

Rewriting Orthodoxy: Caste, Gender, and Religious Power in Amish Tripathi's *The Immortals of Meluha*

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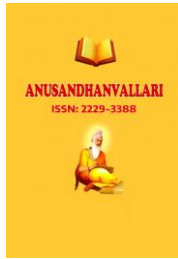
Abstract: Amish Tripathi's first novel of *Siva Trilogy*, *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010), is a contemporary mythological narrative that retells the story of Lord Shiva by portraying him not simply as a godlike figure but also as a normal human being whose behaviours and ethical actions gradually alters him into the legendary lord, Mahadev. The selected novel blends with mythology, history, fantasy, Indian culture, politics and social commentary. The presented paper explores *The Immortals of Meluha* through the conceptual framework of cultural evils, with specific focus on caste and gender discrimination, religious orthodoxy, social discrimination, patriarchal authority and political exploitation. The study focuses on Amish Tripathi's representation of the society Meluha is preciously paradoxical. At first, Meluha is portrayed as a unique perfect and orderly society well-known according to the principles of Lord Ram. The novel also cross-examines gender inequality. The female major character, Sati is a warrior and a capable individual, yet her identity is suppressed by patriarchal and religious laws. Through this character, the author proves the contradiction between women's actual abilities and the restrictions forced upon them in the name of culture. Further, the novel demands religious orthodoxy by explaining that laws recognized to Lord Ram can be challenged when they become unjust. Applying qualitative textual analysis and close reading, this present study examines selected chapters, characters and dialogues from the prescribed novel. It upholds that Amish mythological reconstruction is not simply an attempt to modernize ancient mythology, it also utilities as a critique of social injustice. The study concludes that *The Immortals of Meluha* was mythology to question inherited social conventions and clarifies a culture based on merit, equality, rationality, compassion and individual dignity.

Keywords: Cultural Evils, Caste, Gender, Religious Orthodoxy, Social Discrimination, Patriarchy, Mythology

Introduction:

In the recent past, Indian English fiction has revisited the realm of mythology, revisiting its role in discussions of contemporary socio-political and cultural issues. Rather than simply reproducing the myths, the contemporary writers are seeking meanings in the mythological figures and stories in light of the present day realities. Amish Tripathi is no exception to this pattern. Able to be classified in this genre of literature, his *Shiva Trilogy* is a case in point. The trilogy is composed of *The Immortals of Meluha*, *The Secret of the Nagas* and *The Oath of the Vayuputras* that put Shiva, the God of destruction, in the new light through the combination of mythology and historical fiction.

Instead of beginning as a deity, Shiva attains godhood through choosing, discipline, and compassion, serving as a metaphor for human capability, which is a foundation of Karma and Dharma. Shiva's transformation in character from the Tibetan tribal chief to the great Mahadev represents the moral path where moral consciousness is preferred to divine authority. By eliminating the gap between god and worshipper in his depiction of Shiva, Tripathi demonstrates the democratization of the divine. This gives readers an opportunity to see spirituality as the individual experience rather than preconditioned knowledge perceived from the beginning



of one's lifelong journey. The paradigm reflects India's rich philosophy of contextual ethics expressed in the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, where the divine revelation occurs through self-knowledge (Chakraborty 59; Raj 107).

Likewise, the Mythology's treatment of myth as an active cultural dialogue is remarkable too. Tripathi creates a detailed universe where cultures like Suryavanshis, Chandravanshis and Nagas exist, and embody different moral and philosophical systems. While the Meluhas are obsessed with order, the Swadweepans are spontaneous. This initiates an ideological conflict, providing a reflection of the problem of duty versus freedom in Indian civilization. Shiva's voyage across the region leaves Tripathi to create a moral debate among conflicting ideas of truth. Thus the trilogy converts the mythic world into a representation of pluralism that corresponds to the idea of unity in diversity in Indian culture. Generally speaking, Meluha and Swadweep reflect Indian history based on the reversal of discipline and dissent as well as tradition and innovation (Sarkar 72).

