

Rewriting Morality: Myth and Ethical Reconstruction in Amish Tripathi's *The Secret of the Nagas*

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Abstract: Amish Tripathi's *The Secret of the Nagas* (2011), the second book in the *Shiva Trilogy*, reinterprets Indian mythology into a modern narrative structure characterized by a combination of mythology, history, philosophy, adventure and criticism of society. Tripathi complicates the usual opposition between good and immoral by examining morality through the prism of karma, look, bias in society, disabilities, gender, religion and personal responsibility. While the Nagas are first represented as mysterious and dangerous, they finally become victims of social exclusion and misinterpretation. Shiva's journey from revenge to understanding makes one rethink the validity of the conventional definitions of good and bad. The novel transforms the idea of Shiva into that of a person whose divinity is not simply a result of miracles. The paper will analyze the representation of myth in the novel, karma ethics and politics of othering, social discrimination, gender, truth, and transformation of the protagonist.

Keywords: Mythology, Karma, Naga identity, Discrimination, Disability, Gender

Introduction

Indian mythology has been a significant and inspiring source for modern Indian writers. Writers of today regularly reinterpret characters and events from mythology, fitting them into the mold of modern philosophy, society, and politics. Amish Tripathi has played an important role in this evolution. His *Shiva Trilogy*, comprising three books, presents Lord Shiva as a regular person who eventually becomes immortal because of the choices he makes and the changes he undergoes morally. *The Secret of the Nagas* is the second book of the *Shiva Trilogy* released in 2011. The 2022 edition published by Harper Collins identifies it as "Book 2 of the Shiva Trilogy". The story starts where the previous book ends. Shiva is in search of the Naga warrior whom he believes is responsible for his friend Brahaspati's killing and the attack on Sati.

The primary focus of the book is thus more than just the literal pursuit of an enemy; it also represents a quest for truth. One of the key questions in the book is: who decides what good and bad are? The author shows how certain groups of society stigmatize others with labels such as "evil" based on physical looks, traditions, ancestry, or political affiliation. At the beginning of the story, the Nagas are seen as monsters, but further on in the plot, we learn the causes behind this approach. In this way, Tripathi promotes mythology to underscore social issues of today. The very content of the novel points at its philosophical nature. The chapters "What is Your Karma?" and "The Maika Mystery," and "The Secret of All Secrets" clearly state philosophical matters are connected to the story.

2. Objectives of the Study

The present study has the following objectives:

1. To explore the representation of Indian mythology in *The Secret of the Nagas*.
2. To analyse the ideas of good and bad depicted in the novel.

3. To explore the concept of karma.
4. To study how the Nagas are represented as an “other” community.
5. To explore the link between physical difference and social discrimination.
6. To examine gender representation and female agency in the novel.
7. To analyse the relationship between truth, perception and social beliefs.
8. To explore the transformation of Shiva from a warrior to an academic leader.
9. To examine the relevance of mythology in contemporary times.
10. To illustrate that mythological fiction could deal with matters of social justice.

3. Methodology

The research employs a method of qualitative textual analysis. The main text is *The Secret of the Nagas* by Amish Tripathi, specifically referring to the Harper Collins India edition published in 2022.

- The analysis is based on the principles of mythology, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, and othering theories.
- The analysis aims to explore many topics, including but not severely limited to depictions of the Nagas, prejudice in society, disability, gender, morality, and the concept of karma.
- The study also investigates the transformation of classical myth into modern literary works. Tripathi does not simply copy the stories from the past, but he builds up a fictional world where mythological characters experience very much humanized emotions, political quarrels, and dilemmas that differ from each other in visual and ethical aspects.

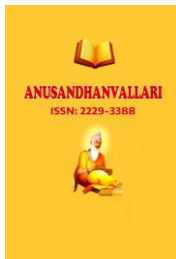
4. Mythology and Modern Reinterpretation

The Secret of the Nagas can be said to stand out among many other novels since it brings about a different interpretation of Indian mythological stories. The author takes the well-known mythological characters and shifts them into some other interpretive historical context. Of great importance is the way the author introduces Shiva. According to the author, Shiva can be seen as a warrior, lover, dancer, leader, and evil destroyer simultaneously at the initial stage. This shows that the author adopts a unique way of presenting Shiva as a complex being rather than a distant mythical god. Thus, the book can be referred to the category of mythopoeic literature which aims to reshape the traditional myths, giving answers to topical questions.

