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Portrayal of Caste Systems in Amish' S *Shiva Trilogy*

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Abstract:

“More than twenty years have passed since independence, how much longer? I want to be able to drink from the village well, worship in temple, walk where I like”

Rohinton Mistry: A Fine Balance(14)

Using Amish's Shiva trilogy this paper is an attempt to explore the caste systems and highlight the depth of evil to which the human mind can succumb to cling on to power and supremacy. The Trilogy is a reminder of the danger of division segregation issues which were adhered to centuries ago and which are as relevant as today as it was then. Through the Shiva trilogy Amish explores the various rules imposed on the lower caste (Nagas Vikramas). Some examples of these rules were: walking with *dhol* (drum) and beating on it to announce their arrival so people could run away to avoid being polluted, living outside the city limits, never touching other people. It also reveals the hypocrisy of Hindu ideology and show a helpless community deciding to stop tolerating the crime.

This paper is based on the caste systems as portrayed in the Shiva trilogy. It is an attempt to explore their origin, nature, gravity, and deprivation and also discuss how tradition and culture combine to produce a unique form of social bondage and many time it becomes the reason of violence, physical assault and humiliation.

The Shiva trilogy discuss the maltreatment, oppression and caste discrimination of the Vikramas and Nagas, and Shiva's challenging of these customs.

Keywords: caste system, Shudhikaran Nagas, Vikramas, Discrimination

INTRODUCTION:

Amish Tripathi is foremost among the popular fiction writers. He is known for writing the Shiva trilogy, which means that it is a set of three books: The Immortal of Meluha, The Secret of The Nagas and The Oath of The Vayuputras. In these books Amish has delineated lord Shiva's life very beautifully and effectively. How he was a common man like everybody else, living a rural life, and how destiny had something else in store for him. Shiva trilogy is the story of a legendary man. Shiva is a Tibetan tribal chief who is fierce and hates the frequent fights and wars and has the quality to decide quickly between good and bad, virtuous and evil, right and wrong.

Amish portrays lord Shiva as a human form rather than a deity, who was born into the world to destroy Evil. As a human being he uses different strategies to battle against the Evil.

In the world everything has both side positive and negative. Good and Evil are the ways of life for every living entity. Our creation and destruction is through Good and Evil through balance and imbalance. This is true rule for plants, stars, and every sentient and non-sentient thing. According to Bhagavad Gita the universe is always trying to maintain the balance of good and evil. We must aid this by ensuring this that good is not enjoyed excessively. Or else the universe will re-balance itself by creating evil to counteract good. That is the purpose of evil; it balances the Good. Always good leads to Evil. Many times the Good we create leads to Evil that will destroy us.

In the Shiva trilogy Amish has shown this very succinctly through Somras the divine drink which leads to immortality. In the beginning Somras was good, because it was consumed in very little quantity. It is only for the Brahmins but with the passing of time Lord Rama declared that the benefit of the of the Somrasa should be available to all. After this Somras is manufactured in large amounts and it changes into great evil. If we think logically about the manufacturing and processing of Somras, we can understand how it transforms into something harmful. When the Somras is produced it generates large amounts of toxic waste. It can not be disposed off on the land, because it can poison entire land through ground water contamination. The Somras waste react with salt waste to disintegrate in a dangerously rapid and explosive manner. Somras is directly connected to plague of Branga, the plight of Nagas and Vikarma and the drying up to the Saraswati. Nagas peoples born with deformities as the result of Somras. The Somras randomly has impact on a few babies when in the womb if the parents have been consuming it for a long period. But in the Meluha society the Somras become still Good for lot of peoples. They never want to see Somras in the form of evil. Because it increase their life span dramatically and enable them to lead youthful, disease free and productive lives. but in reality it has become evil for society as a whole. Many people sacrifice their everything for some selfish people. In the proclamation Shiva describe Somras as an Evil

“father Manu had told us Evil is not a distant demon. It works its destruction close to us, with us, within us. He was right. He told us evil does not come from down below and devour us. Instead, we help Evil destroy our lives. He was right. He told us Good and Evil are two sides of the same coin. That one day, the greatest Good will transform into the greatest Evil. He was right. Our greed in extracting more and more from Good turns it into Evil. This is the universe way of restoring balance. it is the parmatma’s way to control our excesses.