The description of the city gates and the kingdom of Meluha was quite a revelation for today's readers. Myths refer to the stories that illustrate the culture, customs, and lifestyle of ancient people, and the gods worshipped by them. India is famous for its cultural heritage. Indian mythology is composed of some stories that have religious and moral values and that have been passed from generation to generation. *The Immortals of Meluha*, published in 2010, is the first book in the trilogy. It offers a vision of Shiva as a tribal chief from Tibet who journeys to Meluha and gradually gets to know as Neelkanth. The author describes the trilogy's style as an interpretation of Indian mythology, which combines the aspects of reality and historical imagination. The first part of the book shows Shiva as an ordinary man, whose deeds made him godly.

The book is set around 1900 BCE, where Meluha is constructed as a seemingly perfect empire created by Lord Ram. The Suryavanshi rulers have created a very systematic society. The kingdom is equipped with culture, medical treatment, military structure and social structure. Its people are supposed to follow an elaborate code of conduct. On the surface level, Meluha seems like an ideal society. However, the perfection of Meluha slowly begins to unravel due to the contradictions it faces. An ideal society that prides itself on being a meritocratic one creates a system that ostracizes people who are considered unfortunate and unclean. A society that embraces justice tolerates the discrimination of Vikarmas. A culture that honours Satis as great warriors imposes restrictions on them. A civilization that boasts about its moral superiority considers Nagas to be evil and impure. This study will address the contradictions as cultural evils.

In this paper, the phrase "cultural evil" doesn't imply that a certain culture, religion, or community is evil by nature. Instead, it is about the social practices and traditions that are perceived as absolute and thus become harmful to people. Cultural practices can preserve identities and social coherence, but they can also be used to maintain social inequality because they may be built on fear, prejudice, discrimination or hierarchy.

This distinction is especially important in *The Immortals of Meluha* because Tripathi isn't criticizing Indian culture or its mythology. Instead, the author is very familiar with Indian philosophy and mythology, and he criticizes the misuse and misinterpretation of cultural values.

Aspects related to caste and social stratification in the novel is equally complicated. According to Meluha, one's position in society depends on one's accomplishments. Parvateshwar says the following: "Only your karma is important. Not your birth. Not your sex" (Tripathi, 2010, p. 59). The novel also reveals how disability is constructed culturally. Individuals suffering from physical ailments or having deformities are perceived as the carriers of evil fate. It is especially evident in the case of the blind man whom Shiva meets. Another key element of concern here is gender. Sati is a very powerful female character in the novel. She is brave, physically strong, and clever enough to fight on par with male warriors. However, she is socially stigmatized for an incident that she had no influence upon she bore a dead baby and lost her husband.

The fact that Sati is a Vikarma has a bearing on her marriage and social life. The irony lies in the fact that while a woman with special abilities is socially polluted. Thus, Sati's position shows the connection between gender and cultural oppression. While women can be honoured as warriors, they can be controlled under patriarchy as well.

One of the most prominent theses of the study is that *The Immortals of Meluha* employs mythological fiction to question the cultural practices of degrading the humanity of individuals. The most prominent ethical message of the novel is that people should not be treated according to their social background but according to their deeds, their characters, and their good intentions.

Being a blend of gender, politics, and philosophy, the mythological fiction of Tripathi mirrors the complexity of Indian culture, which is a union of contradictions mediated by the process of dialogue. The author's narrative technique is straightforward and profound, cinematic and contemplative, connecting classical epics to the literature of the contemporary times. The language, though being contemporary, is filled with echoes of oral tradition, and every single conversation is reminiscent of philosophical dialogues in the *Mahabharata*. (Banerjee 39; Nayar 85).

Objectives of the Study

The primary goals of the research are:

1. To analyze how cultural evils are represented in *The Immortals of Meluha* written by Amish Tripathi.
2. To analyze how caste system and social stratification is depicted in Meluhan community.
3. To study gender discrimination and male dominance through the character of Sati.
4. To evaluate the role of religious fundamentalism and unquestionable acceptance of traditions and beliefs.
5. To evaluate the metamorphosis of Shiva as a moral response to injustice in society. To study the use of myths to raise issues regarding equity in contemporary times.
6. To analyze the relevance of modern-day issues raised by the novel regarding cultural discrimination.

