

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

SHIVA FOR ALL TIMES: A STUDY OF AMISH TRIPATHI'S *THE IMMORTALS OF MELUHA*

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ABSTRACT

Shiva is one of the supreme deities of Hindu mythology. He has been subject of all the literary works from folklore to present text. *The Immortals of Meluha*, the first novel in *Shiva Trilogy* by Amish Tripathi is also heavily embedded in Indian mythology. The narrative of *The Immortals of Meluha* builds on the Shiva myth which is central to the narrative structure yet it holds a mirror to the present social reality. The issue of environment pollution is addressed in the novel. The plot is set in 1900 BC but the situations which he portrays are also the replica of the present. Myth is used as a metaphor for contemporary society. The new writers with their modern sensibility recast ancient tales or narratives from their new perspective to reflect on and comment on contemporary reality.

Keywords: Immortals of Meluha, Hindu mythology, Myth, Environment

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INTRODUCTION

Amish Tripathi is a finance professional educated from Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta. He is passionate about history, mythology and philosophy. He is an avid reader of history and his inspirations for the story ranged from writers like Graham Hancock and Gregory Possehl to the Amar Chitra Katha series of Indian comics. For mythological parts in the novel, Tripathi relied on the stories and fables that he had heard from his family. He believes that there is a beauty and meaning in all cultures and religions of the world. One day, while watching a historical program, Tripathi and his family got into a discussion about consciousness and the evil inside man. In the program, they learned that in ancient Persia, Demons were known as 'Daeva' and angels were called 'Asuras'. Tripathi added,

It set me thinking that this was exact opposite of our Vedic etymology where evil was Asura and gods were Devas. It struck me that if the two civilizations were to confront each other, they would be at stark odds and calling each other evil. (Wikipedia web)

Tripathi felt the urge to write on this subject and found that no subject is better than Shiva, one of the major Hindu deities and the 'destroyer of evil'. Shiva's journey and story would deliver the philosophy Amish wanted to convey to his readers. He noted that Hindu gods were probably not "mythical beings or a figment of a rich imagination", but rather they were once human beings like the rest. It was their deeds in the human life that made them famous as gods. Indians worship God in four forms- Nirgun (Nirakaar-formless God), Aakar (in a

form i.e. Lord Vishnu, etc.) Avatar (incarnation of God i.e. Lord Ram, etc.) and a man who becomes God or discovers God within him (Gautama Buddha). Amish Tripathi took the fourth type and portrays Shiva as a human being of flesh and blood, makes him like an ordinary being or common people. As the reviewers of the novel remark,

The author takes myth and contemporises it, raising questions about all that we hold true and familiar. The book is (a) marvelous attempt to create fiction from folklore, religion and archeological facts. *People* ...wonderful book, replete with action, love and adventure, and extolling virtues and principles... The author has succeeded in making many mythological figures into simple flesh and blood human beings, and therein lie(s) the beauty and the acceptability of this book. *The Afternoon*

Within the novel, Tripathi focuses on the social issues through mythical framework. The issues of environmental pollution have been raised in the text. Environment pollution is one of the primary causes of diseases, health issues, etc. Conservation of environment has been an issue in various literary texts such as *Yajnavalkya Smriti*; a historic Indian text which advocates the prohibition of cutting of trees. Kautalya's *Arthashastra* written in Mauryan Period emphasized the need of forest administration. Ashoka Pillar's Edicts expressed his views about the welfare of environment and biodiversity. The British Empire also implemented several laws for environment conservation such as Shore Nuisance Act of 1853, Bengal Smoke Nuisance Act of 1905, etc. The Indian Penal Code of 1890 imposed a fine on anyone who voluntarily fouls the water of any public spring. Amish Tripathi has shown concern for the environment pollution and its effects. The manufacturing of various goods and health supplements produce lots of waste which is thrown in the water bodies. The contamination of water with harmful products causes serious diseases like cancer, tuberculosis, plague, etc. At UN Conference on Environment at Stockholm (Sweden) on June 14, 1972, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the late Prime Minister of India had said,

Modern man must re-establish his broken link with nature and with life. He must again learn to invoke the energy and to recognize, as did the ancients in India centuries ago, that we can take from the earth and atmosphere only so much as one put back into them. (Kumar 399)

It is true that any society urban or rural, industrial or scientifically advanced disposes of different kinds of waste products in the environment which affect the ecology or ecosystem. These pollutants have adverse effects on flora and fauna. Environment pollution is a continuous process that degrades the ecosystem. Industrial activities are the major source of air, water and soil pollution. For instance, the Union Carbide factory disaster in Bhopal in December 1984 was a major tragedy. It affected the health of thousands for a long time.

