

# Varna or Karma: Reidentifying Disability in Main Stream in the Novels of Amish Tripathi through the Lens of Michel Foucault

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**Abstract:** *The concept of disability has been prevalent in Indian literature and mythology for centuries. In ancient texts like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, we see characters such as Dhritarashtra, who is blind, Ashtavakra, the great Vedic sage with eight deformities and Vamana, the incarnation of Lord Vishnu who was a dwarf. These characters were not seen as weak or incomplete but rather portrayed as strong and wise individuals. Disability studies in Indian literature have also shed light on the social and cultural attitude towards disability. It also counts the LGBT people in terms of disability. The Vedic texts mention the concept of "Varna" or caste system, and they often show marginalized people with disabilities. However, there are also instances where people with disabilities have been revered and held in high regard, such as the story of Kripacharya who was deaf and mute warrior in the Mahabharata. In modern Indian literature, we see a shift towards a more inclusive and empowering portrayal of people with disabilities. Authors like Arundhati Roy, R. K. Narayan, Devdutt Patnayak and Amish Tripathi have explored the theme of disability in their work, highlighting the struggles of their discrimination faced by individuals with disabilities in society. Overall, the concept of disability in Indian Literature and mythology is multi - faceted and continues to evolve reflecting the changing societal attitude towards this marginalised community. Victimisation, oppression and persecution have been major subjects of our society. By analysing literary works that featured disable characters or written by disabled authors, this field highlights the diverse experiences and perspectives of individuals with disabilities and advocates for their rights and representation in society. My research paper will critically explore disabled characters of Amish Tripathi's novels i. e., Shiva Trilogy comprises The Immortals of Meluha, The Secret of Nagas, The Oath of Vayuputras and four novels of Ram Chandra series i. e., Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku, Sita: Warrior of Mithila, Raavan: Enemy of Aryavrat and War of Lanka with Foucaultian framework.*

**Keywords:** Disability, Deformity, LGBT, Marginalized, Varna, Foucaultian, Vikrama, Discrimination, Post humanism, Impairment, Monsters, Race, Co - genital disorder

Disability studies in literature is an interdisciplinary field that examines the portrayal of disability in works of literature. It focuses on the representation, experiences and perceptions of individuals with disabilities in literature, as well as the social and cultural construction of disability. It aims at challenging traditional perspective and stereotypes surrounding disability by exploring the social, cultural and historical contexts in which it is constructed which examines its inter - sectionality with other aspects of identity such as race, gender and sexuality. It is important to differentiate between disability and impairment, as disability is a social construct that is created by society's attitude and barriers; impairment refers to an individual's physical or mental limitations. Paul Hunt, a disability right activist, introduced the concept of disability as a social construct rather than a person's medical condition. According to his theory, society creates barriers and limitations that disable person with impairment from fully participating in daily activities and accessing opportunities. Disability studies in literature points to challenge and deconstruct these social fences and promote a more inclusive understanding.

The Foucaultian theory of power and knowledge is a fundamental concept of disability studies. According to Michel Foucault, power is not something that is held by a

few individuals but rather it is a pervasive force that operates in all social interactions and relationships. When taken under discussion at a large scale, this theory challenges the traditional understanding of disability as an individual problem and instead highlights how power and knowledge are used to construct and maintain societal norms and structures that oppress such individuals as have these traits. Therefore, this concept is not fixed or inherent, but rather it is socially constructed through systems of power and knowledge. By analysing the ways in which power and knowledge operates in society, disability studies can uncover the underlying oppressive structures and work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable society for disable individuals. This theory also emphasises the importance of challenging dominant discourse and bringing marginalised voices ahead, as they have been historically silenced by those in positions of power. According to Foucault, truth becomes the puppet of power and the social construction maintains the society by segregating the stronger and the weak. This thought is even applicable to Meluhan society in Amish Tripathi's novels as the deformed people are segregated as Tribe of Nagas, a cursed tribe of people who are born with serious disfigured organs supposed to be the outcome of the sin of their past lives or births before.

