

A Critical Study of the Representation of Subalterns in Amish Tripathi's *The Shiva Trilogy*

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Abstract: Amish Tripathi in *The Shiva Trilogy* has contemporised the mythical legend of Lord Shiva. Through the modernisation of the Indian 'Puranas', the narrator weaves a thread of marginalisation in his narrative. The position of the so called 'Vikarmas', as pointed out in the novels *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010), *The Secret of the Nagas* (2011), and *The Oath of the Vayuputras* (2013), equates with the notion of the outcastes or Dalits in modern India. This paper will focus on the depiction of untouchability in the genre of epic fantasy, the role of 'misinterpretation' of the philosophy of 'Karma' behind promoting the Caste System, and the historical concept of 'Sapt-Sindhu', the northern India. It will also be concerned with the covert strategies invested by the marginalised, exploited sections, like Nagas, to vent their pent-up rage and agitation, bordering on political unrest. The inherent power-politics, played across the social and economic hierarchy, renders the portraiture of the mythical, pre-historic Indian utopia in mainstream literature complicated and questionable.

Keywords: Mythology, Subaltern, Marginalisation, Discrimination, Class Division, Segregation, Injustice

The term 'subaltern' denotes that group of people who are living outside the hegemonic power-structure in a colonial homeland. They are ousted from the social, political, and geographical arena. The term 'subaltern' was coined by Antonio Gramsci, particularly while illustrating 'cultural hegemony'. In the Marxist philosophy, the ruling class invariably longs to crush and dominate the ruled classes culturally, through manipulating their beliefs, perceptions, values, morals, and imposing a ruling class world-view. Gramsci identified the groups excluded from a society's established institutions as the subaltern ones. The ruling class always wants to suppress the voices of the subaltern people. They are also called the marginalised section of the society. "Marginalization is the process of pushing a particular group or groups of people to the edge of society by not allowing them an active voice, identity, or place in it" ("Impact of Marginalization").

Amish Tripathi's *The Shiva Trilogy* consists of *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010), *The Secret of the Nagas* (2011), and *The Oath of the Vayuputras* (2013). In these books, Tripathi has endeavoured to modernise the mythical world of ancient Vedic India. He very wittingly has blended myth with philosophy, history, cartography, symbols, geography, and modern science to represent convincingly that Lord Shiva was not a born god, but a chosen human being who ascended the throne of divinity through his humanity, passion, intelligence, courage, fortitude, determination, above all through his 'Karma'. It is an odyssey of a common human being who bleeds, dreams nightmares, gets aged, afraid, excited, enraged, wants to take revenge. But what makes him more different from others is his unflinching bravado to question an age-old, orthodox tradition, to break a miserable custom, to uproot an irrational practice.

Tripathi's mythical Meluha predated 1900 B.C. About Meluha Tripathi wrote in *The Immortals of Meluha*, "The land of pure life. This is the land ruled by the Suryavanshi kings. It is the area that we in the modern world call the Indus Valley Civilization" (220). It is the perfect country governed by the motto of "Satya. Dharma. Maan: Truth. Duty. Honour" (46). The basic purpose of myth is to represent that gods once also

were human beings. It sounds blasphemous in more orthodox, narrowed societies; but, it opens up the cooped-up minds and creates enough scope and space for acceptance of other versions, other voices of the same tale. It is a liberalising and democratising process that educates a nation to culture and experiment with their oblivious traditions, long-forgotten heritages.

The writers like Longfellow, Dan Brown, Amish Tripathi humanise the divine, brings heaven down to earth, explores supernaturalism through the lens of reality. *The Shiva Trilogy* shows a man named Shiva, who got trained as a warrior. His throat became blue due to some medical application. To turn out Evil from the society, he fought several wars, but ultimately lost his beloved wife, Sati. On the other hand, *The Secret Magdalene* also evinces a common human being named Yeshua. He eventually turned into an extraordinary Messiah and finally got crucified for his divinity.

