



The Immortals of Meluha: A Literary Review

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Abstract: Amish Tripathi's Shiva trilogy (2010-'13) remains the fastest-selling book series in Indian publishing history over a decade later, having cultivated scores of mythology aficionados spanning generations. Its influence reverberates in the current fictional engagement with mythology, an abundance of which has spawned since Tripathi's publication. The novels, following the arc of Shiva written into fiction, become a site of demythologizing and remythologizing of the canonical mythological figure.

The review examines Amish's attempts at condensing the larger-than-life portrait of the divine into a life-sized character fleshed out with flaws, as someone who is shown struggling with imposter syndrome, the ill-fitting symbol of destruction testing out his fate in the prime of the Indus Valley Civilization. It locates the exercise of Shiva's apotheosis in the first book, *The Immortals of Meluha*, understanding how he navigates his stature as the prophesied Neelkantha.

Keywords: demythologizing, remythologizing, apotheosis, world-building, origin world

The Immortals of Meluha (2010) serves as the debut novel by Amish Tripathi, and the first to the Shiva trilogy, namely *The Secret of The Nagas* (2011) and *The Oath of The Vayuputras* (2013) following it. *Meluha's* catapult to fame led to the trilogy being the fastest-selling book series in Indian publishing history, captivating mythology aficionados looking to indulge in retellings of a story they had unquestionably consumed thus far. Set in 1900 BC, the book follows the arc of Shiva, the *Guna* tribe chief, and his journey from the Mansarovar Lake in Tibet to the socio-topographical prime of the Indus Valley Civilization – Meluha.

Amish attempts to rewrite history and culture by spinning the mythic codes and taking the creative liberty to fictionalize it. He draws the reader into his exercise of neo-historical reading of what has grown to be accepted as mythology, toying with the liberties of fiction, and the contrasting belief subsumed into much of his readership. The trilogy operates as a careful interrogation of mythology now made glossier, sophisticated, with its frayed edges tied into a neat bundle packaged to entertain hero-worship. We find him rectifying, for the readers, the erroneous and lost knowledge of the Indus Valley Civilization, thereby creating the fictional world of Meluha through the ruptures of history. The character of Shiva is centralized within the mythic scope as much as it is in the fiction, where the former cultivates him into a staunch and undeterred power, the reverberations of which are experimented with in the fiction. The Acknowledgement finds Amish declaring his devotion towards Lord Shiva, “The universe bows to Lord Shiva. I bow to Lord Shiva,” and before the story even begins, one would assume that the character has already attained a degree of infallibility. The trilogy stands as his attempt at interpreting the apotheosis of Shiva. It is based on the possibility of the religious icon being a human, with fleshed-out flaws, a mortal history, and an end – a very life-sized story being caved out of divine, larger-than-life myths. The text becomes a site of demythologizing and remythologizing, with Vedic concepts refashioned and repurposed into the realm of logic and science, and a broader understanding of spiritualism and its correlation with technology. Meluha is built as the landmark of civilization, and the ironic positioning of the lord of destruction in the civilized prime opens interesting routes to continual conflicts. Any scope of destruction is driven by the hero’s impulses shaping into his hamartia, without treating it as an omniscient caliber that is usually a hallmark of Shiva’s divine identity. Amish’s way of showing fidelity to characters based around the mythical figure of Shiva adds to his strength in world-building. Nandi, the devotee and guardian deity of Shiva’s abode Mount Kailash, is given a human equivalent as Shiva’s Meluhan general. Sati, Bhadra, Daksha, and the other chief names in Vedic history such as Vashistha and Vishwamitra appear as prominent characters catalyzing the course of action for the hero. The universe is fictionalized in an effort to extend the myth, to corroborate it into the scope of realism, and demystify the divine to some extent. Amish tries to justify and rationalize the myth and its tropes in scientific terms, as if justifying his own devotion and making it palatable to the youth, the atheist, and the agnostic. He also makes sure to refrain from constructing the text as an antithesis to the

devotion he harbours, and so does the majority of his readership. The trilogy has since been published in several translations, making it accessible to the masses in all communities and age groups.

