificent treatment of sublime subjects. According to Shashi Tharoor, "Amish is a fresh new voice in Indian writing-steeped in myth and history, with a fine eye for detail and a compelling narrative style."

His novels are written in easy to understand everyday language, which is at once understood by the reader. Tripathi uses day to day terms for his writings that makes the nonliterary kind of audience bond with his works.

As long as authors like Amish Tripathi interpret myths in modern and innovative ways, mythological prose and fiction will keep on intriguing us and igniting our imagination. Myths and legends presented in such a way will always cast their spells on readers and compel them to read more. Thus, the allurements for interesting literature on Indian myths and legends shall continue.

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