Modern Interpretation of Ancient Myths in Amish Tripathi's Immortals of Meluha

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Abstract

This study examines "The Immortals of Meluha" by Amish Tripathi in relation to its interpretation of concepts like Gods, legends, caste system, feminism, education, structure of society, architecture, feudal wars, terrorism, friendship and loyalty. His novel shows a blend of ancient mythology, fantasy and fiction. The tales from the ancient mythology are retold giving them a modern touch and feel. Many characters like Shiva, Sati, Nandi, Brihaspati etc reappear playing their respective roles which are not so distant from their ancient counterparts.

Keywords

Myth, Caste, Feminism, Shiva, Interpretation.

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"Immortals of Meluha" by Amish Tripathi serves as the inaugural novel in his Shiva Trilogy series. The author has created a sensation with his debut novel selling millions of copies. It presents a fantastical reimagining of the tale of Lord Shiva, a deity from Indian mythology with several enlightening thoughts which sparked reader's enthusiasm as well as criticism. This novel as mentioned in the preface is the story of the God Shiva in a human form bearing the qualities of a human (Tripathi 11). Thus Shiva becomes an avatar whose purpose is the upliftment of good and destruction of evil.

It is inconceivable to imagine a God being in a human form with all the human qualities both divine and mediocre. But Mr.Tripathi had done exactly what he wanted, creating Him with human feelings, emotions, aspirations and putting Him in the shoes of a common Himalayan tribal who, competent as he is in what he does in leading the tribe and always protecting them in the times of danger and misery. Shiva is the leader of Gunas, an ancient tribe having its roots in Mt Kailash. He is persuaded by Nandi the Captain to migrate into their land (Meluha) to seek peace and prosperity while paying taxes to the Empire.

Upon hearing the proposition, Shiva was skeptical. However, given the persistent conflicts between the Guna tribe and their arch-rivals, the Pakratis, he believed that relocating to the powerful kingdom of Meluha might be the best chance for his tribe to escape the relentless warfare and seek a tranquil existence. For centuries, men have revisited ancient legends, enhancing some while overlooking others. They've found various beauties and values in these tales. When interpreted, these legends reveal diverse meanings (Highet 2). Myths often depict humans and deities in human forms, hinting at potential historical events. Such interpretations started with Euhemeros in Greece, who believed that legends represented real warriors and chiefs later deified by their tribes (3).

Mythology shapes cultures by addressing deep topics like good versus evil and passion versus sacrifice. Roland Barthes, a French cultural theorist, suggests that these myths or ideologies work through underlying meanings that are often unconscious in texts and practices. (Storey, 20). In this context, "myth" refers to an ideology characterized as a collection of ideas and practices that actively support the values and interests of society's dominant groups, thereby upholding existing power structures (119). Lévi-Strauss posits that all myths share a common structure and fulfill similar socio-cultural roles within their respective societies (Claude, 1968). According to this perspective, the role of myth is to render the world comprehensible, magically addressing its conflicts and paradoxes. As argued, mythical thought invariably moves from recognizing contradictions to resolving them. The function of myth is to offer a logical model that can reconcile such contradictions (224, 229). Myths represent narratives crafted by cultures to dispel contradictions and render the world comprehensible and livable. They strive to reconcile us with our own nature and existence, fostering a sense of inner peace (Storey, 115). Novels of Amish Tripathi use these concepts to create powerful narratives by reinterpreting ancient myths. These interpretations include the grand concepts like Gods, legends, caste system, education, structure of society, architecture, feudal wars and terrorism.

This idea (of God in a human form) is not uncommon in the Indian context. They are called the Avatars. Gods who take the form of a human to end the evil that has grown beyond its restricted limits on Earth. "yadayada hi dharmasya glanir bhavati bharata abhyutthanam adharmasya tadatmanam srjamyaham"(Gita Ch 4, 7)

In the novel, there's a seamless fusion of historical elements with contemporary scientific discoveries. While there's no direct mention of the Indus Valley Civilization, the descriptions of the Great Bath, hygiene systems, and elevated city structures hint at a sophisticated civilization predating 1900 B.C.

Caste system or Varna system has been interpreted in a

new way. The writer claims that the caste system was not rigid in the past. He says that in his books, he discusses the caste system and points out that recent genetic research suggests that the caste system was not originally based on birth. It was more flexible in ancient times. Maharishi Valmiki, for instance, was not born into a Brahmin family. Similarly, the sage who composed the Mahabharata and compiled the Vedas was not born a Brahmin he was born to a fisherwoman. However, he didn't just become a Brahmin; he ascended to the status of a rishi. (Express).