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The tribe of *Nagas* is the people, as portrayed in Amish Tripathi's novels, can be seen through the lens of Foucault's framework of power and knowledge. In *The Immortals of Meluha*, when Shiva queries about *Nagas*, Nandi replies, "They are born with hideous deformities because of the sins of their previous birth. Deformities like extra hands or horribly misshapen faces. But they have tremendous strength and skills. The *Nagas* name alone strikes terror in any citizen's heart. They are not even allowed to live in Sapt Sindhu". (*The Immortals of Meluha*, Pg.61)

The *Nagas* are depicted as deformed people ostracised and feared by society due to their physical differences. This de-humanization and marginalisation of the *Nagas* can be traced back to the power dynamics within society, where those in power use their knowledge to construct a narrative that portrays the *Nagas* as savage and inferior. This not only justifies their oppressions but also perpetuates the belief that certain physical characteristics determines one's worth and place in society. This results in a deep-seated sense of self-hating and shame within the tribe, as they are constantly reminded of their "otherness". The ruling class of the *Nagas* led by their ruling queen Kali born with four hands, maintains control over the rest of the tribes by instilling fear and promoting a strict adherence to their customs and beliefs. This leads to suppression of individual freedom within tribe, as any deviation from the norm is met with severe punishment. However, the story unfolds and the protagonist learns more about the history and the origin of the *Nagas*, he begins to question these dominating aspects of power and challenges the established orders. The novels of Amish not only offer an engaging narrative but also serve as a commentary on societal structure and the power on individuals and communities. The analysis of Ganesh and Kali as disabled characters as the lord of people and queen of the *Naga's* Tribe is a complex one that can be explored through the lens of disability studies and the concept of power and knowledge. In *Shiva Trilogy*, both the deities are depicted as human beings having physical disabilities, with Ganesh having an elephant head and Kali having multiple limbs and fierce appearance. In traditional societal norms, people with disabilities are often seen as weak and incapable of holding positions of authority. However, in this portrayal, Ganesh and Kali challenge this notion by showcasing their exceptional skills, wisdom and ability to lead their communities despite their disabilities. This challenges the traditional notion of power being associated with physical strength and instead highlights the importance of knowledge and intelligence in leadership. By portraying these characters as strong and capable leaders, it challenges the social stigmas surrounding disability and highlights the potential for individuals with disabilities to excel in positions of power. This analysis also brings to light the importance of inclusion and diversity in leadership, as it showcases that disabilities do not hinder one's ability to lead effectively.

In *Shiva Trilogy*, Amish explore the concept of *Vikrama*, a group of untouchable and discriminated people. Like *Nagas*, the curse has caused them to be segregated from society and barred from participating in rituals and social gatherings. The Meluhan princess, Sati, the daughter of Emperor Dakshya, is also a *Vikrama*, making her a subject of discrimination and isolation, Amish attacks superstition of

society in general. Similarly, the LGBT communities are also considered underrated and excluded and ridiculed. Amish's depiction of '*Vikrama*' as a diminished community throws light on the harsh reality of the evils existing in society, whether it is based on caste, gender or sexual orientation.

According to Foucaultian theory, the character of Manthara in the *Ram Chandra Series* of Amish is seen as deformed due to her physical appearance of having hunchback. This deformity is used to represent her as an outsider and an 'other' in society, who is identified due to her physical indifference. As an ally of Queen Kaikeyi, Manthara's deformity is also used to reflect her cunning and manipulative nature, further reinforcing her status as an outcast. Additionally, Manthara's occupations as a business trader adds to her portrayal as a shrewd and crafty character, using her physical deformity as a means to gain power and influence in the court. This depiction of Manthara highlights how social ethics and expectation can shape and limit individuals leading to their exploitation. It also exposes the power dynamics at play in the royal court, where physical appearance and social status are valued over morals and ethics. Foucault's concept points the de-humanising effect of society ethics and how they can perpetuate discrimination and oppression towards those who do not conform.

The paper also argues that deformity or disability is not only a representation of post-human alterity but is also prevalent in the *Ram Chandra Series* by Amish. In the series, Hanuman the son of Vayu Kesari, is depicted as Naga and a member of Vayuputra tribe. He has a monkey-like features and an outgrowth from his back, further emphasizing his non-human form. Similarly Jatayu's, appearance like vulture, a *Naga* friend of Ram and Sita is also portrayed with physical deformities as the captain of Malayputra tribe. Pramod K. Nayar, in his book '*Posthumanism*', elaborates on the concept of impairment as monsters. This idea can be seen reflected in the characters of Hanuman and Jatayu, who are not accepted as fully human due to their deformities. Thus the paper highlights how deformity in the *Ram Chandra Series* can be interpreted as post-human alterity and aligns with Nayar's perspective on impairment as monstrous in post-humanism. It is also showing how post-humanism embraces diversity and celebrates difference. This further highlights the idea that deformity should not be stigmatized but rather embraced as a part of one's identity in the post human world.

