Anusandhanvallari
Vol 2026, No.1
November 2026
ISSN 2229-3388

Reconstructing the Hero: Joseph Campbell's Monomyth in Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy

[1]N. Nagapushpam, [2]Dr. T. Sathyakala

[1]Part-Time Research Scholar PG and Research Department of English Arulmigu Palaniandavar College of Arts and Culture, Palani Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai.

[2]Research Guide Associate Professor PG and Research Department of English Arulmigu Palaniandavar College of Arts and Culture, Palani Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai.

Abstract: Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy reimagines Shiva through a narrative that joins mythological memory with political conflict and ethical uncertainty. This paper reads The Immortals of Meluha, The Secret of the Nagas, and The Oath of the Vayuputras through Joseph Campbell's three broad movements of the monomyth: departure, initiation, and return. Using qualitative textual analysis, it examines how Shiva's movement between communities' changes both his public identity and his understanding of justice. The argument is that Tripathi borrows the recognisable architecture of the heroic journey but shifts its emphasis from the fulfilment of a predetermined destiny to the testing of authority through choices and consequences. Meluha's treatment of the Vikarma, the suspicions surrounding the Nagas, and the conflicts that culminate in the final novel expose different limits in the social and moral systems Shiva encounters. The trilogy therefore makes heroism a matter of interpretation and responsibility: a heroic title may create expectations, but it cannot settle the ethical value of a character's actions.

Keywords: Joseph Campbell, monomyth, heroic journey, Amish Tripathi, Shiva Trilogy, mythological fiction, narrative transformation

Introduction

Mythological fiction often works by placing inherited figures in new narrative situations. Rather than merely retelling a familiar story, writers can reshape its point of view and use it to examine authority, justice, identity, and social belonging. Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy participates in this practice by presenting Shiva not only as a figure of cultural significance but also as a protagonist whose understanding develops through encounters with institutions and communities that challenge him.

The trilogy, The Immortals of Meluha (2010), The Secret of the Nagas (2011), and The Oath of the Vayuputras (2013) moves Shiva from the Guna community into a wider world of competing political and cultural systems. Each novel changes the scale of the problem before him: the first introduces him to Meluha's ordered society and its expectations, the second unsettles the categories through which communities are judged, and the third brings unresolved questions of justice and political action to a crisis. This progression gives the trilogy a structure through which a familiar mythological figure can be reinterpreted.

Joseph Campbell's The Hero with a Thousand Faces offers a comparative framework for analysing this progression. Campbell describes the monomyth through the broad movements of departure, initiation, and return, with subsidiary stages involving a call, a threshold, trials, revelation, and renewed engagement with the community (Campbell [1949] 2008, 23). These movements are useful here as interpretive prompts, not as a checklist that the novels must satisfy.

The framework also requires limits. Campbell's comparative model cannot, by itself, explain the cultural meanings attached to Shiva in Indian traditions, and the trilogy should not be treated as a transparent representation of those traditions. The analysis therefore distinguishes between the mythological associations the novels invoke

and the fictional choices through which Tripathi reshapes them. It asks where the monomyth clarifies the narrative and where the novels' social and ethical concerns exceed it.

This paper argues that Tripathi adapts the monomyth by making the hero's development depend on repeated revisions of judgement. Shiva's journey is not simply a movement towards the confirmation of his special status. Instead, the three novels place that status under pressure: he must assess the society that welcomes him, investigate the people it fears, and confront the consequences of political action. These distinct stages reveal how the trilogy reconstructs heroism through experience rather than through destiny alone.

The study uses qualitative close reading, concentrating on characterisation, narrative sequence, social classification, and the consequences attached to key decisions. Campbell provides the principal theoretical framework; Vogler and Segal offer supporting perspectives on narrative structure and myth interpretation, while Brockington helps situate the discussion within the complexity of Indian epic traditions. Because the analysis concerns Tripathi's modern fictional adaptation, it does not claim that the trilogy reproduces a traditional account of Shiva or follows every stage of Campbell's model.

The Monomyth as a Framework

For Campbell, the monomyth describes a recurring narrative pattern in which the protagonist leaves familiar conditions, undergoes experiences that alter perception or capacity, and re-engages with a wider community (Campbell [1949] 2008, 24). Its value for this study lies in the relationship between narrative movement and changed understanding. The stages offer a way to organise the trilogy's development, but their meaning must be established through the particular conflicts represented in each novel.