Initially, Tripathi's Shiva is propelled forward with personal emotions. Anger and vengeance are the twin motivations behind the hero's travels that soon evolve into philosophical explorations of morality and justice. Therefore, the divine persona is realized through the performance of moral deeds. Tripathi uses the mythological framework in his novel to challenge stereotypes. Initially, the readers participate in Shiva's negative perception of the Nagas. However, by the end of the story, the audience learns that what seems to be a monstrous race actually has its own history and culture. This change in perspective is fundamental for the novel's artistic style.

5. Moral and Immoral

Good vs Bad form the philosophical foundation of the novel. Nevertheless, Tripathi complicates the binary notion of good and evil. “My Lord, they are pure evil.” (*The Secret of the Nagas*, p. 14). At the beginning of the novel, characters speak about Nagas like their immoral nature is self-evident. For example, one character declares: This declaration has important implications as it demonstrates the ease with which one social group can be labelled as immoral without having sufficient information about its history and circumstances. The word “pure” carries a lot of significance as it implies the absolute moral judgment. However, the author gradually starts dismantling this assumption. Not only do Nagas represent immoral. Their differences in appearance and social marginalization play a role in their being excluded from society.



By focusing on their humanity, Tripathi prompts the reader to challenge their preconceived ideas about what is moral and immoral. The philosophical argument is strengthened with the statement: "There is a good in every single one of us. And there is evil in every single one of us." Now, the notion of good vs bad is shifted from the external communities to the individual person. Good and bad do not belong to communities; they reside in every particular individual. This makes a significant contribution to the overall philosophy of the book.

6. Karma as a Defining Philosophy

Karma happens to be one of the fundamental philosophical notions presented in *The Secret of the Nagas*. The question, "What is Your Karma?", gives evidence of the significance of this notion. In the 2022 edition by Harper Collins, the chapter can be found in the beginning of the book. Tripathi discusses karma in the perspective of moral accountability and not just as a religion-based idea. There is an extremely valuable excerpt which explains that an individual should deal with evil arguments even if others remain indifferent. "It is your karma to fight evil." (*The Secret of the Nagas*, p. 302). Tasks, related to morality, cannot be simply delegated to the whole society because an individual alone has certain moral "missions" to accomplish.

The idea conveyed in the above-mentioned paragraph allows us to view the doctrine of karma as an active moral concept rather than a philosophical one. This aspect plays a key role in understanding the process of transformation undergone by Shiva. He will not be able to shift the responsibility onto others anymore. This extract is especially significant for the modern world. When we observe crimes, discrimination, or violence, people intend to blame others and shift the responsibility. The novel further states: "You don't live with the consequences of other people's karma. You live with the consequences of your own." (*The Secret of the Nagas*, p. 302).

7. The Interplay of Appearance and Identity, as Well as the Politics of "Othering"

The way the Nagas are depicted seems to be the most important social aspect represented in the novel. The term "Naga" has a negative association to begin with. It is perceived as something horrible, ugly and dangerous. However, Tripathi describes the social dynamics leading to this identity formation. One of the most significant moments is when Athithigva provides his audience with an insight into the ethics of Lord Rudra: "Lord Rudra said judge a person by his karma, not his appearance." (*The Secret of the Nagas*, p. 181). This statement confronts the idea of judging others based on their appearance. The central ethical notion introduced by the writer is the difference between "appearance" and "karma." Appearance refers to the outside view while karma stands for actions taken. Therefore, the novel focuses not only on the critique of judging others superficially.

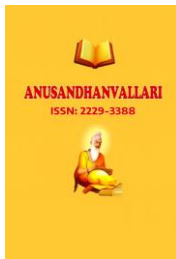
8. Disability and Social Stigmatization

The Nagas' importance stems from the fact that the majority of them possess some physical features that set them apart from the community around them. This difference has turned into a social stigma. Maya's speech is remarkable; for her, the notion of "being misunderstood" is significant. Tripathi does not view physical differences as negative by definition. He emphasizes the social dimension of the difference. Maya's identity reveals the brutality of a society that transforms a physical difference into a tool of exclusion. "Who is more misunderstood today than a person with a deformity?" (*The Secret of the Nagas*, p. 182). Therefore, the novel foresees the approach of the contemporary disability studies. It regards disability not purely as a physical phenomenon but as a result of social perception. The Naga community thus acts as a symbol for all communities that are labeled as abnormal by mainstream society. The novel goes beyond myth. Enters the realm of social criticism.

