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## **Retelling of Myths and Its Role in Nation-Building: A Critical Study of Amish Tripathi's the Shiva Trilogy**

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**Abstract:** The greatness of a nation is determined by the unique national character of its people, shaped by the cultural traditions and values of that nation. Myth is a powerful tool to induce a good value system subtly into the people of all ages alike. All myths offer resolutions to contemporary social problems through an emphasis on the virtues of truth, honesty, justice and morality, thereby inculcating the quintessential traits of a good citizen into people and providing them with a paragon of virtue. In an age of globalisation and more specifically cultural Americanisation and Anglicisation, when today's youth is moving towards a tradition of cultural homogenisation, dissociating themselves deliberately from their own rich cultural values in their race to classify themselves as modern and updated, retelling of myths becomes a task of paramount importance to acquaint them with their unique traditional values and their relevance in the modern context. This paper seeks to explore how Amish Tripathi's retelling of an ancient myth in the Shiva Trilogy turns it into a contemporary treatise on sustainable development, leadership skills, governance, ethics, women's rights and the rights of the disabled and the marginalised.

**Key words:** National character, myth, value system, sustainable development, nation building.

Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam once said, "I don't want our youth to grow up on Harry Potter stories. These stories are very well written, but we must ensure that our treasure of symbols, metaphors, myths and legends is properly transferred to the younger generation. Characters like Vidur in *Mahabharata* and Bharat in *Ramayana* have no parallel" (Kalam and Tiwari 91-2). It is indeed our responsibility to disseminate the knowledge and ethos of our rich cultural values to the younger generation. A youth, firmly rooted in his own culture, is inherently virtuous and grows up into a good law-abiding citizen, thereby strengthening the very foundation of the nation. It is a good value system and the national



character of people that determine the progress of a nation. Myths, though set against the backdrop of a particular period and the then societal evils, are modern in their approach and attitude to life's problems and in their upholding of poetic justice through the victory of good over evil and the celebration of the virtues of truth, honesty, justice and morality. Arun Tiwari in his conversation with Dr. Kalam has raised a pertinent question regarding the relevance of these ancient myths in our modern life: "We indeed have role models for some very complex and difficult situations. But those were different times. How do I get the feel of the way the people of our times are thinking?" (92). To this Dr. Kalam replied, "Books help a lot in this. There are very good contemporary Indian authors who understand India, not out of emotions rooted in the past, but more out of aspirations after they had a global exposure" (92). Inherent in this response is the importance of retelling of myths.

In the recent years, retelling of myths has been taken up as a serious devotion by authors like Devdutt Pattanaik, Ashwin Sanghi, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Ashok Banker, Krishna Udayasankar and Amish Tripathi, to name but a few. These authors retell the ancient myths from a completely fresh perspective, striking a fine balance between tradition and modernity. They set the traditional myths against the backdrop of the present social evils and find solutions to the contemporary issues by reinterpreting the past in the light of the present. It was the individual talent of these writers, having a rich experience in the traditional Indian mythology and a global exposure, that they could popularise these traditional stories amongst young readers of the country. The popularity of these books again proves the veracity of T. S. Eliot's words in "Burnt Norton", "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past" (3). Amish Tripathi in the *Shiva Trilogy* has recreated the ancient myth in the model of fantasy fiction, and therefore, it appeals more to the popular perception.

Divesting gods of their divinities, Tripathi has turned them into human beings of flesh and blood; and his powerfully enticing narrative framework offers scientific explanation to everything, thereby dismissing the necessity of having a "willing suspension of disbelief" (Coleridge 365) on the part of the reader. Through the portrayal of Lord Shiva as a tribal leader from Mount Kailash, Tibet and his journey towards restoring peace. Tripathi gives us the message that anyone can attain godhood



through selfless service towards humanity. In his own words, “What if Lord Shiva was not a figment of a rich imagination, but a person of flesh and blood? Like you and me. A man who rose to become godlike because of his karma. That is the premise of the Shiva Trilogy, which interprets the rich mythological heritage of ancient India, blending fiction with historical fact” (*Meluha* Loc119).