Departure begins when the hero is drawn beyond the social world that has shaped an earlier identity. The call may take the form of an invitation, a crisis, or an opportunity; its importance lies in the disruption it creates. In Tripathi's first novel, Shiva's movement from his community to Meluha exposes him to institutions whose assumptions he cannot fully understand from his previous experience.

Initiation refers to the encounters that test the hero's earlier knowledge. A trial may be physical, but it can also arise from social injustice, conflicting evidence, or a decision for which no option is uncomplicated. The relevant question is not merely whether the hero survives an obstacle, but whether the encounter changes how the hero interprets the world and acts within it.

Return concerns what happens when the hero's altered understanding meets the needs and expectations of a community. It need not be a literal homecoming or a complete restoration of order. In the trilogy, the return stage is most useful as a way of considering the widening consequences of Shiva's decisions and the difficulty of translating individual insight into collective well-being.

Christopher Vogler adapts the heroic journey for narrative analysis and offers a practical vocabulary for tracing character development (Vogler 2007, 29). His model can help identify shifts in a protagonist's role, but it should not be used to claim that every narrative follows one universal sequence. Tripathi's three novels distribute revelation and conflict across a longer arc, so stages may overlap rather than occur in a neat order.

Robert A. Segal's work on myth supports an approach that treats myths as narratives interpreted within particular intellectual and cultural settings (Segal 2004, 81). This perspective matters because Tripathi's novels draw on familiar mythological associations while constructing a modern fictional world. The trilogy's meaning emerges from that act of adaptation, not from a simple equation between the novels and an inherited source.

Accordingly, the following analysis uses Campbell to identify the trilogy's broad movement, while giving priority to the specific social conflicts and narrative choices in the novels. Departure is examined through Shiva's entry into Meluha; initiation through the Vikarma question, the Naga encounters, and the revelations of the second

novel; and the final conflict and return through the consequences of action and the expansion of responsibility. This organisation avoids forcing every episode into a single stage.

Departure from the Familiar to the Unknown

The Call to Adventure

In The Immortals of Meluha, Shiva begins as the leader of the Guna tribe, with his identity formed by the responsibilities and limits of his own community. He is not introduced as an established ruler of Meluha or as someone who already understands the political world he is about to enter. This starting point matters because the trilogy's later conflicts require him to judge institutions outside the experience that first shaped him.

The invitation to enter Meluha initiates the departure. At first, the journey offers a practical possibility for the Guna people; it also brings Shiva into contact with a society whose customs and assumptions are unfamiliar to him. The decision therefore operates on two levels: it changes his physical surroundings and begins to separate his self-understanding from the identity that Meluha will assign to him (Tripathi 2010, 16).

In Campbell's terms, the call is significant because it interrupts the hero's existing pattern of life. Shiva's departure does not need to be understood as a supernatural command; it is the choice to enter circumstances that his previous experience cannot fully explain. The novel thus establishes the first condition for transformation: he must learn to assess a world whose rules are not his own.

At this point, Shiva's future role remains uncertain. Others may later interpret his arrival through prophecy, but he initially acts from the immediate needs of his people and his own assessment of the opportunity before him. The distance between this practical motive and the larger public meaning attached to him becomes an important source of tension in the first novel.

Crossing the Threshold

Meluha is not merely a new location; it is a social order that presents its own arrangements as rational, disciplined, and just. Shiva encounters institutions and customs that shape both how he is treated and how he begins to interpret the people around him. Crossing the threshold therefore means entering a system whose apparent coherence must be tested against its treatment of those who do not fit its ideals.

The Meluhans identify Shiva as the Neelkanth and attach to him expectations of deliverance. This recognition rapidly changes his public position, but it does not give him complete knowledge of the society that has welcomed him. The gap between the role others project onto him and the person who must decide how to act is more important than the title itself.

The threshold is therefore social as well as geographical. Shiva must navigate a new public identity while learning how Meluha's values operate in practice. Campbell's model helps name this transition, but the novel's specific tension comes from the way a community's expectations begin to compete with the protagonist's independent judgement (Campbell [1949] 2008, 192).