This fleshed-out hero serves as a modern icon who is shown using expletives and staying true to his identity as a tribal chief, experiencing the spectrum of human emotions which are anyway associated with the passionate image of Lord Shiva. While centralizing the myth on his image, he also parallelly decentralizes it, pluralizing the stature of Lord Shiva himself. The name *Mahadev* hence becomes a common noun, a democratized title, as Shiva himself hails that anybody could be a *Mahadev*, the most benign god. It can also be read as his attempt at lessening the weight of the title himself, tracing his identity crisis and imposter syndrome – whether he truly belongs to a land as sophisticated as Meluha, and to top the epiphany, being deemed as the saviour of that civilization. We also see a play of delayed decoding, with the shifting of antagonism, from Chandravanshis to the Nagas, to a yet unknown force of evil. The morality and righteousness emblematic in “*Satya. Dharma. Maan: Truth. Duty. Honor.*” is also questioned by the ambivalence that surrounds it. With the delayed decoding, we get to later negate the Chandravanshis and the Nagas as the evil force, but only when it is too late. It also problematizes the trope of the elixir, the *Somrasa*, which is presented as an antioxidant drink of the Gods, the glory of the aristocrats, only to later be debunked as the force of evil. This guise of morality is hence debunked in a text inspired by mythology – the latter notoriously known to thrive on polarity, therefore opening post-modern interpretations of the text. However, the act of destabilizing the “known” and demystifying the “unknown” also lets Amish weave his strands of fiction into the fabric of social commentary. The Nagas are ostracized and cornered into a separate community, the ones who were born into regular families, civilians and aristocracy alike, but were abandoned due to the anomaly in their anatomy. Kali is the identical sister of Sati, but black-skinned and with four arms, and Ganesh is the elephant-headed son of Sati from her first marriage. Their identity is clandestinely cast away. The Naga community, shunned to suit the hegemony that the origin world operates in, now threatens it, developing itself as a radical and reactionary force to the dominant lifestyle of the Meluhans. This also adds tension to the idea of *Ram Rajya*, the utopian conduct followed in the Meluhan society. The society is vile with oppression, owing to class and caste hegemony, which is affirmed by the motif of seals used to classify the caste distinction, a nod to the trailblazing finding of artefacts from the Indus Valley Civilization.

Sati is also on the receiving end of political and social stigma. She is kept in the dark of her husband and child's death, only to discover Ganesh alive as the Naga chief in the later parts of the series. Despite being an able princess warrior, she is discriminated against as a *Vikarma*, a carrier of bad fate – an untouchable. This stigma that functions even within the aristocracy is falsified by Amish, not by widely having the characters denounce and hence destroy it, but by negating Sati's identity as a *Vikarma* by bringing up a backstory, a political underpinning which rules her life unbeknownst to her. We also find a Marxist sentiment in the State ideology, where we are told how the children from all the households are turned in to the State, which tracks their development and allocates what discipline or field of work they are to pursue for the rest of their lives. This forms a looming question to the idea of free will, which is problematized right from the very first chapter; Shiva recalls his uncle from a distant memory, encouraging him to seek the truth beyond the Himalayas, before he finds himself entangled in the predestined *Neelkantha* prophecy which he is bound to fulfill.

The meta-mythologizing of the *Neelkantha* also democratizes the godliness in the title, as iterated above. The chant “*Har Har Mahadev*” which means “*Mahadev* is everybody” serves as an act of Amish's crediting of the human imagination, and so does his universe of the trilogy, by means of which he deftly posits himself as a sub-creator. This demythologizing also opens doors to an anthropological reading of our histories, going beyond the cultural and symbolical imperative and decoding several meanings to understand the past better. His imagination lets a translation of those mythic codes into fictional tropes within a realist frame. For example, Nandi, as mentioned above – the mythological bull and aide of Lord Shiva, is personified as the good-natured Meluhan chief catalyzing Shiva's grand narrative by inviting him to move beyond the mountains with his tribe in the orders of Emperor Daksha. Tripathi, trying to maintain fidelity to the appearances of the mythical characters, emulates their essence in his fiction. Nandi is shown as an obese general, to gain resemblance to his image as the mythical bull. The relayed iconography and its translation, thereof, lets the mythology gain a parallel traction with the fictional text itself.

The amalgamation of history, mythology and fiction enables a seepage of rational, scientific paradigms into the Vedic corpus and history. It portrays technology in a transcendental light, something which is not only present in a rigid bracket of time, but has its extensions beyond our knowledge of history. However, Amish chooses to normalize the preaching of “Lord” Manu in the severely problematic text *Manusmriti*. He does not only normalize

the oppression, but also showcases that society in a matter-of-fact way, transacting with the social evils. The author, we realize, uses fiction not as an empowering tool, but as a tool of extending our forms of knowledge of the mythology. He furthers the masculine and feminine binary in Suryavanshis and Chandravanshis respectively, but in his defense, it hinges on the duality of Shiva's mythical image, and Amish endorsing the theory of cyclicity, allowing fluidity in the status of the dominant discourse. His tropes are based on binaries; *asura*, *devata*, the good, and the evil, which limits the post-modernist potential at first until it starts to challenge the dominant discourse. There is never one absolute concept that can stay in power; it is continually replaced by the engagement between the residuum and the derivative. The theory of *Karma* and *Moksha* reinstates the said fluidity, enabling Shiva to fill the void of his predecessor, Lord Rudra, and also digest philosophies of death and destruction. In this way, Amish condenses the largesse of mythology and fantasy into his fiction, separating Shiva from the figure of the supreme to a relatable fictional hero.

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