Scope and Methodology

Scope of the Research

The research is largely geared towards *The Immortals of Meluha* with a concentration on cultural practices and beliefs of the fictional society of Meluha. The main aspects to be studied are:

- Caste system and social order
- Gender discrimination
- Patriarchy
- Religious orthodox approaches
- Cultural practices
- Mythology
- Respect for humanity and fairness in society

Research Methodology:

The research utilizes qualitative methods, with the main approach being textual analysis and close reading. The main source of research is the book *The Immortals of Meluha* by Amish Tripathi, while at the same time;

secondary sources include various themes in literature, caste, gender, social inequality, and the concept of power in literature and contemporary Indian literature. The research adopts the following methods:

1. Close textual analysis to focus on critical dialogues and descriptions.
2. Character exploration to include Shiva, Sati, Parvateshwar, Daksha, Brahaspati, Nandi, and the Vikarma characters.
3. Cultural study which revolves around the study of society and its customs.
4. Gender study to analyze how women are portrayed and how patriarchal systems function.

Thus, this study concentrates on literature and analysis simultaneously.

Literature Review:

In recent times, the criticism of Amish Tripathi has increasingly focused on the social and philosophical aspects of his mythological writings. In his paper, entitled “Modern Interpretation of Ancient Myths in Amish Tripathi’s Immortals of Meluha,” Ganta Nikhil Kumar considers mythology, caste, feminism, education, social structure, architecture, war and other themes to be crucial aspects of the book. Kumar highlights the ability of Tripathi to successfully combine ancient legends with modern interpretations and contemporary themes. This point is significant because it means that the book shouldn’t be perceived as pure fantasy.

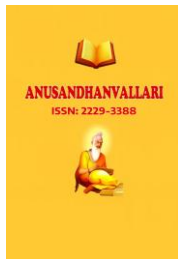
Its mythological plot enables Tripathi to talk about social institutions and modern ideas. Studies in the area of gender in Tripathi’s texts emphasize the idea of the strong female characters as Sati. In the book, conservative views concerning the weakness of women are challenged by the fact that Sati is portrayed as a warrior who is brave and physically strong. This paper is based on these arguments but creates a synthesis of them through the idea of cultural evil. Instead of considering caste, gender, disability, religion and exclusion as separate themes, the paper argues that they are manifestations of cultural rigidity.

Result and Discussion:

When readers encounter Meluha in the story, it may appear to be a perfect civilization where self-regulation prevails among the people. The term ‘utopia’ is thus used ironically. One of the main elements reflected in the novel is caste system. Meluha claims that this society is based on merit. In one of his speeches, Parvateshwar points out that “Only karma matters, not birth and not sex” (Tripathi, 2010, p. 59). The idea stated in this quote is indicative of the idealistic concept of Meluha. Nevertheless, the novel successfully contradicts this concept by the introduction of tribes, professional groups, and classifications.

The caste system adopted in Meluha seems to be illustrated as functional. People are raised according to their skills and social obligations. At first glance, this approach looks more advanced than the traditional caste system. However, it becomes problematic in this respect. Although *Shiva Trilogy* criticizes caste systems, it also makes a major contribution in addressing the issue of social transformation. The narrative favors the process of social reform as the protagonist seeks to change the wrong ideas of Meluha such as creating Somras and stigmatizing Vikarmas.

Sati is the most powerful woman character in the book. She is both strong and brave and has the ability to fight. She has completely rejected the image of the weak princess. However, despite her ability to fight for her country, she does not have many rights in her private life. While Sati can protect society, she cannot decide on her own future. She might be able to take an active role in the life of her country, but her personal life is subject to societal laws. This shows that society sometimes uses women’s abilities to its advantage and restricts them when women begin to fight for their rights. Sati’s statement reflects the impact of such a system upon women: “I am a Suryavanshi. Rules are all that I live by” (Tripathi 123). Sati’s identity is based on obedience. The culture has taught Sati to be more concerned about her duties than about her happiness.



The meritocratic principle that is discussed in the novel also presents an interesting gender statement. Parvateshwar argues that in Meluha, merit is rated above lineage or gender and, therefore, women should have access to all opportunities open to men. The example of Sati's military talents confirms this principle. However, the Vikarma system negates gender equality, and a woman can be held liable for the events beyond her control. This seems to be a serious cultural sin as it turns biological destiny into social punishment.