Keeping the relationship of all the mythical characters intact, Tripathi has transformed this tale into a critique of all sorts of evils inflicting the contemporary society. Thus, the first book in the series *The Immortals of Meluha* begins with Shiva’s tribe being invaded by the ruthless Pakratis and his subsequent decision to immigrate to Meluha in search of better opportunities. The culturally dislocated Guna tribe realises it much later how vulnerable they are in a foreign land. Meluha, being depicted as the richest and most powerful land not only in India but in the whole world, offers a lifestyle beyond the wildest dreams of the Guna tribe. Meluha with its strict rules of tax payment, immigrant camp, Foreigner’s office and the Orientation Executive, appears to be a modern city of our times. Its system of keeping immigrants under a compulsory quarantine period of seven days to ward off new diseases shares striking parallel with the COVID-19 pandemic situation which compels all countries at one point of time to impose similar restrictions on travellers from other countries. Placed against the better health facilities and hygiene standards of Meluha, the Guna’s lack of awareness of hygiene becomes all the more prominent. The terrorist attacks by the Chandravanshis, who are represented as “a crooked, untrustworthy and lazy people with no rules, morals or honour” (59), share affinity with the modern times. The caste system in Meluha is regulated by clearly codified guidelines which is in the line of the ancient Indian tradition, but the professions that they choose depend on their merit and ability determined by the Allocation Board on the basis of a rigorous examination process, thereby making it contemporary.

The process of de-deification continues in the portrayal of Vishnu as it is a title meaning the protector of the world and propagator of good, and in the representation of Lord Brahma as one of the greatest Indian scientist. In the line of the Indian tradition, Shiva is represented as the great Lord Neelkanth, but Tripathi makes it plausible through the proclamation of the Meluhan chief scientist Brahaspati. “I am sure there is a scientific explanation for the blue throat” (142). A rational and



scientific touch is also given to the immortality of the Meluhans by showing it as an effect of the *Somras*. This book ends with Shiva discovering the purpose of his life which is finding an answer to the overwhelming question- “What is evil?” (397) much in the line of the knight’s Quest for the Holy Grail. His journey as depicted in the next two books *The Secret of the Nagas* and *The Oath of the Vayuputras* takes him to the lands of Swadweep, Ayodhya, Kashi, Branga, Panchavati and Pariha. This journey has helped Shiva to discover his own identity. Tripathi has transformed this search for an identity from merely being a thrilling tale of adventure to an educative experience for his readers, encompassing the pertinent issues of the day.

The *Shiva Trilogy* drives home the concept of sustainable development and the threats related to man’s lust for immortality, thirst for power and unethical usage of science and technology into the young minds much better than the scary datasheets produced by ecologists and environmentalists. *Somras*, which is initially projected as the miracle potion with unique life-saving potential, later on becomes the greatest evil due to over-exploitation by people. Depleting water levels of the legendary Saraswati river due to overuse of its water for making *Somras* is in parallel with the receding water levels in many rivers of the country and it engenders a sense of guilt into the young reader as he tries to find the faults in his consumption level and at the same time minimise it.. The toxic waste released during the preparation of *Somras* is shown to have severe side effects on human health and ecology. The Meluhans, being oblivious of the needs of their future generation, use *Somras* in an unsustainable manner; and their narrow selfish motives lead them to release the toxic waste into the Brahmaputra river, thereby protecting themselves, but they forget that ecological destruction at one place will affect the entire system in the long run. Tripathi takes it further by making the toxic waste responsible for the Plague of the Brangas and the excruciating pain that they undergo for this. He finally nails it down by connecting the birth of Naga children in Meluha with the prolonged use of *Somras*, and it is then that the reader realises: “... if the universe is trying to maintain balance, we must aid this by ensuring that Good is not enjoyed excessively. Or else the universe will re-balance itself by creating Evil to counteract Good. That is the purpose of Evil: it balances the Good” (*Oath of the Vayuputras* 96).



This trilogy can very well serve as a guide for leadership training. Shiva's rise from a barbarian to becoming the great lord Neelkanth is shown to be based on his leadership skills- he is a great orator, he is inquisitive and tries to reach the root of each problem, he believes that the rules of a nation should apply equally to all its people, he treats everyone with respect and he values the individuality of one and all. When Shiva came to know about the Vikarma law, he was aghast with the concept and wanted to scrap the law, King Daksha supported him only to the extent of manipulating the law in favour of his daughter Sati, but Shiva rose above the selfish concern and wanted to strike off the law itself so that no one was discriminated. Through his 'Karma', Shiva attains divinity even in the eyes of the non-believers of the legend of the Neelkanth, "Parvateshwar looked at Shiva in surprise. Though he did not like even a comma being changed in any of Lord Ram's laws, he appreciated that Shiva was remaining true to a fundamental canon of Lord Ram's principles- the same law applies to everybody, equally and fairly, without exceptions" (*Meluha* 282).