Disability of Kumbhkarana in the works of Amish as far as described, is entirely different from rest of the disabled characters. He comes before us as a super-personality among all the demons. His structure of body has an uneven and uncommon type of body parts which are nowhere found in the entire the *Ram Chandra Series*. His big and tremendous ears are just like pots and there where outgrowth on his shoulders, likes two small extra limbs. Shurpnakha, sister of Raavan and Kumbhkarana is also a disfigured character. These body deformities characterised them as *Nagas*. Raavan, a famous trader and ruler of Lankan kingdom, son of sage Visharva and his wife Kaikesi, recognised as the superpower in the entire three universes. Yet he is one of the disable characters of The *Ram Chandra*

*Series*. He faced humiliation and hatred by his father due to his birth deformity as a purple outgrowth from his naval. Sage Vishrava says his wife Kaikesi “I am suffering due to your karma. Your bad karma has infected his naval! And his mind!” and “cover that thing! He glared his wife. ‘Your son will destroy my name’ (Raavan: Enemy of Aryavrat, Pg 23)”, clears that Sage Vishrava was embarrassed that his son is a Naga. Raavan faced hatred, mortification and abhorrence from his father due to his congenital disorder since his childhood. Despite these deformities he is famous for his scholarly knowledge and as a great musician, painter, inventor of Rudra Veena, writer of ‘*Shiva Tandav Stotam*’. Raavan depicted as the infamous antagonist in the Hindu epic Ramayana, is often portrayed as a cruel and violent character but Amish’s Raavan is a person of contrast, brutally violence but scholarly wisdom, a man of complex personality. As the point of view of Michel Foucault’s concept of power and knowledge, Raavan’s deformity and physical disability could be seen as a contributing factor to his brutal and violent behavior. As a child he faced physical abuse, which may have instilled feelings of resentment and anger in him. This coupled with societal stigma and discrimination faced by individuals with disabilities, could have led to Raavan’s desire for power and control over others. In the eyes of society, his disability may have made him feel inferior and powerless, leading him to use violence as a means of asserting his dominance. Thus, Raavan’s brutal and violent behavior can be seen as manifestation of the power dynamics at play in society, where the able-bodied hold power over those with disabilities. This highlights how disability can be used as a tool for exerting power and maintaining societal hierarchies.

As it has been said in *Bhagwad Gita*.

दिव्यांगत्वम् असहायं न कुर्यात् धैर्येण चानुकम्पया । यत् करोति तद् अस्माकं बोधं प्रत्तुभिरपि ॥

In this *shlok*, it is emphasized that one should not discriminate or show lack of empathy towards individuals with disabilities. Instead, one must approach them with patience and compassion. The actions and behavior towards individuals with disabilities should serve as a reminder to everyone to be more aware and understanding. This *shlok* highlights the importance of treating individuals with disabilities as equals and not letting their disabilities define them. It encourages society to educate themselves and others to create an inclusive and empathetic environment for those with disabilities.

Thus the paper points out the ideology of changing power with time and brim through novels of Amish provoking and enlightening exploration of disabled, monsters, black races, mutant babies and the impaired and insane characters in contemporary society. Through the use of Foucault terminology the paper is able to clearly identify and depict the response of these marginalised and underrated individuals to different forms of power. Shedding light on Foucault’s theory shines a critical lens on societal structures and hierarchies that contribute to oppression and discrimination faced by these groups. By highlighting the struggles and challenges faced by these characters, Amish not only brings attention to these issues but also offer a

unique perspective on the complexities of these power dynamics in modern society. Through their thought provoking narrative, he challenges the readers to question their own beliefs and perceptions towards these marginalised groups and inspire a deeper understanding and empathy for their experiences. The use of Foucault’s depth add a new layer of depth and insight to these novels, making them powerful work of literature that not only entertain but also educate and enlighten readers about important social issues. The paper serves as a reminder that every individual deserves equal rights and acceptance in society, regardless of their differences. Amish’s writing is a powerful commentary on contemporary society’s treatment of marginalised individuals and serves as a call to action for change.

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