I have come to the conclusion that the Somras is now the greatest Evil of our age. All the Good that could be wrung out of the Somras has been wrung. It is time now to stop its use, before the power of its Evil destroy us all. It has already caused tremendous damage, from the killing of the Saraswati River to birth deformities to the diseases that plague some of our kingdom. For the sake of our descendants, for the sake of our world, we can not use the Somras anymore” (The Oath of the Vayuputras 119)

Thus Somras becomes the reason of social conflict and casteism in the Meluha society one side it has those people (upper class) who think that it is not evil and only reserved for them and on the other side are the exploited and power less peoples who think that Somras is the major evil in the Meluha society.

Social inequality and caste systems among the people is found all over the world. This is found in the different patterns and form. Sometime it is found in form naturally other time it created artificially or designed by tradition and our religious values. Social inequality is not a product of our time, it is deeply connected and rooted in our past. It is a cultural and social phenomenon that has been a part of tradition, dividing people into caste in a hierarchical order based on their descent/birth.

In the ancient times Manusmirti ((dated between 200 BC and 100 AD) contains some laws that codified the caste systems. Manusmirti and other shastras mention four varnas: The Brahmin (teacher scholar and priest) The Kshatriya (king and warriors) The Vaishyas (trade landowners and artisan group) and The Shudras (agriculturalist and service provider).

Caste systems is a designed system to control people. It is a tool which causes people to suffer oppression. The downtrodden/oppressed blame themselves for their misery, because they believe that they are paying for sin committed either in their previous lives or those committed by their ancestors or even community. The systems therefore propagates suffering as a form of atonement and at the same time does not allow one to question the wrong done unto oneself.

Portrayal of Caste systems in Shiva trilogy

In the Shiva trilogy Meluha city is the symbol of perfection. Meluha civilization is the best civilization in the world. Rule of law is supreme in Meluha because law is the foundation of the Meluha civilization which gives it an edge over others. This was the land of abundance of almost ethereal perfection. It is an empire ruled by clearly codified and just laws to which every Meluhan was subordinated, including the emperor. The average intellect was exceptionally high. It seemed to be a flawless society where everyone was the aware of his roles and played it perfectly. This is the one side of the Meluha, but when we look another we find the caste systems old tradition rules which exploit the lower caste peoples. The problem is that some grossly unfair practices in the nearly perfect society for example the way Vikarma are treated. When we analyse the Meluha city we find Meluha a land of truth, duty and honor. The society of Meluha is wonderful, things do seem very well and in order. In the poem The Second Coming, W. B. Yeats rightly observed after the passing of the time every civilization and society becomes corrupt and going on the way of destruction. The rules and law of the caste systems makes Meluha imperfect and the "perfect society" becomes full of violence, bloodshed cruelty. The strong point of the Mehula become the weakness and good thing change into the evil.

In the Shiva trilogy the caste system is divided into four Varnas Brahmin Kshatriya Vaishyas and Shudra. Everyone has a tribe and caste amulet on his shoulder for identification. The partition of the caste is based on the Parmatma's body lines. If the lines are drawn to represent the head it means Brahmins, if drawn on the shoulders it means Kshatriyas, thighs for Vaishya and in the last feet of the Parmatma for Shudras. There are also tribe symbols: birds for Brahmin, animals for Kshatriyas, flowers for

Vaishyas, and Fish for Shudras. Every caste is created on the basis of peoples quality. But problem arises when we see the pathetic and miserable condition of Nagas and Vikramas people. All the rules of social welfare and perfection are completely changed.