Thus, Tripathi shows the contradiction between meritocratic ideology and patriarchal social practice. Sati's widowhood intensifies her marginalization. Widowhood is not depicted as a mere personal tragedy, as it becomes a social identity. The novel shows how women can be doubly marginalized. First, they go through personal sorrow. Second, the society adds cultural punishment to personal sorrow. Therefore, people lose their dignity. Thus, Shiva's response is important because he separates suffering from moral evaluation. His love for Sati does not originate from pity. He perceives Sati as an equal.

Religion is an indispensable aspect of Meluhan lives. The rules being followed in society are based on the teachings which are believed to belong to Lord Ram. This gives the political system the legitimacy of morality. Since a rule is treated as holy, challenging it is uneasy. This is where the danger of the religious dogma comes into play. The issue lies not in the faith in god but in the usage of religious power against the ethical interrogation.

Therefore, Shiva frequently questions if a law is fair. The fact that Shiva questions the laws of Lord Ram shows that respect for the customs does not mean blind obedience. Brahaspati tells him that it is absolutely acceptable to question the laws of Lord Ram. This is one of the most important themes of the book. Religion should provide guidance in ethical behavior but should not hinder ethical thinking. The book hints at the conflict between tradition and rational thinking. The Meluhans put faith in their believed system due to the fact that it has survived for many years. The thought can be simplified into: Because it has been there for so long, it must be true.

Numerous cultural traditions endure due to the fear of insulting them. According to Tripathi, real respect for customs might mean a need for some changes. If a culture is unable to change, it will turn into a tyranny. The author realizes the significance of being adaptable.

Another important theme of the novel is cultural conformity. Meluhans are expected to abide by certain traditions and norms of behaviour. People need to understand that if they rebel against the order, they might receive a harsh reaction from the society. Sati is a typical example of the conformity. On one hand, she realizes her pain but on the other hand, she conforms to the customs because she thinks that the Meluhan system has its reasons.

The transformation of Shiva into Neelkanth is at the same time a conversion to an ethical leader. This kind of leadership is not authoritarian. Shiva refuses to be an exception. He wants equality to prevail. The novel mentions his wish: "I want the entire Vikarma law to be abolished" (Tripathi 2010, p. 279). He also refuses to accept the notion that bad luck means punishment for sin: "Everybody can be unfortunate" (Tripathi 2010, p. 279). All this contributes to forming of Shiva's ethical stance. One of the major philosophical issues of the novel is what evil means. At first sight, this notion seems rather simple. Chandravanshis and Nagas seem to be enemies. Meluha looks benevolent. It is assumed that Shiva will deal with evil. However, as the story continues, the picture changes and gets complicated. The reader finally realizes that a perfect society may have injustice in it.

One of the greatest accomplishments of this novel is its ability to show a certain type of evil that is often hidden from people's sight. One of the most remarkable aspects of this novel is that it shows how victims fall into the trap of the cultural system. This system receives its power proportionate to its followers' acceptance of its

ideology. Thus, it can be said that social reform requires more than just law changes. This analysis brings out many conclusions.

The novel *The Immortals of Meluha*, shows that cultural evil does not equal to the immorality of an individual. It can be institutionalized through the operation of laws and traditions. The Meluhan government claims that discrimination guarantees stability. And the novel does not agree with this idea. The novel suggests that social stability can be morally incomplete. Even though Meluha claims that it is meritocratic country, people's conditions are determined by the social system. Thus, discrimination can exist even if there are no explicit laws guaranteeing it. The treatment of Sati makes one realize that unjust treatment of women is not just a personal view of some people. The novel nevertheless exhibits that ethical reasoning must remain possible within religious traditions. Shiva's leadership establishes that political power can be used to challenge injustice rather than preserve privilege.

Findings:

The main results of the research are:

1. In *The Immortals of Meluha*, the customs possess duality as both identity providers and oppression techniques.
2. Sati demonstrates how women's and men's economic standing and religion cross each other.
3. The Nagas reflect the social construction of the cultural "Other".
4. Although Meluha claims to be a meritocratic society, it features distinct social systems.
5. Religious authority may be misused to justify wrongful actions.
6. The ages of a tradition do not justify its ethics.
7. Shiva symbolizes moral leadership based on inquiry, empathy, and justice.
8. Cultural identity must be in accord with human dignity.
9. Mythological prose can be a means of social critique.
10. The novel's critique is significant in contemporary issues related to caste, gender, disabilities, and exclusion.