9. The Naga as the "Other"

Seen through the theoretical lens of post-colonialism and cultural studies the idea of the "Other" fits the Nagas. The Naga community is set against the Meluhan civilization. The Other is created as follows:

- ✓ a monster versus a person



- ✓ an abnormal versus a normal person
- ✓ a stranger versus a local
- ✓ an impure versus a pure person
- ✓ an enemy versus a nation

But as the story continues the author begins to change these definitions. At first the reader sees the Naga identity through the eyes of the Meluhan people. The reader then learns about the Naga from, inside the Naga world which is why the chosen narrative style pushes the reader to rethink old ideas. In the end the story shows that sometimes it is the labels that create the "Other" and not built-in moral differences.

10. Female Agency

I find Sati to be an important figure in the story. Sati is not the spouse of Shiva but a person who joins the investigation and contests common opinions in society. Through Sati's actions Sati reveals bravery and independence. Sati's questioning of the relationship between mainstream society and Nagas shows Sati's ability to question established views. Thus the novel makes it possible for female characters to be involved in social and intellectual disputes. The character of Sati complicates the depiction of women in mythology. Sati is a wife, mother, warrior and a person of morals at the time.

11. Gender and Patriarchal Structures

I notice that the book talks a lot about gender. The book focuses primarily on the story of Shiva. It also deals with gender aspects. Women characters are often situated in settings dominated by monarchs, family and religion. Women's position is not entirely passive. Sati's bravery, the presence of Kali, with the depiction of Naga women prove that women have different levels of power and vulnerability. Thus Tripathi's imaginary world allows the reader to think about how institutions influence women's decisions.

12. The theme of ambiguity in character

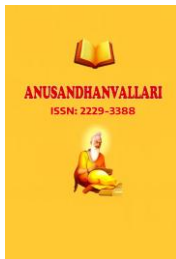
I see that the novel shows humans are not only good or bad. The saying, "There is both good in everyone and bad in everyone" pushes back against ideas of right and wrong. This idea is clear from the start when characters that look like enemies appear. The book asks readers to look at motives, not deeds. A person can. Still not be evil. Conversely a person seen as good may act in ways that raise doubts. This makes the story feel deeper.

13. Nationalism and Cultural Identity

I also notice that the novel paints a map of places and cultures. Shiva walks through communities and political systems. The publisher says the story is about a trek through India to learn the truth about the Nagas. This travel lets the author show an India full of many cultures and political identities. The novel then joins talks about what India means. However the India in the book is not shown as one culture. Many communities keep their traditions, histories and beliefs. So India in the novel is a picture. A close look at the words shows that these varied cultures are more, than background; they help build meaning.

14. The function of mythology in *The Secret of the Nagas*

Amish Tripathi looks at myths through the eyes of the people colonized from whom he infers collateral meanings and a value system apart from those in existence due to the advent of colonialism. He establishes the factor of colonization in the utilization of myths by the colonized people as a weapon of resistance to colonial cruelty and of restoration of their cultural identity and self-esteem. The author embarks on a study of what we call hybridity in myths and the difficulties of cultural practices brought out by colonialism. His works pay attention to an amalgamation of the indigenous and the colonial aspects of religions in the myths of post-colonialism.



Tripathi discusses how vital it is to look at myths from the eyes of underprivileged classes to postulate them. He sheds light on the utilization of mythological writing as being central to cultural identity reclamation; cultural decolonization; preserving cultural links; and elaboration of new identities while adapting to life abroad. Shiva Trilogy explains how various postcolonial authors interpret myths so as to revolutionize the colonial narrative. Historical notion of myth emphasizes that language, power, and culture are intertwined fields of study in postcolonial analysis of myths. The combination of postcolonial studies and feminist/queer theories calls attention to aspects of gender and sexuality in colonial and postcolonial literature.

The Secret of the Nagas brings about connections between ancient myth and modern-day social issues. There are multiple layers of interpretation of the Nagas:

- ✓ as mythical characters
- ✓ as parts of an invented ethnic group
- ✓ as victims of social biases
- ✓ as a metaphor for bodily diversity
- ✓ as voice of oppressed people
- ✓ as a challenge to existing notions of normal

All of this allows the book to be a good subject of cultural and literary studies at the same time. The very narrative invites the reader to think deeper than just the myth.

15. Narrative Style

Tripathi employs a rapid narrative technique that encompasses:

- excitement;
- investigation;
- love affair;
- political turmoil;
- legend;
- thought-provoking conversation;
- physical activity;
- Suspense

This combination enables the readers to understand philosophical themes easily. Actually, every chapter title is related to the philosophy of the narrative. Titles like “What is Your Karma?”, “The Secret of All Secrets” serve as philosophical inquiries. As a result, the narration moves between action and contemplation.