Like a true leader, when faced with conflicting viewpoints from different stakeholders, Shiva instead of being influenced by one party pays heed to each and then probes the matter on his own to reach any conclusion. He is fiercely protective of the rights of women and the marginalised. Gopal, the chief Vasudev, admires the leadership skills of Lord Shiva as:

It is you who brings us together, great Neelkanth...Lord Bhrigu may be as intelligent as you are, maybe more. But he is not a leader like you. He uses, rather misuses his brilliance to cow down his followers. They don't idolise him; they are scared of him. You, on the other hand, are able to draw out the best in your followers, my friend. ... You had decided upon your course of action already. But that did not stop you from having a discussion, allowing us to be a part of the decision. Somehow, you guided us all into saying what you wanted to hear. And yet you made each one of us feel as if it was our own decision. That is leadership (*Oath of the Vayuputras* 168).

Ganesh's leadership skills can be found in the siege of Ayodhya and in his unwavering commitment to protect his family and his own people. The qualities of a true leader are also portrayed



through Kartik's equanimity and ability to take the right decision even when faced with inconsolable sorrow at the death of his mother. Kartik said to Ganesh, "Dada, she was the best mother... But she taught us to always put the world before ourselves... if we were any other family I would give in to my rage... But we are not... We are the family of the Neelkanth... We have a responsibility to the world" (500). It was his foresightedness that prompted him to save the legacy of the *Somras* as he knew that it was evil then but it was not supposed to be completely destroyed, it was to be simply taken out of the equation. The chief Vasudev Gopal also said, "We have to keep the knowledge of the *Somras* alive, for it may well be required again. It's the future of India that we are talking about" (509). This also reiterates that science and technology is not harmful on its own, it is rather the usage to which it is put that matters.

The trilogy also offers insights into various aspects of ethics and governance. The self-proclaimed motto of Meluha is "Satya, Dharma, Maan" (*Meluha* 63), that is, "Truth, Duty, Honour" (63); that of Swadweep is "Shringar, Saundarya, Swatantrata" (372), that is, "Passion, Beauty, Freedom" (372) and that of the Land of the Nagas is "Satyam, Sundaram" (*Secret of the Nagas* 356), that is, "Truth, Beauty" (356). Thus, Tripathi shows how the three realms offer three models of governance. The Suryavanshis of Meluha are marked with the strict observance of Lord Ram's rules; and are happy under the ideology of being the most developed, rule-bound, systematic and ethical nation. Swadweep, apparently a "functioning pandemonium" (*Meluha* 372), offers the free flow of emotion to the Chandravanshis and "Freedom for the wretched to also have dignity" (389). Panchavati, the land of the Nagas, strikes a fine balance between the two extreme ways of life and turns out to be a model democracy combining rules with freedom. Ayodhya shows the failure of good governance with false promises of housing for all and lack of infrastructure. Tripathi also critiques colonialism through the Meluhan king Daksha's self-proclaimed duty of ending the evil Chandravanshi way of life and bringing them into the pure Suryavanshi ways. Meluha, initially presented as a land of wish-fulfilment, a utopic land, later on turns out to be the greatest dystopia with the discovery of evil. This serves as a great lesson on ethics and sustainable development for the readers:



...Evil is not a distant demon. It works its destruction close to us, with us, within us. ...we help Evil to destroy our lives... Good and Evil are two sides of the same coin. That one day, the greatest Good will transform into the greatest Evil... Our greed in extracting more and more from Good turns it into Evil. This is the universe's way of restoring balance. It is the Parmatma's way to control our excess (*Oath of the Vayuputras* 119).

The greatest contribution of this retelling to society lies in its critique of the social stigma faced by the disabled people and its attempt at building an inclusive society by securing equal rights and dignity for the disabled. Tripathi appeals to the emotive faculty of people by showing the excruciating pain that each Naga child undergoes during their growth years and by making society responsible for their deformity. Kali, Ganesh and other Naga children are left writhing in pain in Maika and are abandoned by most parents in fear of being categorised as a Vikarma. Panchavati offers shelter to the abandoned Naga children and allows them to live a life of dignity. The Nagas are tormented more with their status of social outcasts than the physical pain of their deformed bodies. Very interestingly, Tripathi justifies the black skin of Kali and the elephant-like head of Ganesh through the rationale of Naga children, born to those parents who overuse the *Somras*. Kali and Ganesh fight against all the backward social establishments and centres of power to secure equal rights and dignity for all the Nagas.