The Neelkanth prophecy creates a question rather than providing a final answer: should Shiva accept the interpretation others place upon him, or test it against what he observes? Tripathi makes this question consequential by allowing the society's moral contradictions to emerge after Shiva has been welcomed as a potential saviour. His role is not settled by recognition; it is tested by what he does with it.

This threshold prepares the first major ethical trial. Shiva has entered Meluha physically and acquired a public identity, but he has not yet decided whether the social principles supporting that identity deserve his allegiance. The narrative's movement into initiation begins when the order that seemed admirable becomes subject to moral scrutiny.

Initiation through Conflict

The Test of Social Order

The initiation phase becomes visible when Shiva encounters the distance between Meluha's self-image and its social practices. The society values order and discipline, yet these qualities do not automatically guarantee justice. In the first novel, the treatment of the Vikarma community provides a concrete test of whether a stable social system can also respond compassionately to people who suffer.

Meluhan beliefs associate Vikarma status with the consequences of past actions and impose restrictions on those classified in this way. The practice is treated within the society as legitimate, but Shiva's response brings its human consequences into view (Tripathi 2010, 61). The episode matters because it turns an abstract question about social order into a question about the treatment of particular people.

The encounter complicates Shiva's first impression of Meluha. Its organisation may appear effective, but the Vikarma system reveals how a society can preserve order by making exclusion seem deserved. The conflict asks whether a rule should be accepted because it is established or judged by the harm it produces. This is a more specific test than a general struggle between good and evil.

Shiva's response marks a movement towards independent judgement. Rather than allowing Meluha's institutions or the Neelkanth title to determine his position, he must consider the people affected by the rules. The trial is therefore political and ethical: it tests whether he can separate loyalty to a society from uncritical acceptance of its practices.

This episode expands the meaning of initiation beyond physical danger. Shiva's challenge is to recognise that a system may contain both admirable organisation and unjust exclusions. The change is not that he acquires a perfect moral code; rather, he begins to evaluate social claims against their consequences for those with less power.

Beyond the Heroic Label

The Neelkanth identity risks making Shiva's actions appear justified before they are examined. Tripathi complicates that risk by placing him in a society where the people who celebrate him also maintain practices he must question. The narrative thus separates symbolic status from ethical credibility: the former is assigned by others, while the latter has to be earned through judgement and conduct.

This distinction changes the function of authority in the novel. Recognition gives Shiva influence, but influence increases his obligation to examine the effects of the systems he supports or challenges. The story does not present leadership as a possession that automatically produces wisdom; it presents leadership as a position in which decisions carry wider consequences.

Campbell's initiation model helps describe the pressure placed on the hero's earlier assumptions (Campbell [1949] 2008, 89). Yet the specific content of Shiva's trial comes from Tripathi's portrayal of social classification. The issue is not simply that Shiva must overcome a personal limitation; he must decide how to respond when a respected institution harms a marginalised group.

The first novel therefore makes Shiva's arrival only the beginning of his transformation. The important shift is from being recognised as a possible saviour to accepting the burden of evaluating the society that expects salvation from him. This argument prepares the analysis of the Nagas, where the problem is not an institution's treatment of a named group alone but the process by which fear shapes collective judgement.

The Naga Encounter

In The Secret of the Nagas, Shiva's investigation brings him closer to a community that has been defined by the fears and suspicions of others. The Nagas are initially encountered through a public image that associates their

physical difference with danger. Tripathi uses this framing to show how reputation can precede knowledge and influence the response to a group before its circumstances are understood (Tripathi 2011, 10).

The Naga narrative differs from the Vikarma episode. The Vikarma question exposes the consequences of an established social rule; the Naga encounter examines how incomplete information and collective suspicion shape the perception of an entire community. Shiva must therefore look beyond the label attached to the Nagas and investigate the circumstances that the label obscures.

As the investigation proceeds, Shiva's task becomes evidential: he must compare what he has been told with what the unfolding events reveal. This process does not mean that every conflict disappears once new information emerges. Rather, it shows that judgement based solely on group identity is unreliable and that the causes of violence must be examined instead of assumed.