Mr Tripathi tried to show the transformation of the Varna system whose sole purpose was to assign or designate citizens to their respective role (which they would play their part in the future) based solely on merit and nothing else. The system of education has been interpreted in a unique way. The citizens or the students to be precise need to go through a rigorous examination and based on how they perform they would be given their respective ranks in the society. The novel has a very interesting concept of the Maika system of education. In theory it simply can be described as follows: After the birth of the child he/she has to be placed in Maika (a place of education similar toGurukool) and it is only after 15 years the parents would be reunited with their kids. These 15y neither the parents nor their kids are allowed to meet. And during these 15y, rigorous training is provided for the young brains, different subjects would be taught to them and in the end they had to face an examination and based on the overall performance of the candidate he/she would be allocated his/her Varna- Brahmin or Kshatriya or Vaishya or Shudra. At the end of 15y the parents would come to Maika to take their kids away. If a Brahmin child does not meet up to the standards of a Brahmin and gets allocated to a Khsatriya then the parents are given a suitable lad - a Brahmin from other parents. It can happen that a Vaishya parent can get a Brahminchild or a Shudra parent can get a Kshatriya child (Tripathi, ch6).

But the writer also reiterates that, by the passing of time this Varna system which used to be an epitome of high standard education and merit had fallen and become rigid. The ranks were now passed on from the parents to their children without examination and the system was so abused so as to foster severe hatred and discrimination of the lower castes by the upper caste. Kuldeep Barman, in his work 'Portrayal of Caste System in Amish's Shiva Trilogy' states each caste is formed based on the qualities of people. However, the issue becomes evident in the deplorable and distressing state of the Nagas and Vikramas. In their case, all norms of social welfare and ideal conduct undergo a total transformation (Barman). "Vikarmas" are individuals experiencing hardships in their current life due to negative actions (sins) committed in their past lives. This aligns with the broader understanding of karma, where one's current circumstances are often seen as the result of past actions, whether from this life or previous ones.

Amish Tripathi's interpretation of the ancient Varna system is both innovative and thought-provoking. Drawing from historical contexts, he reimagines the system not as a rigid birth-based hierarchy but as a meritocratic structure rooted in education and individual capability. His unique portrayal is evident in the Maika system of education, where children undergo rigorous training and are subsequently assigned their Varna based on performance rather than lineage. This modern twist not only challenges traditional narratives but also resonates with contemporary ideals of meritocracy and fairness. However, Tripathi doesn't shy away from addressing the system's eventual degradation over time, offering a critical examination of how societal structures can deviate from their original intent. His style seamlessly blends ancient lore with modern sensibilities, prompting readers to reevaluate preconceived notions and engage in deeper introspection about societal norms.

Amish Tripathi emphasizes his deep commitment to addressing the issue of women's empowerment and highlighting the grave problem of violence against women in India. Hepoints out that while religious violence garners attention, the scale of violence against women, evidenced by the skewed gender ratio, is far more alarming. To raise awareness and challenge societal norms, he incorporates these themes into his book, crafting strong female characters and weaving in other societal issues without detracting from the main storyline (Hindu).

Through strong female leads like Sati, Ayurvati and Kali 'he emerges power and fire from his ladies contrasting with male partners of those ladies' (Nair 3). She embodies fairness and integrity, viewing herself as a kshatriya rather than a princess. Thus, an image of 'New Women' (Anjanamol 1) is depicted who are strong, capable and in no way less than their male counterparts. They have their own will and possess great personalities. The idea of the New Women comes from the novels of Henrik Ibsen, Henry James and D.H. Lawrence who also portrayed strong female leads in their dramas and novels which were A Doll's House, Portrait of a Lady and Women in Love respectively. Writers like Amish Tripathi and Jaishree Misra have written a great deal about women empowerment in their novels. They say that the topic of women's empowerment is a prominent one in modern society. Women's status has improved significantly compared to the past, with women now establishing their own identities and having ample opportunities to demonstrate their talents in various societal roles. In literature, numerous authors have explored women's rights. Feminists particularly appreciate these writers, as they have been instrumental in elevating women's societal status from a previously lower position to one nearly equal to men through their work. Authors such as Amish Tripathi and Jaishree Misra are notable examples, clearly portraying the concept of the 'New Woman' in their writings (Anjanamol).