In the Shiva trilogy Nagas people are the cursed people. They are born with hideous deformities because of the sin of their previous birth. These deformities are like an extra hand or misshapen face. The Nagas are the symbol of hate and misbehave with all Meluhan peoples. They are not allowed to live in the 'Sapt sindhu'(Indus, Saraswati, Yamuna, Ganga Sarayu, Brahmaputra and Narmada).The city of the Nagas exists to the south of Narmada,beyond the border of Meluha land. In a song Naga show the plight of their life and ask a question to God

*“You were my world, my God, my creator
And yet, You abandoned me
I did not seek you. You called me,
And yet, You abandoned me.
I honored You, lived by your rules, coloured myself in Your colour
And yet. You abandoned me.
You hurt me, you deserted me, You failed in your duties
And yet, I am the monster.
Tell me lord, what can I”*

(The Secret of The Nagas, 144)

Another category of the exploited is Vikrama and untouchable. Vikaramas are those who have been punished in this birth for the sin of their previous birth. They have to live this life out with dignity and tolerate their present suffering with grace. According to rules this is the only way they can wipe their karmas clean of the sin of their previous birth. Vikarama men and women follow many strict rules like they have to pray for forgiveness every month to lord Agni the purifying fire god.Vikamras women not allowed to marry since they may contaminate with their fate. They are not allowed to touch any person who is not related to them or is not part of their daily life. In Meluha two types of oppressed peoples reside; one who believe that their own people deserve their cruel fate, because they are being punished for their past life sin. Sati, who believed in the concept of karma extending over many birth. In all the eighty five year she had the spent as a Vikarma. She had never broken the law. The second group wants to break these laws as they think that these laws are only an excuse for the exploitation of the people. Shiva is the voice of this group. He always criticized the law of Vikarma. He says ,

How illogical this entire concept is ? How can one believe that an innocent child is born with sin ? It is clear as daylight: a new born child has done no wrong. He has done no right either. He has been. He could not have done everything. (The Oath of Vayuputras,55)

Procession of Vikarama women: In this procession Vikarama women walked silently. They were all draped in Angvastram which was dyed in holy blue colour. Their heads were bowed low in penitence their prayer plate full of offering to lord Agni.The bustling

market becomes deadly silent as the pitiful women lumbered on their way. All the people of Meluha give way to Vikarama women because nobody want to see and touch them.

Law to decide Vikarmas: It is a very strange rule to brand a person as a Vikaramas, for example, if a woman gives birth to a still born child she becomes a Vikrama because her still born child is proof that she had committed some terrible sin in her previous birth or if a man suddenly contract an incurable disease and get paralyzed he will be a Vikarama because the universe is penalizing him for the sin of his previous life. All the people deeply believed in the concept of karma being carried over many birth. In the Beginning Shiva is the only one who does not accept such rules and laws. He always raises his voice against them and wants to abolish them

According to Shiva

“that sounds pretty ridiculous to me. A woman could have given birth to still born simply because she did not take proper care while she was pregnant. or it could be a disease. how can anyone say that is being punished for the sin of her previous birth?”(The Immortal of Meluha,94)

“Well, to be honest, it sounds like a rather unfair law to me” he adds further on.

Law of the shudhikaran : In this law if any vikaramas or any citizen touch each other they must undergo the purification ceremony. If any person does not undergo shudhikaran it can be harmful to him. This rule cannot be overlooked or disobeyed by anyone.

In the words of Sati

“ I respect you immensely. your valour, your intelligence your talent. but you are not above the law, you have touched a vikarma. you have get a shudhikaran.that is the law.”
pg 199

But Shiva never accepts this he thinks that it is completely wrong, and he questions Brahsapati:

“you tell me honestly, how can it harm me if i happened to touch a wrong man.who might add still love his country despite the way he has been ostracized and ill-treated”

In the dance scene when Shiva touches Vikarma Sati it becomes the cause of terror. the dance teacher was the first to recover his wits and realize that Shiva must undergo the purification ceremony. he advises Shiva thus: go to your pundit and tell him you need a shudhikaran.Go before the day is over. Sati also give him the same advise and she think that she is the reason for this and says, I would never be able to forgive myself if something were to happen to you.

But Shiva is a logical man and he did not believe in this law and he refuses to undergo the shudhikaran. In fact he does not even bother to find out the rites and rituals of the ceremony, he thinks

“Why would I have to be purified for touching sati? I want to spend all my remaining year touching her in every possible way. Am I going to keep on undergoing a shudhikaran everyday? Ridiculous!” (104)

After this brief outline of the various castes and the rules governing them, that existed in the perfect Meluhan society, an attempt is made to bring into focus certain characters who are living representatives of this system like Sati, Kali, Ganesha and the Naga sister of king Athithiva.