Campbell's framework is relevant here because the trial changes the hero's relation to what he previously believed (Campbell [1949] 2008, 82). However, the episode's particular force lies in its challenge to social categorisation. The monomyth names the structural function of the encounter; close reading explains its ethical significance in the novel.

The consequences extend beyond Shiva's personal understanding. Once he recognises that a community's public reputation may conceal a more complicated reality, he must reconsider how his choices affect people who have been excluded from the dominant social order. The novel broadens the field of responsibility from the expectations of Meluha to the experiences of those whom its social categories marginalise.

Knowledge and Revelation

The revelations in The Secret of the Nagas change how earlier events and relationships can be interpreted. Details that appeared to support a settled explanation become less secure when placed beside new evidence. The narrative's method is cumulative: the reader, like Shiva, is asked to revisit earlier assumptions rather than treat the first explanation as final.

This is where revelation adds something different from the Naga encounter itself. The encounter foregrounds social suspicion; revelation alters the interpretation of the plot's evidence. Campbell's model helps describe this shift in perception, but the novel's narrative technique delaying or revising what characters and readers know is what gives the shift its particular form (Campbell [1949] 2008, 336).

New knowledge does not remove the need for decision. It can expose further obligations and make a previously simple response harder to defend. Shiva must determine how the information should change his conduct, especially when acting on it may affect several communities. Knowledge is therefore presented as a responsibility, not as a solution that automatically resolves conflict.

The second novel does not turn revelation into complete certainty. Its discoveries complicate the moral map rather than replacing one unquestioned answer with another. This uncertainty prepares the final novel, where Shiva must act in circumstances shaped by conflicting accounts of justice and by the consequences of earlier choices.

Taken together, the Naga encounters and the revelations make initiation a process of revising interpretation. Shiva's growth lies in learning to test the stories that organise conflict, recognise the limits of inherited categories, and accept that better information makes his decisions more consequential rather than effortless.

The Final Trial

Conflicting Visions of Justice

The Oath of the Vayuputras brings the earlier questions into a wider political confrontation. By this point, Shiva has encountered the exclusions built into Meluha's social order and has had reason to question the assumptions

surrounding the Nagas. The final novel tests whether this accumulated knowledge can guide action when competing visions of justice cannot easily be reconciled (Tripathi 2013, 54).

The final trial differs from the earlier stages because investigation alone is no longer enough. Shiva must choose how to respond to the knowledge he has gained and consider the likely effects of opposing established practices. The narrative shifts from the discovery of contradictions to the difficult problem of acting within them.

The trilogy does not present moral judgement as a choice between an entirely good side and an entirely bad one. Political obligations, incomplete knowledge, and the welfare of different communities complicate the available options. This complexity does not excuse harmful action; it makes the grounds and consequences of each decision essential to evaluating it.

Campbell's account of trials offers a structural comparison for this confrontation (Campbell [1949] 2008, 89), but the final novel also reveals a limit of the model: a stage called 'the final trial' cannot by itself explain the political substance of the conflict. That substance must be analysed through the competing principles and practical consequences represented in the story.

The ethical measure of the confrontation is therefore not victory alone. The means chosen, the people exposed to harm, and the long-term effects of action all matter. By placing Shiva's decisions within a conflict larger than his individual destiny, Tripathi asks readers to judge the hero through the responsibilities attached to power.

The Cost of Action

The final novel foregrounds the gap between intention and outcome. An action pursued in the name of justice may still cause suffering, just as an institution that claims to preserve order may damage the people it is meant to protect. The narrative resists the assumption that a worthy objective makes every method acceptable; the justification of action must include attention to its effects.

This emphasis challenges the idea that a single leader can resolve a complex political crisis through personal conviction alone. Shiva's authority gives his choices weight, but it cannot make him omniscient. Responsible leadership requires awareness of other people's needs and of the possibility that even a sincere decision may produce unintended consequences.

The trilogy also makes the past active in the final conflict. Earlier choices shape the conditions under which later decisions are made, so the hero cannot begin from a clean slate. This continuity gives the journey ethical depth: transformation involves responding to consequences already set in motion, not simply demonstrating courage at a climactic moment.

For this reason, responsibility is a more convincing measure of Shiva's development than power or certainty. His authority matters only insofar as he considers what it enables him to do and whom his decisions affect. This prepares the return section, where the question becomes how individual transformation relates to collective life.