The trilogy is feminist in its celebration of the power of women through the portrayal of the two female figures- that of Sati and the Naga Queen Kali. Sati is fiercely independent and fights her own battles. Shiva also respects Sati's sense of individuality and self-respect as he said, "Citizens of Karachapa, I have seen the Princess fight. She can defeat anyone. Even the gods" (*Meluha* 230). Shiva has always treated Sati as his equal and a great warrior. Sati, on her part, has never accepted any undue privilege thrown at her by some people who perceive women as weak, insignificant and stupid. Every time Sati has made sure to prove these people wrong through her prowess, intelligence and leadership skills. In her duel with Tarak and later with Swuth and his accomplices, she proves her worth as a great warrior and fiercely protects her dignity as well as that of her opponent as we have seen in her decision to let Oa'a keep his head and die an honourable death. "It wasn't just her skill



with the sword that had surprised him [Swuth]; it was also her character... She had followed the rules of the duel of Aten, even though the rules were not her own.” (*Oath of the Vayuputras* 471)

In fact, she is the only character who has never manipulated any rules in her favour. The strength of her character draws tears into the eyes of a person like Swuth who, though an out and out misogynist, bows low before Sati as he regards her to be his final kill. She has also proved her leadership skills in her adroit actions to protect her army from the charging Vasudev elephants in the Battle of Devagiri. Sati is the embodiment of power, courage, independence, love and kindness; and she serves as a paragon for the modern women of twenty-first century. The Naga Queen Kali also represents a powerful woman, committed to secure equal rights for all the Nagas and build a truly democratic and inclusive society. Pitted against these two independent and powerful women are the docile and submissive queen Veerini and the victim of honour killing Renuka, Parshuram’s mother. Veerini could never oppose Daksha for the sins he committed, but like a responsible queen she succumbs to the same fate as her subjects. Renuka, a Kshatriya lady, revolted against the imposed rules of her clan for the sake of her love; but patriarchy could not tolerate a woman, breaking the norms, and hence, it rescued its lost honour through honour killing. Thus, through the portrayal of Veerini and Renuka, Tripathi has exposed two of the greatest evils of our society- the subtle workings of the process of indoctrination to keep the position of woman as subjugated and the intolerance of society for a woman who decides to live her life on her own terms. Tripathi, however, has laid the foundation of a progressive new world by making Ayurvati the best doctor of Meluha and Kanakhala a dedicated and skilful Prime Minister, thereby showing women’s participation in the economy as well as in the administration.

The trilogy is also vocal about the rights of the marginalised. The scrapping of the Vikarma law and Meluhans’ acknowledgement of the Nagas as their offspring show an attempt at building an inclusive society by bringing the marginalised into the mainstream. The plights of the Vikarma people are reminiscent of the predicaments of the untouchables in India. Shiva has exposed the hypocrisy of the system by arguing: “Bad fate can strike anyone. It is ridiculous to blame their past lives for it” (*Meluha* 282). Thus, the trilogy nowhere endorses superstition, rather it has placed everything on a



strong scientific base; even the myth of the Neelkanth has been given a proper scientific explanation. The foundation of a truly inclusive society was laid down by Kartik and Ganesh through the establishment of a tribe drawn from “an eclectic mix of Chandravanshis, Suryavanshis and Nagas. They had also inducted most of the Gunas, Shiva’s tribesmen, and many other local Tibetan tribes” (*Oath of the Vayuputras* 555).

To conclude, Tripathi’s powerful retelling with ingenuity of thoughts have turned the ancient myth into a modern fantasy fiction with educative values. Through its focus on sustainable development, leadership skills, governance, ethics, women’s rights and the rights of the disabled and the marginalised, the trilogy has become a guide to the modern youth. Retelling an ancient myth for the generation that feeds itself on fantasy fictions, thrives on western culture and finds more interest in Greek, Roman and western myths and history, is indeed very challenging. But Tripathi’s engrossing narrative technique and rich imagination have made it popular at once across the globe. Readers find the trilogy a fascinating read with their discovery of a renewed interest in Indian mythology. Tripathi has woven the lessons on human values, virtues, ethics, morality, loyalty and leadership very subtly into the fabric of retelling and turned it into a contemporary tale of those divine figures whom we have known since childhood. The readers have been made aware of the dreadful consequences of science and technology when used unmindfully; they have been imparted with training on sustainable development, leadership skills, governance and building an inclusive and democratic society. This retelling becomes all the more significant in view of the present culture of intolerance across the globe as it gives the message, “There is your truth and there is my truth. As for the universal truth? It does not exist” (58). A good, responsible and liberal citizen is indeed the building block of a progressive nation.

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