A myth is a story of gods and kings, their prowess, valour, with the blending of historical facts. Every country has different myths. These myths define a national pride, a nation's self-confidence. All the myths safeguard some unity, a lost meaning. We all have unresolved curiosities regarding this world, the other planets, the space, the whole universe, their Creator. In our simple faith in myths as traditional knowledge, or in Jungian terminology, 'collective consciousness', all those queries melted with a charming excitement. The innocuous mythical stories can help easily to explain a complex theoretical or philosophical idea, which may take thousands of words to illustrate. Thus they in a very interesting way teach moral lessons, value system without any preaching imposition. It can be seen as a form of juvenile literature that can shape their whole character to a positive dimension.

Shiva, a leader of the Gunas tribe in Tibet, immigrated to Meluha and got struck by the Meluhan way of life. After drinking Somras, his throat turned blue and the Meluhans recognised him as the long-awaited Neelkanth. The King Daksha requested him to attack the Swadeepans who were their enemies for centuries. Shiva fell in love of Daksha's

daughter, Sati, who turns out to be a 'Vikarma'. Shiva abolished this age-old custom and all the related taboos. Brahaspati, the main scientist of Meluha, invited them to Mount Mandar, where they produced the Somras with the water from the Saraswati River. He fought against the Chandravanshis, who were allegedly assisted by the Nagas. Under the leadership of Shiva, the Suryavanshis won. But in the second book, *The Secret of the Nagas*, he comes to know that none of the Suryavanshis, Chandravanshis, and Nagas, was evil. Rather, the main Naga fighter, whom Shiva thought to be the archenemy, was revealed as Ganesha, a Vikarma, born out of Sati's first marriage, and the queen of the Nagas, Kali, was Sati's Vikarma sister, banished by Daksha, scared to lose his family honour for begetting a Vikarma. In the third book, *The Oath of the Vayuputras* Shiva found out that the Somras, which was the greatest discovery of the age, had turned into the greatest Evil. The leader of the Vayuputras, Mithra, gave Shiva the Pashupat-astra, with which he destroyed the city of Devagiri to avenge Sati's death and thus banished Somras.

The Hindu scriptures, like the Vedas, the Epics, the Puranas, the Smritis, the Shastras, and the Upanishads, favoured the Aryans. But the non-Aryans like Dasa, Dasyu, Fifth Varna or Outcastes, and Shudras were represented in a cornered way. Either they have not been given enough space to cry out their voices or they have been accused of unproved crimes and villainies. Among these sections the 'Nirvasito' or banished people were treated more inhumanely. They were pushed down to the corner of the society and given pejorative appellations over the ages. Mostly they were called 'osprishyo' or untouchables. Touching them and even crossing their shadows are considered contaminating. These people living in the margins of the socio-political structure are depicted in marginal writings. Cultural minorities, Dalits, Afro-Americans, and women all over the world include the marginal section in literature.

The Immortals of Meluha brings forth the ancient Indian social structure. The Meluhan society is divided into four categories – Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Brahmins represent teachers, lawyers, priests and other intellectual professionals. The Kshatriyas are the warriors and rulers, Vaishyas are craftsmen, traders, and business people, and the Shudras are the farmers and workers. In this social hierarchy, one caste cannot do another caste's job. The amulet symbolising the shoulders of the *Parmatma* means that the wearer is a Kshatriya. Every caste has been allotted a particular amulet. Nandi, a great devotee of Shiva, expresses it in this way, "Well, if the lines are drawn to represent the head of the *Parmatma*, it would mean the wearer is a Brahmin. The symbol for a Vaishya would be the lines forming a symbol of the thighs of the *Parmatma*. And the feet of the *Parmatma* on the amulet would make the wearer a Shudra" (38).

The Meluhans are devotees of Lord Ram who was a Suryavanshi king. The Meluhan kings claim that they are the Suryavanshi or the descendants of the sun. The rival Swadeepans come from Chandravanshi – the descendants of the moon. The Meluhans believe that the Chandravanshi people are untrustworthy, crooked, and lazy with no rules, morals and honour. The Chandravanshis, along with the

Nagas represent the marginalised section of the Meluhan society in the novel. Though the Nagas possess tremendous strength and skills, they are neither treated as human and nor even allowed to live in their country by the Meluhans, as Nandi comments, "They are born with hideous deformities because of the sins of their previous births. Deformities like extra hands or misshapen faces.... They are not allowed to live in the Sapt Sindhu" (59).