The novel is set in 1900 B.C and the undertones of the great civilization can be seen that existed before 1900 B.C. Although there is no reference to the Indus Valley Civilization anywhere inside the text but the Great Bath, hygiene system

and the complicated cities which were built on raised platform gives us an impression of an advanced civilization.

Although the India depicted by Mr Tripathi in this novel is completely different from the modern day India, the terrorism (the word and the concept of terrorism has been defined way after 1900 B.C) fostered by Chandravamshi's can be compared with the happenings in Kashmir. The Suryavamshi's excel in military might and advanced warfare technology compared to Chandravamshi's. But they refuse to wage a full fledged war with the Chandravamshi's because the Chandravamshi's excel them in vast numbers. They resort to terrorist attacks out of fear, believing they can't confront us directly. Their apprehension stems from the realization that they are no match for our advanced technology and superior war machinery. (Tripathi, 311)

The Suryavamshi's also believe that their major drawback is their strict adherence to the rules of war (not attacking the enemy from behind, not attacking the enemy below the waist etc). The constant attacks by the Chandravanshiis growing beyond control and it is conspicuous for the Suryavanshi's of the impending threat from them due to their alliance with the powerful Naga's. Amidst these circumstances the Suryavamshi's fear the wonderful civilization of Meluha will be destroyed by the 'barbarous butchers' (45).

Shiva holds the responsibility of the prophesized leader and the protector of the downtrodden. He severely condemns the Vikarma system. Shiva as seen in the novel always raises his voice for the downtrodden outcasts who are looked upon by the society of Meluhan's as someone who have been cursed and are not to be respected. He raises his voice in several instances where he finds injustice to them.

The Vikarma (outcasts) are the people who are believed to be cursed because of the terrible things they had done in their past lives and a result of which they are suffering today as untouchables. The untouchables as a word is not used in the entire novel but the concept or theory of it is well portrayed. The Vikarma people are considered inauspicious and the mere touch of them as said in the novel brings bad luck to those who come into contact with them. And furthermorein order to purify the person who was touched by Vikarma, he/ she needs to get a 'Shudhikaran' done.

Shiva questions about the unfairness of this system to a high ranked pandit who justifies the system as a means to control mass hatred that arises due to the existence of inequality in society. The pandit believes it is necessary for the Vikarma to accept their fate for the betterment and stability of society. The system is justified as a means to achieve and maintain stability over the ages and it is only in a stable society where there is an opportunity to create intellectuals, businessmen and true geniuses. He also discusses the importance of balancing flexibility and stability in society. Flexibility is essential to allow individuals to pursue their unique dreams and talents, like a warrior's son becoming a businessman, enabling everyone to reach their full potential and thereby elevating society as a whole. Stability, on the other hand, provides a secure

environment where survival isn't a daily concern, allowing for the flourishing of intellectuals, artists, and innovators. Without stability, society risks descending into chaos, reverting to a primitive state where survival overrides civilized norms, ethics, and the pursuit of dreams. This delicate balance is crucial for maintaining a thriving, civilized society.

The point the pandit is drawing is that the people who come out of the Maika system in the lower social order after some time get frustrated because of their lack of talent and they tend to blame the society [as a whole] for their inability to perform better. This tends to create mass hatred in society and as a result there would be wars and fights for injustice which eventually lead to disruption in social order and instability.

The caste demarcations which had existed in society have been explained so as to justify the cause of stable society. This system existed to mass control people by this 'make belief system' of untrue facts like past sins.

The style and language used by the writer is lucid and simple, which connected well with the audience. This simplistic style entranced the readers along with the grand concepts on numerous contemporary topics such as caste system, education, structure of society, feudal wars and many more. The plot is aesthetically appealing in many ways. We can clearly see the author tried to entwine the past with the present by blending the contemporary issues with the past and presenting it in such a way that the reader easily understands the complexities involved. Shiva acts as the destroyer of superstition and dogma. Thus through logic and sensible rationality Shiva destroys the false beliefs and false dogmas that people held through his superior wisdom and his logical sense. Mythologies and stories remain a great inspiration and source of nostalgia and their reinterpretations will always be seen again and again through the contemporary writers in a new form with a modern touch and feel.

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