Limitations of the Study:

This article has its share of weaknesses. To begin with, it is limited to the analysis of only one book instead of the entire *Shiva Trilogy*. Additionally, it shows more qualitative interpretation of texts rather than any empirical social research. Furthermore, the term 'cultural evil' is picked up to use it as an interpretative framework, not an established term. Also, Meluha is a fictional community, so it cannot be seen as a historically accurate representation of Ancient India. Moreover, the focus is mainly on caste, gender, disability, religion, and social discrimination within the text, while other themes which relate to the environmental issue, fighting, medicine, and political economy are mentioned only if they support the main argument of this article.

Research Gap:

Further areas are required for investigation. The notion of cultural evil may be applied to modern-day Indian mythological fiction in a better way in the future. It may also be interesting to investigate how cultural discrimination develops in *The Immortals of Meluha*, *The Secret of the Nagas* and *The Oath of the Vayuputras*. One can also compare the character of Sati with female characters of other modern mythological novels. The representations of the role of religion by Tripathi that should be interpreted as a shifting ethical code instead of a stable system can also be considered. Moreover, the tension between caste-based identity and meritocracy should be examined. Shiva's leadership can be viewed through the prism of the theories of ethical leadership and political legitimacy. Last but not least, the influence of popular mythological fiction on the attitudes of modern

readers towards caste, gender and religion should be studied, making use of various modern film or digital adaptations to determine whether the social criticism of the original work is preserved or altered.

Conclusion:

Amish Tripathi's *The Immortals of Meluha* is not just a mythological tale about the metamorphosis of Shiva into Mahadev. The story revolves around the theme of the transformation of Shiva into Lord Shiva and poses as an adventure novel. However, it is more about the criticism of the social institutions, culture, and power structure. The depiction of Meluha is purposely paradoxical. It is a society that seems ideal since it is orderly, disciplined, and technologically advanced. Thus, Tripathi has shown cultural oppression on two levels: institutional and psychological. He is known for altering the idea of good and evil and portraying culture as evil.

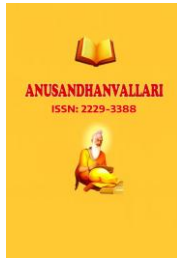
Even though *The Immortals of Meluha* doesn't disregard tradition, it promotes an ethical rethinking of it. This may be the most important finding of the study. Values are supposed to be maintained by culture, not stereotypes. Religion should not stifle the thirst for righteous judgment. Traditions should serve the purpose of continuity rather than legitimization for discrimination. Leadership should defend the weak, but not preserve the privileges. Stability of the society should be assured with justice. The usage of mythology in the novel is important as it enables the author to state his message in the voice of one of the most famous figures of the Indian cultural consciousness. Tripathi's Shiva is transformed into an icon of ethics.

The primary message of the piece is a humanistic one: a society can only be claimed to be truly great when it acknowledges its flaws and is ready to address them. *The Immortals of Meluha* examines the designated imperfections of people who seem to be living in an ideal world through such issues as caste, gender, disability, religious sterilization, and social exclusion. It shows readers that tradition should be in line with a need for ethical reflection. The importance of the book is not restricted to the time of its action. Today people still face the issues of caste racism, gender inequality, disability discrimination, religious intolerance, and social exclusion. Even though the forms of the problems can be different, the essence is the same: people still dislike human beings because of their ethnicity.

In this regard, Tripathi's mythological fiction transforms itself into a modern-day social text. Thus, the transition from Shiva to Mahadev can be understood not only as a paranormal metamorphosis, but as a moral change from accepting values to raising critical questions, from following customs to thinking ethically, from hierarchy to equality, and from adhering to cultural identities to being socially responsible. Thus, the book concludes by suggesting that real destruction of evil takes place, when human beings refuse to accept injustice, which is disguised as tradition. Nevertheless, some people perceive this new approach as a necessary evolution providing traditional notions with relevancy today. In the age of globalization and mix of cultures with complicated ethics, rigid moral systems would not work anymore.

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