A systematic study on this subject started in 1970s but much earlier works of James Thomson's *The Seasons* (1726-30), William Bertram's *Travels* (1791) and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) had portrayed the concern for environment. Thoreau expressed, 'in wildness is the preservation of the world' in "Walking" in *Excursions*, 1863 (Abrams 83).

The point repeatedly made by ecocritics is that for the first time in human history, no true wilderness any longer exists on the planet, for every region is affected by global warming, and other 'anthropocentric' problems, such as toxic waste and nuclear fall-out. (Barry 248).

There are people across the globe who are concerned about the environment issues. They actively participate in the drive to save environment. These ecologically conscious individuals and scholars have been constantly publishing progressive works on environment. British Marxist critic Raymond Williams wrote a seminal critique of pastoral literature in 1973, *The Country and the City*. Another early eco-critical text is Joseph Meeker's *The Comedy of Survival* (1974). Various other efforts are being made to save the environment such as the recently launched programs like *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan*, *Namami Ganga* project and others.

Tripathi addresses this serious problem in *The Immortals of Meluha*. Meluhans take Somras which makes them strong, healthy and young. Somras reacts with the oxidants and absorbs them. Then, it expels the oxidants from the body in the form of sweat or urine. Therefore, no oxidants are left in the body because of Somras. But this

Sweat and urine released from the body even after a person has drunk the Somras for years remains toxic. So you have to eject it from body and make sure that it does not affect anyone else (135).

It is because of this the Meluhan society is very hygiene conscious. The people of Meluha bathe twice a day. They wash clothes every day. There is 'Great Public Bath' for everyone. There are no special rooms for the aristocrats in the Public Bath. 'All the ablutions are done in special rooms and underground drains then safely carry the waste out of the city' (135). The waste is thrown in the river that flows through Swadweep or the land of Chandravanshis due to which they are inflicted with deadly diseases.

Similarly, in the present time a large amount of waste from domestic activities such as bathing, laundry, etc is discharged in the Ganges and other rivers. The rivers serve as a dumping place for chemical plants, textile mills, distillers, hospitals and others. The waste which is thrown in the rivers is often toxic and non-biodegradable. This contaminated water when consumed by living beings causes diseases like cholera, hepatitis, dysentery, etc. Amish Tripathi raises this issue in the novel, Saraswati River is under threat. It is slowly depleting as the Meluhans are using a lot of water and throwing toxic remains of Somras into the river. The Somras is a boon but it is also curse; it gives strength and vitality to Meluhans on the one hand but is causing diseases in the Chandravanshis and increasing the Naga population on the other.

There is advancement in technology but it is leading to destruction. Development and destruction are the two sides of the same coin. Meluhan society though advanced yet is creating troubles for other societies. One strata of society has to suffer because of the other half. The water of Saraswati River is an important ingredient for

making Somras along with branches of Sanjeevani tree. But the manufacturing of Somras requires a lot of water.

When Somras was being made for just a few thousand, the amount of Saraswati water used didn't matter. But when we started mass producing Somras for eight million people, the dynamics changed. The waters started getting depleted slowly by the giant manufacturing facility at Mount Mandar... It's a matter of time before the entire river is completely destroyed (Tripathi 17-18).

Though the issue of environment pollution is taken up in the novel, *The Immortals of Meluha*, yet many other facts regarding the depletion of the Saraswati River will be further taken in the other parts of the *Shiva Trilogy*.

Conclusion

Amish Tripathi through this novel tries to address the social reality of the contemporary society. He recasts the Shiva myth to represent the malicious designs of people in power and how their selfish desire leads to destruction and devastation. He suggests a rational outlook to solve these problems. The fantastic elements of the Shiva myth are interwoven with the contemporary reality. The issue of environmental pollution is addressed through mythical narrative. Amish Tripathi did not invent a new world but reveals a world of magical realism in which supernatural realm mixes with the natural and familiar world. For instance, in the novel the intake of Somras turns Shiva's throat blue whereas according to Shiva myth Lord Shiva consumed poison during the Sagar Manthan. The writer gives the supernatural element a scientific tone as the readers may not believe that a human being can drink poison so he introduces an elixir drink that turns Shiva's throat blue. Hence, fantasy and realism combine to project the writer's worldview or vision of a more rational, just and fair society for all.

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