Sati : Sati in the Shiva trilogy is an important character and the female protagonist. She was the princess of Meluha and wife of the Shiva. She is the great warrior and follows every rule of the lord Rama Chandra and Meluha society. She is probably the most eminent Vikarma in the history of Meluha, because she was the first royal woman to give birth to a stillborn. Her fate has been a source of embarrassment to the emperor. It has raised question about his ancestry. Although Sati has the power to rebel against the rules of Vikarma she does not do so. She fades into the background like most Vikarma and lives her life in anonymity. How Sati becomes a Vikarma underlines how totally ridiculous this system is. It was around ninety years ago.Sati married one of the noble emperor Chandandhwaj. When she got pregnant and went to Maika to deliver the child. But unfortunately the child was stillborn. On the same day, her husband who had gone to the Narmada to pray for the safe birth of their child, accidentally drowned. On that cursed day her life was destroyed, and she was declared a Vikarma not because of her husband’s death but because she gave birth to a stillborn child. In Meluha giving birth to a stillborn child is probably one of the worst ways in which a woman can become a Vikarma. Only giving birth to a Naga child would be considered more worse. But in actuality Sati gives birth to a naga child. Her child was not stillborn. Her father knows this secret about her child but he never tell her the truth of child, because it will be more worse for Sati.

After being declared a Vikrama Sati follows all the rules of the Vikarma like she covered her body to holy cloth, she never marries again, she never touches other citizens of Meluha and every month she worships lord Agni to purify her sin. Being a Vikarma she become subject of humiliation and insult by her own people and rules.

In the chapter Trial by Fire, Tarak a Meluhan citizen raised a question on the presence of Sati when a yagna is being conducted. Tarak raised the issue that the law says that no Vikarma should be allowed on the Yagna platform. The exact words of the law is that no Vikrama can be on the same platform while a Yagna is being conducted.the Yagna is being conducted on the Dwitiya platform of the city. being on the same platform, the princess defiles the Yagna. He also insults Sati and says that

“I don’t understand what a vikarma, woman is doing traveling with the convoy of the Neelkanth. she is polluting the entire journey”()

After this Sati who had tolerated insult far too long, and had endured them with quiet dignity. But this time she refuses to be tolerant and she asks for a Agnipariksha. Agnipariksha, a duel unto death, enabled a contestant to challenge an unjust tormentor. It

is called Agnipriksha as combat would be conducted within a ring of fire. There was no escape from the ring.

So it is clear that how the rules and law of caste played a crucial role in the exploitation and discrimination of Vikrama peoples. The Vikarma law did not make sense a thousand years back and remains so even today. It was just a tool to oppress people one does not understand.

Kali: another female character of the trilogy, oppressed for the sake of caste. She was the daughter of king Daksha, and twin sister of Sati. King Daksha left Kali when she was born, because she was born with Naga features..For the sake of his false power and hypocrisy king abandoned his daughter. She became the queen of Naga people .Her entire torso had an exoskeleton covering it, hard as bone. there was small ball of bone which ran from her shoulder down to her stomach, almost like a garland of skull. on the top of her shoulder were small two appendages, serving as a third and fourth arm. The colour of the face was jet black but the Nagas queen face was almost an exact replica of the Sati's. After the birth of Kali, king Daksha left Kali secretly and she lived in the Nagas city. But she never satisfied with her father's decision, and has always anger for her father. she think that why her father left her despite he was a king if he want, he can changed the rules of Nagas. She think that due to upper caste rules we feel pain and discrimination. Kali was the well skilled warrior and she attacked Meluha many times , but she never killed innocent people. Her only target is to get control of the Somrasa. She wants to destroy every source of Somrasa. Because it is the real evil in the Meluha.

Lokadhis/ Ganesha: Ganesha/naga is the another person who is hurt by the the deadly rules of the Meluha. He was the son of Sati and Chandandhawaj. he was born with hideous deformities, or Nagas quality. Ganesha 's forehead was ridiculous broad, his eyes placed on the side almost facing different directions. His nose was abnormally long stretching out like the trunk of an elephant. Two buck teeth struck out of the mouth one of them broken. The ear floppy and large shaking of their accord. It almost seemed like the head of an elephant had been placed on the body of this unfortunate soul.