Return and the Meaning of Heroism

From Individual to Collective Responsibility

In Campbell's model, return concerns the relation between the hero's changed understanding and the community beyond the trials (Campbell [1949] 2008, 169). Applied to the trilogy, it is less a literal journey home than a way to examine how Shiva's experiences alter the range of people for whom he feels responsible and the standards by which he evaluates social order.

Shiva begins as a leader whose immediate responsibilities are tied to the Guna community. His encounters with Meluha, the Nagas, and the Vayuputras expose him to different groups and competing claims. The widening of

his perspective is not simply a sign of personal growth; it changes the scale of the decisions he must make and the consequences he must consider.

Return can thus be read as a changed relationship with society rather than a restoration of the original conditions. Shiva cannot return to his earlier understanding unchanged, because he has seen how social systems distribute privilege, suspicion, and harm. The narrative's emphasis falls on the difficulty of applying what he has learned to a world that remains divided.

The trilogy does not suggest that greater awareness guarantees social harmony. Insight may clarify the causes of conflict without removing political interests or repairing every injury. Tripathi's version of return therefore remains unsettled: the hero's experience matters because it changes the terms of responsibility, not because it produces a perfect or permanent resolution.

The key change is from responsibility for one community to an awareness of interconnected communities. This does not mean that Shiva can solve every problem individually. Instead, the trilogy makes the limits of individual authority visible, even as it shows why leaders must account for the wider effects of their decisions.

Transformation without Simplicity

The ending resists a simple restoration in which the hero's actions erase the conflicts that preceded them. The trilogy's problems arise from social beliefs, institutional practices, and political interests, none of which can be assumed to disappear after one confrontation. Return therefore marks a changed perspective on collective life, not proof that collective life has been fully repaired.

Shiva's development should consequently be measured by his willingness to reconsider assumptions and accept the burden of decision, rather than by an imagined state of moral perfection. The narrative leaves room for uncertainty because ethical action takes place amid competing needs and imperfect knowledge. This uncertainty is not a failure of the heroic pattern; it is part of Tripathi's revision of it.

Vogler's account helps clarify how a protagonist's experience can change the relationship between character and community (Vogler 2007, 225). In this trilogy, however, return does not close every question. The structure is most useful when it identifies the shift in Shiva's responsibilities while allowing the unresolved social and political tensions to remain visible.

The return stage thus completes the trilogy's broad arc without making Shiva's authority unquestionable. His journey produces a wider field of concern, but the text continues to invite evaluation of his choices. Heroism remains an ethical practice whose value depends on how power is exercised and how consequences are acknowledged.

Reconstructing the Mythic Hero

From Divine Recognition to Human Agency

Tripathi's Shiva is shaped by the tension between mythological recognition and human agency. The novels draw on the cultural significance of Shiva but place the protagonist within a fictional sequence of decisions, relationships, and political conflicts. This humanised narrative makes it possible to examine how a figure associated with divine power becomes a character whose actions must be interpreted within the story.

The Neelkanth title is important here not because it proves Shiva's worth, but because it establishes the expectations against which his conduct is measured. The title gives him symbolic authority before he has fully understood Meluha's social order. As the narrative reveals the costs and contradictions of that order, the gap between the promise attached to the title and the demands of action becomes a source of critical tension.

The trilogy's reconstruction of heroism therefore depends on the difference between assigned identity and demonstrated agency. Shiva cannot rely on recognition to settle difficult questions; he must respond to evidence, competing claims, and consequences. This does not remove the mythological dimension of the character. It shows how Tripathi uses that dimension as a starting point for a modern narrative about judgement and power.

This reading also clarifies the role of Campbell's framework. The monomyth helps trace the sequence of departure, trial, and changed relation to society, but it does not determine what Shiva's actions mean in the cultural setting of the novels. The pattern provides structure; the narrative's treatment of social exclusion, political conflict, and moral choice provides the interpretation.

The Limits of the Monomyth

Campbell's model offers a useful map of the trilogy's large-scale movement, but it cannot explain every feature of Tripathi's adaptation. Its usefulness depends on treating it as a flexible comparative framework rather than a universal law. Three limitations are especially important: the novels' overlapping chronology of transformation, the cultural specificity of Shiva, and the role of institutions in shaping the hero's choices.