Besides Chandravanshis and Nagas, there are the Vikarma people. People who are physically challenged or disabled, and those who give birth to disabled children come under this category. Shiva enquires about these people and Nandi reports, "Vikarma people, my Lord, are people who have been punished in this birth for the sins of their previous birth. Hence they have to live this life out with dignity and tolerate their present suffering with grace. This is the only way they can wipe their karma clean of the sins of their previous births. Vikarma men have their own order of penance and women have their own order." (92-93).

The Vikarma people have been alienated from the mainstream of the society. They are supposed to live a secluded life. Even they are not allowed to marry since they can contaminate others with their ill fate. Equally they are not allowed to touch any person who is not in their relation or is not part of their daily life. If a woman gives birth to a stillborn child, she will be marked as a Vikarma because she might have committed some terrible sin in her previous birth. If a man suddenly contracts an incurable disease and gets paralysed, it means that he is punished by the universe for the sins of his previous birth. All these sins of people are decided by the Pandits in the temples. This ridiculous practice of branding a person Vikarma goes on irrespective of any other reason – hereditary, physical disability or malnutrition, whatsoever.

There are many rules that the Vikarma people have to follow. They have to pray for forgiveness every month to Lord Agni through a special ceremony. The women have to wear long *angvastrams* dyed in the holy blue colour covering from head to toe. Their heads should be bowed down low in penitence. Sati, the heroine of the novel, gives birth to a stillborn child, and it is probably one of the worst ways in which a woman can become a Vikarma as per the Meluhan social belief. Shiva is captivated by Sati's beauty, swordsmanship and her wonderful dance. Once he touches her elbow to move it to the correct angle. She immediately recoils in horror and says, "Please go for a *Shudhikaran*, Shiva before nightfall" (103). During his journey to the Meluhan Empire, Shiva visits Kotdwaar and happens to see a blind man. The blind person has been marked as a Vikarma by the Meluhans because of his disability. He is not supposed to touch the *Neelkanth*. Hence, Vikarma people are considered to be the carriers of bad fate in the novel.

Contrary to Dalit or traditional marginal writings, the protest or anger against this system is hardly observed. The Vikarma people are highly submissive and meek while observing *Vikarma* rules. They have completely surrendered themselves before the Meluhan social ethics. They have no personal grudge or complaint against this social extortion. They believe and are made to believe that their low status is granted by the Almighty itself. This lowness is granted due to their

terrible sins of the previous birth. Hence the sanction behind this meanness is supreme or godly. The person who even grumbles against this recognition is considered to be a double sinner. When the procession of *Vikarma* women walked silently on, the normally quiet market street becomes almost deathly silent. Even, Sati, who is beautiful, honest, straight-forward, brave, intelligent, does not protest against this blind custom. She genuinely believes that she deserves to be a *Vikarma* and consequent punishment. She strictly adheres to all other rules laid down for *Vikarmas*. When Sati's aid and confidant, Krittika, raises question over this system, Sati glares: "Rules are all that I live by. What have I got to do with happiness? Don't ever dare to speak to me about this again" (214).

A *Vikarma* is normally not allowed to attend a *yagna* in Meluha. No *Vikarma* can be on the same platform while a *yagna* is being conducted. Tarak, a common *Kshatriya*, objects that by standing on the same platform, the princess Sati defiles the *yagna*. It was suggested that she should either move to the other platform of the city or outside the city wall. In this way she was insulted in public, blamed for polluting the *yagna* ceremony from far distance. Consequently, she was obligated to appeal to the right of *Agnipariksha* – a trial by fire. *Agnipariksha* is a duel unto death that enables a contestant to challenge an unjust tormentor. The duelists have to keep fighting till one person either surrenders or dies. So in this way a blameless woman's life is endangered without her any real blunder for the sake of Meluhan societal principles. Though Sati raises no hostility against this unjust practice, her father Daksha feels the angst of mortification and discrimination. He says, "It breaks my heart that I cannot give my daughter the happy life that she deserves ... that I cannot save her from humiliation that a good soul like her suffers daily" (277).