16. The Symbolism of the Naga

The central symbol in the novel is the Naga. At first, the Naga symbolises:

- terror;
- hazard;
- enigma;
- strangeness;
- Malevolence.

As the story goes on, however, the symbol is transformed. It now bears the meaning of:

- diffusion;
- misunderstood personality;



- social isolation;
- persistence;
- resistance;
- Human dignity.

The change of symbolism corresponds with changes in Shiva's mindset. As Shiva takes control of the Naga readers are also invited to view it in a way.

17. Shiva as a Philosophical Hero

In the *Trilogy* Shiva is shown as a man—human, made of flesh and blood. Yet through his actions he rises to a level, almost godlike. In this story Amish Tripathi blends history, mythology and science into a kind of narrative. He brings in ideas from life—civilization, culture, family ties—and these themes play a major role in the story. The trilogy mixes myths and traditions with the world we live in today.

Shiva is not called a god in the book. Instead he is a man with values. He fights for fairness and equality and in doing he earns immortality. The way the writer tells the story is blending myth with fiction. Shiva is shown as the leader of the Guna tribe. In Hindu mythology Shiva is the god of destruction. He is also the one who destroys evil and brings balance. The author changes parts of the story but the heart of it stays the same.

In style heroic stories heroes are often shown as people who win battles, who defeat their enemies. Tripathi's Shiva fits this idea. He is a warrior, driven by revenge. He is also more than that. He is a man shaped by his choices his pain and his vision, for a world. But as a character, he transcends physical heroism. His biggest challenge comes from understanding his own beliefs. Hence, the philosophical hero is not just a simple warrior. Physical power alone does not make Shiva great. His ability to accept mistakes and correct his perception is equally significant. The evolution could be depicted in the following way:

Vengeance → Doubt → Investigation → Knowledge → Responsibility → Moral Leadership This transition signifies the main psychological movement of the novel.

18. Importance to Modern Society

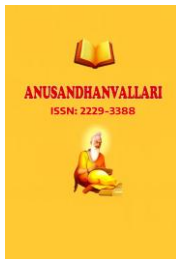
Social issues discussed in *The Secret of the Nagas* are still relevant. The issues of appearance and discrimination presented in the book correspond with the contemporary problems such as:

- disability rights
- social exclusion
- caste discrimination
- racial discrimination
- religious intolerance
- gender discrimination
- stereotyping
- Minority rights

The subjective idea that an individual should be judged by actions instead of appearance is very significant nowadays considering that people build identities based on stereotypes. Tripathi's mythology thus operates as a mirror, allowing modern readers to analyse their own biases.

19. Main Findings

The research highlights the following significant findings:



- ✓ **Moral and Immoral are not Absolute:** The novella does not support the simplistic distinction between good and evil. Moral attributes belong to individuals not to groups in a way.
- ✓ **The Other is Socially Constructed:** The Nagas become "monsters" because society sees their differences through fear.
- ✓ **Karma is about Accountability:** Karma is not about fate but about moral behavior and responsibility.
- ✓ **Looks cannot mean Morality:** The novella highlights the danger of judging people by their appearance.
- ✓ **Truth is about Doubting Accepted Social Beliefs:** Society's beliefs are not always right and finding truth takes courage.
- ✓ Being a Hero Means Being Shiva's real victory is not just defeating enemies but learning to question himself.
- ✓ **Mythology can solve State-of-the-Art Problems:** Tripathi shows how ancient myths can help us understand today's issues, like discrimination, disabilities and exclusion.

Conclusion

Firstly Amish Tripathi's *The Secret of the Nagas* is not a modern retelling of myth. It is also an sociological inquiry into how humanity differentiates between good and evil. Secondly the important merit of the novel is that it changes the Naga from an object to be feared into a symbol of the misunderstood. Here Tripathi makes us realize how dangerous it is to judge people by their appearance origin or social status. In this respect the notion of karma provides the grounds for the novel.

Here the idea is that a person is responsible for his or her choices. The moral message stating that an individual must confront evil even when others are passive turns morality into a choice. Then we come to the fact that Shiva's journey's external as well as internal. Initially he looks for a villain. Finally comes to the conclusion that truth is complicated. The book pays attention to topics of gender, disability, social inequality, religious authority and cultural identity. With the use of mythology Tripathi introduces questions of philosophy and society for the modern reader. Thus *The Secret of the Nagas* argues that the greatest fight between good and evil does not take place between opposing groups. It happens inside of a man. Hence the moral of the story is that morality is, in action, responsibility, empathy and questioning a persons prejudices.

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