First, the trilogy does not progress through a perfectly separated sequence of stages. A question raised in one novel may acquire new meaning in another, and later revelations can change the interpretation of earlier events. The monomyth is therefore most accurate as a broad pattern, not a rigid template into which every episode must fit.

Second, Campbell's comparative account cannot fully explain the cultural meanings attached to Shiva. Brockington's study of the Sanskrit epics underscores the complexity and historical specificity of Indian epic traditions (Brockington 1998, 57). Tripathi's work is a contemporary fictional reconstruction, not a Sanskrit epic, but this distinction reinforces the need to avoid treating different mythological traditions as interchangeable.

Third, the hero's development in these novels depends on social structures as much as on personal trials. Systems of classification, political authority, and collective belief shape the options available to Shiva and the risks faced by other communities. Campbell's stages can describe when a challenge occurs, but they cannot alone explain the institution that produces it or the people who bear its costs.

These limits define, rather than cancel, the value of the framework. Campbell helps organise the trilogy's narrative arc; close reading is needed to explain the specific cultural and ethical meanings that emerge from it. The strongest interpretation therefore combines structural comparison with attention to the novels' particular social conflicts.

Conclusion

Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy adapts the monomyth by connecting the stages of the heroic journey to specific conflicts over social classification, communal suspicion, and political responsibility. Campbell's model clarifies the trilogy's broad movement from departure through initiation to return, but it does not fully account for the cultural meanings of Shiva or the institutional forces that shape his choices. The novels must therefore be read both through the structure of the journey and through the particular conflicts that give it meaning.

In The Immortals of Meluha, Shiva's move from the Guna community into Meluha creates the conditions for a conflict between public expectation and independent judgement. His identification as Neelkanth grants him symbolic importance, while the treatment of the Vikarma community exposes the limits of Meluha's claims to justice. The first novel's key contribution is to make social order an object of scrutiny rather than an unquestioned measure of goodness.

In The Secret of the Nagas, the focus shifts from the operation of an accepted social rule to the assumptions through which an entire community is feared and judged. The investigation and subsequent revelations unsettle earlier explanations, showing that knowledge must be tested and revised. Initiation here is not simply the

acquisition of information; it is the recognition that social labels can conceal the circumstances that produce conflict.

The Oath of the Vayuputras places Shiva before the consequences of acting on his changing understanding. Competing visions of justice make the final conflict more than a test of courage: the means chosen and the people affected become part of the ethical evaluation of his leadership. The trilogy thus links heroic action to accountability rather than treating victory as sufficient proof of virtue.

The return stage is best understood as a changed relation to collective life, not a simple restoration of the world that existed before the journey. Shiva's experiences widen the range of people whose welfare must be considered, but they do not guarantee a harmonious resolution. The narrative leaves responsibility as an ongoing task shaped by the consequences of decisions.

The study therefore finds Campbell's monomyth productive but limited. It helps explain the trilogy's large-scale narrative design, while close reading reveals the distinct work performed by the Vikarma episode, the Naga investigation, and the final political confrontation. Tripathi's adaptation gives the heroic pattern a particular ethical emphasis: authority must be tested through conduct and consequences.

Ultimately, the trilogy reconstructs the mythic hero as a figure whose significance is not exhausted by prophecy or public recognition. Shiva's journey matters because each novel changes the questions he must ask and the people whose lives his choices affect. Through this movement, Tripathi retains the shape of the heroic journey while making responsible judgement, rather than unquestioned status, central to its contemporary meaning.

References

[1] Brockington, John L. 1998. The Sanskrit Epics. Brill.

[2] Campbell, Joseph. (1949) 2008. The Hero with a Thousand Faces. 3rd ed. New World Library.

[3] Raglan, Lord. 1936. The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama. Methuen.

[4] Segal, Robert A. 2004. Myth: A Very Short Introduction. Oxford University Press.

[5] Tripathi, Amish. 2010. The Immortals of Meluha. Westland.

[6] ———. 2011. The Secret of the Nagas. Westland.

[7] ———. 2013. The Oath of the Vayuputras. Westland.

[8] Vogler, Christopher. 2007. The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers. 3rd ed. Michael Wiese Productions.