The Nagas, representatives of the bad fate in the novel, have been violently castigated by the Meluhans even if they act upon an exertion of righteousness. In the chapter "Journey through Meluha" the Nagas save two women from the severe assail of a crocodile. While rowing through the sea they hear feminine screams of terror in the air. They straight away engross in the rescue action without caring their own life. One of the Nagas was coming ashore carrying the other woman's limp body. The bewildered woman took the crocodile's blood all over his clothes as that of her friend and shrieked, "What have you done, you beast?" (110).

During his visit to Kotdwaar, Shiva confronts a discomfiting circumstance when a blind man happens to touch him. The man's son feels tremendously sorry because his father was a *Vikarma*. The blind man continues to sob while folding his hands in an apologetic *Namaste*. Shiva was moved by the seemliness of the blind man as he still loves a country that has treated him so shoddily. He represents all disabled persons of Meluha and a voice of injustice against such people. Drapaku, the son of the blind man, was also declared *Vikarma* along with his father, though he was a brave combatant. Severe objections were raised by the people against his insertion in the Meluhan army. They think that fighting is a business that involves none by *Kshatriyas*, and *Vikarmas* are weak that cannot fight. Later on Drapaku fights very bravely on the Meluhans' side and wins compliments from all corners.

The Meluhans think that this concept of *Vikarma* provides stability to the society. They deem that if you make a person think that his misfortune in this world is due to his sins in his previous birth, he will resign himself to his fate and not vent his fury on society at large. If that does not happen, many such disgruntled people can become a menace to the holistic society. Thus freedom for citizens is sternly restricted with social norms strictly maintained by ideological means and obligations. Parent-child bonds are calculatingly weakened when the child is grasped from mother and its identity is diluted soon after its birth. Healthy children are kept in Maika, while the disabled ones are deported from the kingdom. Thus ideal society maintained itself and prided upon. Only royal class is allowed to keep track of their biological child brought up in Meluha. Except the royal class, children are allotted according to their knowledge and talent to the people of particular class. This reinforces class discrimination and coercion.

Shiva, the central figure of the novel, raises voice against this discrimination and injustice. He challenges the 'perfect' prevalent social order of Meluha. He severely criticises the Meluhan caste system. He wonders that if a person is a warrior, he will not be allowed to trade at the market place. When Sati compels him for instant *Shudhikaran*, he does not care much about it, because he does not believe in impurity of the *Vikarmas*. Shiva is stunned to know how Sati was declared *Vikarma* only due to her giving birth to a stillborn child. He comments: "That sounds ridiculous to me. A woman could have given birth to a stillborn child because she did not take proper care while she was pregnant. Or it could just be a disease. How can anyone say that she is being punished for the sins of her previous birth?" (93).

Shiva does not mind touching the *Vikarmas*. During his visit to Kotdwaar, he steps forward and touches the feet of the blind man, a *Vikarma*, and seeks blessing from him. The whole crowd is awestruck as he frankly violates the Meluhan law. He resolves to knock down this social makeup and comes out as the spokesperson for the *Vikarmas*. He brings social reformation in despotic society of Meluha. He marries widowed Sati and promotes evolution that leads the nation towards higher state of consciousness. This makes him an enlightened being, *Neelkanth*. He works as a link between privileged and non-privileged, between kings and subjects. The people of Meluha, Swadeep, Branga and Naga become his followers.

Shiva believes in a simple philosophy. Brahma, the Creator, has created the universe, but does not interfere in its affairs. The human beings are given intelligence to decide and act upon. Thus, Shiva takes his clan, Gunas, who were continuously in struggle against the *Pakratis*, to a safe and secure living zone, Meluha. Before her marriage to Shiva, Sati had lived without any identity, any recognition. By breaking the *Vikarma* law, Shiva provides Sati an identity, a recognition to her self.

The gradual deterritorialisation and globalisation of human understanding is broadening the space for the marginalised classes all over the world. Tripathi's modern liberalising attitude shows a path to individual enlightenment and social

consciousness under the guidance of a social reformer, Shiva. The elucidation of the motivating war cry, “Har Har Mahadev” (191) as each and every individual is a Mahadev, leads us to realise that the rise of individual consciousness awakens the society at large. As days go by, the marginalised classes are coming to the front and the visions of the Amish Tripathis, of the Mahasweta Devis, of the Arundhati Roys, of the G.C. Spivaks and many such conscious souls are coming true.

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