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The Correlation of Myth and Feminism as Presented in Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy*

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Abstract:

In the 21st century, when women have acquired equal rights in all spheres of life, the subject of women empowerment appears by default in literature. In this regard, Amish Tripathi's fiction presents certain fascinating aspects. *Shiva Trilogy* is a mythic Fiction based on mythology related to Lord Shiva, the prime deity in Hindu Religion. He has re imagined a utopian society called Meluha, created by the Hindu God, Lord Ram, as per his ideals. It is interesting to analyse the status Amish assigns to the women in his visualization of Ram Rajya through mythic archetypes like; Shiva and sati, prototype of Lord Shiva and Goddess Sati. The setting of his fiction is 1900 BC, the period when the projected Saraswati Civilization, commonly referred to as Indus Valley Civilization, collapsed. This fiction presents the status of women in the distant past, intuited by today's ideals of feminism. This article analyses the shades of feminist approach undertaken by Amish in his mythic fiction *Shiva Trilogy* which includes *The Immortal of Meluha* (2010), *The Secret of Nagas* (2011) and *The Oath of Vayuputras* (2013).

Keynotes: Feminism, Meluha, Ram Rajya, Women Empowerment, Literature, Antiquity, Indus Valley Civilization, Vedic Culture.

In the ages long tussle between men and women for social power, men have always remained physically dominant. It has led to their supremacy in the spheres of education, and subsequently, in literature. To them, literature has been a tool to regulate the lives of women by setting up a pseudo model of the ideal female. Authorities from texts, religion, myth, fiction, etc., have been predominantly used to limit women's role in society and to restrict them within prescribed boundaries to sustain patriarchal supremacy. It is no matter of surprise that all limiting social codes for women have been created mostly by men.

Literature and society are in several ways shared reflections. When we need to prove something in social context, our arguments depend to a large extent on the examples projected in literature. In this perspective, a fine example has been stated in the IGNOU

reference book for M.A. students on Feminist Criticism. It puts forward the example of Jane Austen's novel *Persuasion* - during a conversation with Anne Elliot, Captain Harville accuses women of being fickle and inconsistent; the most amusing element of his argument is that it is based on books rather than experience:

*"But let me observe that all histories are against you - all stories, prose and verse...I do not think I ever opened a book in my life which had not something to say upon women's inconstancy. Song and proverb all talk of women's fickleness."*¹

Literature is often used as an authentic source when one has to pass judgement on women. In this reference, famous feminist critic Simon De Beauvoir quotes, *"This has always been a man's world, and none of the reasons have offered in explanation have seemed adequate."* The captain's claim in the novel is refuted by Miss Elliot. She says that men have always had the strategic advantage of telling a story from their viewpoint as *"Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands."*²

Thus, the representation of the status of women in literature is overtly a male oriented touchstone. In this respect, Amish Tripathi must be allotted credit for not only creating a women-friendly society in his fictional world by casting equal power in the hands of women but also for redefining the social norms responsible for the degraded condition of women. He has authored a seminal narrative of contradictory cultural beliefs - gender-bias promoter's *vis-a-vis* the promoters of gender equality. If there is a failing, it is in his propounding of the "Beauty Myth".

In the *Shiva Trilogy*, Sati, Ayurvati, Kritika, Kanakhala, Kali, Major Uma, Veerni, and Anandhmaya are the major female characters - each one of them is dextrous, independent, professional and powerful. Such status of women is iconoclastic against the traditionally defined role of the women in the society where women were referred to as *"The other"*³, men's subordinate and not an *"autonomous being"*⁴ as described by De Beauvoir. In India, Ancient lawgiver Manu, writes regarding the role of women, *"The father looks after her during her childhood, the husband protects her during her youth, and the sons take care for her when she becomes old. Women is never fit for freedom."*⁵ Even the *Holy Bible* denies independent role for women, it says, *"...do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve..."*⁶ What makes the role of these character important is their depiction in the distant past during the period of Sarasvati Civilization. People tend to derive their pride by associating themselves with idealistic mythic past and so these character serves as a solid bridge between the dignified present and imagined glorious past of the Indian Women. Not only Amish Tripathi but also a number of other writers like; Kavita Kane, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Devdutt Pattanaik, have reinterpreted, reconstructed and rewritten the mythic story to fit it in the frame of the modern feminist demands of the society.

The first female character to appear in the novel is Ayurvati, the head state doctor. She is highly respected by all Meluhans. She and her team of competent nurses are capable of the most suitable treatment. The set-up is in sheer contrast to the often parochial and conservative attitude exhibited in the present Indian society that frowns upon independent working

women. Though it is the case around the world as De Beauvoir writes, “*man defines woman not in relation to herself but as relative to him; She is not regarded as autonomous being.*”⁷ Ayurvati’s appearance is also non-conventional so far as the aesthetic standards of the average Indian woman is concerned. Her forehead bears a white dot and “*her head was shaven clean except for a knotted tuft of hair at the back, called choti. A loose string called a Janau was tied from her left shoulder across her torso down to the right side.*”⁷ The point is not to be missed that ‘choti’ or a knotted tuft of hair on the bald skull and Janau are the traditional attributes of highly educated Brahmin males. By assigning similar attributes to both men and women, Amish has created an unbiased society where prejudice is not gender-motored.