Maya sister of king Athithigva: Maya is actually a Naga woman, two women in the one body. The body was on from the chest down, but there were two sets of the shoulders, fused to each other at the chest, each with a single arm dangling in either direction. the naga woman had two head, one body, two arm four shoulders. King Athithigva loved to his sister and never want to left his sister. He secretly hide his sister in a palace and every day he going to meet his sister. When Sati know the this secret she give the advise to follow the rules of the Nagas. But Maya say so rules made thousand of year back, in a different land, by people who don't know us or our circumstances, will govern every aspect of our life. In the words of lord Ram, rules are not an end in itself. They are create a just stable society. But what if the rules themselves cause injustice? Then how do you follow lord Ram by following those rules or breaking them. Maya also say that

“who is the more misunderstood today than a person with a deformity? Call us naga. Call us monster. Throw us to the south of the Narmada, where our presence will not trouble in the other citizen’s lilywhite lives. Is not punishment enough that we live alone in this god forsaken palace, with only three servants. That the only excitement in our lives is the periodic visits of our brother? How much more do you want to punish us? And will you kindly explain what we are being punished for?”

In the trilogy Shiva is the only person who always tries to established the social equality. He is center of the trilogy and plays a role of the social reformer. This is one of the reasons of his being declared a Mahadeva, the destroyer of the evil. He tries to eradicate every evil from the society and is successful in this. He destroys the evils like social inequality, concept of previous birth karma/sin, untouchability of Nagas and Vikarms and lastly destroys the Somrasa (major evil of Meluha). Shiva always thinks logically he never have faith in the concept of previous birth. He discard the belief in the fatalism or predeterminism, followed by the Meluhan people, because it is responsible for social stagnation. It leads to people social consequences and make him a victim of false superstitions in life. He think about previous birth that nobody has seen the previous birth, nobody can prove that you have committed sin in the previous birth it only a systems to control the peoples.

“well, to be honest, it sound like a rather unfair law to me”

After touch to Sati in dancing scene and a blind man at kotdwar journey shiva challenge the law of Vikarama. And after marry with Sati he prove that such type rules is nothing it is only make for exploitation of Vikakarma peoples, it is only a hypocrisy.

“firstly, I don’t believe in the nonsense that he was punished for the sin of his previous birth. He was just stricken by an illness, plain and simple. Secondly, if I chose to carry the weight of someone else’s so called sin, why should it matter to anyone” pg200

In the beginning shiva have to hate Nagas people because he does not know the reality of Nagas peoples. After know the real fact of Nagas he become the Savior of them and he fight a war against the Meluha society to stop the exploitation of these peoples. In the end of the trilogy, shiva destroy the main evil of the society. Somras which is directly connected to plague of Branga, the plight of Nagas and Vikarma and the drying up to the Saraswati. Nagas peoples born with deformities as the result of Somras. With the help of nagas and vikaram and oppressed mass shiva finished this evil and established a peaceful society.

Conclusion: In the Shiva trilogy major concern of Amish is to remove the social inequality or evil and to highlight the inhuman treatment of untouchable peoples. The author is harshly ironical on the snobbery and hypocrisy, ostentation and fabrication of the aristocratic people. In the form of Shiva, Amish is the true voice of the Vikarmas and the Nagas peoples who seem to be like the untouchable and victimized by undeserved tyranny and injustice from the time immemorial. By the medium of Shiva trilogy he

express his great advocacy of the marginalized and defenseless against their age long humiliation, persecution and oppression.

Amish has often declared that he has attempted to explore good and evil in his trilogy and in the process has portrayed a human turning into god. After this discussion, it is clear that alongside his declared intention, Amish seems to have taken a torch in his hand to highlight and remove the dead customs and misleading traditions. Through the medium of the Shiva trilogy, Amish shows us a true and clear picture of how we can rectify our errors, misjudgment, tradition and rules of law. All of us have the potential of a 'Mahadev' to enable the destruction of the prevalent caste system provide a new hope and perfect society for the oppressed and victimized people.

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