Assigning similar attribute and aesthetic standards to both male and female is itself very important for gender equality, the ultimate feminist goal, in the society. Traditionally male and female have been tried to bound in different gender attributes. The submissive attributes like; compassion, gentleness, meekness, nurturance, tenderness are given to women and is attached with the ideal of “femininity” while dominant attributes like; adventure, aggression, boldness, dare, leadership are assigned to men and is attached with “masculinity”. In this reference, De Beauvoir says, “*One is not born but becomes a Woman*”⁹. With pre-defined categorization of expected gender traits, gender-biasness would keep on nurturing as “masculine female” or “feminine male” would also be equally rejected. Thus, the abolition of this gender attribute will collapse the long drawn hierarchical line between male and female. This has been practically presented through the women of the Meluhan Society in the *Shiva Trilogy*.

Another woman character, the prime minister of the state, is a proficient lady named Kanakhala. Amish probably wishes to establish the notion that in spite of wielding abnormal power, these ladies easily integrate normal family values. So, when the prime minister is asked what the most powerful force in her life is, she replies jestingly, “*Well, the most powerful force in my life is the desire to get out of the house before my mother-in-law wakes up!*”⁹

Lady Sati is the epitome of women empowerment in the trilogy. She is the daughter of Daksha, the King of Meluha. She is extremely fine-looking with a captivating appearance of long, black, flowing hair, piercingly magnetic blue eyes, bronze skin, lovely curved features, a flawless face, air of confidence and dignified walk. But her qualities transcend her physical feature as she is a fierce warrior with unmatched martial skills, courage and compassion. She is a widow and a ‘Vikarma’, untouchable, when she meets Shiva. Amish’s concept of untouchability is not connected to birth. In the novel, if a lady gives birth to a deformed or still born child or if there is a person with an incurable disease, he/she is declared an outcaste and untouchable with the belief that the sins of their past birth are responsible for his or her state. The concept has been developed with the conviction that in such circumstances people will accuse themselves for their problem rather than accusing anybody else. Sati is ‘Vikarma’ because her first child was still born and her added misfortune was that her husband also died on that very day. However, in the work, the male protagonist of the novel breaks the social rule and marries her. It is a bold step as widow remarriage is still a contentious issue in a

major portion of Indian society. Godlike Shiva's marrying a widow in the Ram Rajya uplifts the status of women considerably.

Amish also offers an alternative to the concept of "Agnipariksha". In Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas*, the episode of 'Agniparisha', or ordeal by fire, locates Goddess Sita amid leaping flames to establish her purity.¹¹ It is an interpolation as no such episode occurs in the original, Valmiki *Ramayana*. Notably, Valmiki *Ramayana* appeared between 1st and 5th century B.C. when the status of the women in India was lofty and respectable while Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas* was written in the 16th century when their social status of the women in India had begun to erode. In Amish's fiction, 'Agnipariksha' is a duel unto death within the ring of fire, to challenge injustice. In the novel, a cynical character insults Sati for her being an untouchable and inevitably, Sati challenges him to 'Agnipariksha'. Though Parwateshwar who regards Sati as his goddaughter, requests her to let him fight on her behalf, Sati refuses and decides to fight for her honour herself. Shiva stands by Sati in her decision, supports her courage and trains her. In the duel, Sati routs Tarak but spares his life.

In the fiction, Meluha and its contemporary societies have been paralleled with Indus Valley Civilization, the pre-Vedic Civilization. Not much about the Indus valley civilized has been discovered yet as the script of the civilization is yet to be deciphered but it is certain that it preceded the Vedic Period, thus, it must have been somewhere akin to Vedic culture. The gender equality presented in *The Shiva Trilogy*, corresponds to the role of the women in Vedic culture. Ray Choudhri, in his book, *Social, cultural and Economic History of India* writes that the women of Vedic period enjoyed better position than the subsequent periods. He writes, "*These women not only composed hymns but were also well-versed in sacred texts. Women also learnt music and dancing.*"¹² If Vedic literature is taken as a valid document of Indian social, political and religious history of the period in the absence of adequate archaeological or historical evidences, claim of Ray Choudhri must be reserved as undisputable. According to the Vedic literature, women had their rights and privileges during the period. They were allowed to be educated as the initiation ceremony or Upanayana was for both girls and boys. The age witnessed many women poets and philosophers "*like Visvavara, Apala and Ghosha even composed mantras and rose to the rank of rishis.*"¹³. Lopamudra, one of the female preachers, is said to have preached as many as 179 hymns of the first book of the Rig Veda along with sage Agasthya.¹⁴ The Rig Vedic society was free from social evils like female infanticide, sati, child marriage. widow remarriage was permitted; inter-caste marriages was allowed.¹⁵ People were given absolute freedom to choose their caste. "*In one case the father was a priest, the mother grinder of corn and the son a physician, all three lived happily together.*"¹⁶ Such parallel between Vedic Civilization and the civilization presented in *The Shiva Trilogy*, shows that Amish must have painted the women of his fiction with the Vedic Colours.

Woman is often regarded as a "Weaker Vassal", the one who can't fight for herself and needs male protection. Perhaps Amish wants to break down this myth by presenting Sati as a warrior. The concept of woman as warrior is not completely fictitious as Indian history has witnessed a large number of female warriors e.g., Rani Abbaka Devi, queen of Ullal who fought against the Portuguese in the latter half of 16th century, Rani Velu Nachiyar from

Shivganga, Rani Chennamma of Kittur and Rani Laxmibai of Janshi who fought against the British, Keladi Chennamma, the Queen of Keldi in Karnataka who defeated three lakh soldiers of Aurengzeb, Rani Rudrama Devi of the Kakateya Empire who defied the male counterparts in the Medieval Age, Maharani Ahilyabai Holkar, Queen of the kingdom of Malwa, Maharani Tarabai, once Commander-in-Chief of the Shivaji Maharaja etc.¹⁷ Parallel to such outstanding figures is the female protagonist Sati who not only fights shoulder to shoulder with Shiva but also leads in the war. From mythology to contemporary society, the example of warrior women has never lacked. In Hindu mythology goddess Kali, Candi and Durga, in Greek mythology, the tribe of Amazons, Sekhmet in Egyptian mythology etc. appear and reappear in literature with new interpretation corresponding to contemporary social demands.

In Shiva's absence, Icchawar, a village of Kashi is attacked by a pride of thirty lions and lionesses headed by a tiger. Sati rises to the occasion by voluntarily staking her life and fighting the beast to save the lives of the villagers. She is about to lose her life when the Nagas, a tribe of people with deformities, appear and save the situation. Sati's battle with Swuth, the assassin from Egypt, in which she dies, trying to save her people, is exemplary as she never gives up although she is grievously wounded and drenched in blood. Swuth, the head Egyptian warrior, considers women as "*stupid baby-producing machines!*"¹⁸ and he wouldn't even deign to talk to a female whom he considers "*a sex ...far beneath men, only a little better than animal.*"¹⁹ But Sati's valour forces him to revise his opinion and he declares she is his "*Final Kill*". Amish has structured a myth that in Egyptian culture, in the cult of Aten, every assassin would one day meet such a magnificent opponent, who though defeated, would make it impossible for him to carry on the business of elimination. Every assassin must bestow honourable death upon his "*Final Kill*" and give up his profession, venerating the last victim for the rest of the life.

The relationship of General Parvateswar and Princess Anandmayi is allegorised with the mythic story of Menka and Viswamitra. A celibate sage, Viswamitra, is seduced by the heavenly nymph Menka into marriage but Viswamitra leaves her when he finds out that she has been sent only to break his celibacy by Indra, thunder God in Hindu religion, akin to Zeus, Jupiter or Jove, Shango or Perun in ancient Greek, Roman, Yoruba, and Slavic religions respectively. In the same way, the celibate Parvateshwar is seduced by Princess Anandmayi into benign marriage.

In media, the woman form sells. Contemporary popular literature has also used it to a similar effect. In Amish's trilogy, when the celebration of Shiva's Son Kartik's birthday is organised at Kashi, Anandmayi performs a sensuous dance. She is described in following terms: "*she was wearing a shockingly tiny dhoti and a tight blouse, leaving very little to the imagination.... Chandravanshis in the front row leaned forward to get a better view of the ample cleavage that was revealed.*"²⁰ Amish adds that the audience would be whistling if she were not a princess so the worst they can do is ogle. On another occasion, When Parvateshwar goes to her chamber for arrangements, Kanini, Anandmayi's masseuse is on her job and princess has been "*lying on her stomach had one piece of cloth draped loosely from her lower back to her upper thighs. The rest of her, a feast for his eyes.*"²¹ This erotic

description of the female physique appears in Amish's work and sometimes one wonders if the male bias of perception is simply a causative necessity or the real self of the author. Anandmayi's figure, her wit, courage, integrity of character and devoted love for him influences Parvateshwar to break his oath of celibacy and marry her. Naturally, the erotic image appears to be an afterthought. Amish has also presented a balanced view of life on the basis of on gender. There are two ways of Life - Masculine and Feminine. The masculine way of life is "*Life by Laws*" and the feminine way of life is "*Life by probabilities*". Both are necessary for balance.

Women like Sati, Ayurvati, and Krittika represent certain prototypes of women in this Utopian Ram Rajya. A few other female characters like Kali and Anandhmaya are from outside yet their social status is equally superior. Amish recreates these ideals to present true social and community models for 21st Century India.

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