

THE ELUCIDATION OF MYTHOLOGY IN THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU: A POSTMODERNIST READING OF AMISH TRIPATHI'S *THE IMMORTALS OF MELUHA*

NAWAL NAGI

Asstt. Prof. (English), Dept. of Extension Education,
Faculty of Agriculture, Assam, Agricultural University

ABSTRACT

Mythology is the expression of the various facets of a culture and civilization passed on from generation to generation, orally in its original sense, which sustains the essence of an indigenous group of people and indicates their specific identity. With the advent of industrialization which led subsequently to the growth of capitalism and modernism, the nature of society marked a shift characterized by an alteration in conventional patterns of behavior, values and organization. The coming of the postmodern age stressed on subjectivism, skepticism, individual experience and resisted absolute definitions. There is no doubt then that mythology, in its bid for survival, was bound to undergo adaptations and modifications in its nature and politics arising from the myriad of changes in the socio-political setup.

This paper will look into the change in the nature of transmission, reception, interpretation and consumption of mythology in the postmodern era and will examine its seepage into the popular culture. The narrative knowledge generated by this circulation of information in the popular culture brings into suspicion the classical notions and has a key role to play in the power relations of the society. Further, the motivation for the consumption of tradition in the postmodern culture also transforms to one of a very personal nature, rather than a communal one directed at strengthening solidarity.

This paper will examine how with the infusion of technology, mythology finds its way to the market and is commodified in the age of repetition and pastiche, leaving us with only copies which do not refer to any material reality in a temporal frame. It will also study Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* in this postmodern context and will attempt to establish it as product of its time.

KEYWORDS: myth, postmodern, *The Immortals of Meluha*, Amish Tripathi

INTRODUCTION

Ancient human knowledge is beset with mythical narratives passed on from generation to generation, orally in its original sense, which sustains the essence of an indigenous group of people and indicates their specific identity. These myths are profoundly entrenched inside religion and form the expression of the various facets of a culture and civilization. Mythology is molded and sculpted out of a collective memory of a group of people. Even though its origin lies in the distant past and can be traced sometimes to the beginning of civilization, the relevance of mythology to the ever-changing times has been constant. The reason for the same lies in the spirit and substance of the narratives, tales, art and culture which draw upon themes of human predicament and life. This allows for its

adaptation to varying circumstances, enabling it to survive across decades and centuries. Due to this dynamic nature of mythology, it persists and reappears, in similar but not totally alike form, in diverse places and situations. Talking about this recurrence, Philip Johnson states that, Recurrent patterns of

mythic motifs include nostalgia for a lost paradise, yearnings for a utopia, and the universal hero slaying monsters (64).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Mythology transmitted across generations in the form of storytelling serves the integral function of identity consolidation. Storytelling has been an ancient art-form, and according to Laura J. Kaighn, fulfills a deep need for us to define ourselves through our stories (4). These stories help us to place ourselves in a temporal frame while identifying our ancestry, developing an understanding of our history and drawing linkages to our past through tales. Kaighn in her work *Modern Storytelling: The Power of Myth Revisited* draws attention to a statement by Fred Craddock, storyteller and preacher, Anybody who can't remember any further back than his or her own birth is an orphan

(12). The function of storytelling being not just limited to that, stories have been narrated over the years to young children to fulfil an instructive purpose. This is in line with the popular belief that humans learn most effectively when they enjoy themselves, and therefore didactic tales have been used as medium of instruction for young developing minds since time immemorial. While also encouraging the virtue of listening, when we recount the experience of another, underlining their ideality, we set an example for ourselves and for others, and strive to play a part,

however small, in constructing the utopia of our tales. With the advent of industrialization which led subsequently to the growth of capitalism and modernism, the nature of society marked a shift characterized by an alteration in conventional patterns of behavior, values and organization. The modernization of society entailed a change in the thought process which was characterized by suspicion, cynicism and loss of faith in traditional and cultural beliefs. Along with this came the loss of an order and an intense need to find the meaning of life and existence. The famous French philosopher Albert Camus, much associated with the existential school of thought, denied life of any meaning and stressed upon the impossibility of finding one. The commercialization of tradition as a response to the rising capitalism raised questions of authenticity and brought into suspicion the project of cultural continuity. These changes in the socio-political setup marked a change in the outlook and perception of mythology, especially brought about by the skeptical disposition of the period. Walter Benjamin's definition of modernity as new in connection to that which has already been there perfectly reasserts this idea.

The coming of the postmodern age stressed on subjectivism, skepticism,

individual experience and resisted absolute definitions. The advent of the postmodern age replaced the ontological doubt with an epistemological crisis. Hermann Bausinger in his *Folk Culture in a World of Technology* underlines the problems faced by folklorists with the coming of the modern age. The presentation of information of the past was no longer limited to a single sense. The mass culture and commercialization brought before the viewer the

objects of the past which contributed to loss of the aura associated with it. The easy availability and reproduction of history and historical material brought tradition into the marketplace (Tokovsky 330). Common people had easy access to it now and they interpreted and analyzed it in their own manner, thus obliterating the hierarchy which existed between the masses and the folklorists. In the words of Hermann Bausinger, The infusion of technology into our lives creates not only a new world of objects but also new social and spiritual realities. This process blurs the old horizons within which the traditional goods of folk culture found their validity. Goods and images from distant places become available to the individual consumer, disrupting existing perceptions of the spatial world (32). Individuals now become consumers and tradition and mythology are their objects of consumption, which they consume now, in the postmodern age, only to achieve a sense of self fulfillment. Jean Baudrillard underlines the idea of competition in the postmodern world which, he believes, gives way to a philosophy of self-fulfillment as individuals actualize themselves in consumption (Warshaver 223). With tradition becoming an object of consumption, the interpretation of mythology begins to differ for each consumer. The world of technology and media facilitate in the creation of a realm where history and mythology assume different meanings for diverse participants.

Looking at the Indian publication fad of late, a recent trend amongst Indian writers has been to exploit mythology and history to weave stories in a modern scenario, connecting the contemporary world with the historical and mythological domain. Devdutt Pattanaik, Ashwin Sanghi and Amish Tripathi are some prominent writers traversing this domain.

For his book, *The Immortals of Meluha*, Amish reimagines the life of the great leader Shiva and fuses his imagination with fantasy. Shiva, in his books, is not the Destroyer Lord, but is an ordinary young man, a refugee, who is lifted to the pedestal of a Lord through his deeds. The idea that Amish tries to bring home to the reader is that only the deeds of a man can decide his fate in life and can either elevate him or

deprecate him. The very concept is quite contemporary and blends well with the modern emphasis on rationality as it rejects unexplained providence for a judicious and logical outlook.

The character of the protagonist, Shiva, is not in line with the God that we worship today or in fact, have been worshipping from generations. In fact, it would not be wrong to say that he is quite anti-heroic at times. He is portrayed as an ordinary individual, unsure of himself and his potential. The responsibilities forced upon him make him reluctant and anxious. Like an ordinary young man, his insecurities and weaknesses are laid bare to the reader. It is important to note that Shiva is introduced in the first chapter of the book as a man who prefers to escape from his native land instead of fighting against the Pakratists. He is also depicted as being prone to manipulation as Daksha exploits him for his own good. In the words of Abhirami Nair, Amish succeeds in presenting the protagonist with all the baser instincts of a man which puts him apart from the heroic deeds, wars and life of Lord Shiva (460).

The representation of Amish's protagonist is therefore, not in accordance with the conventional or the long-standing idea of heroism but his choices, beliefs and actions definitely render him worthy of the title of The Neelkanth conferred upon him. He elevates himself in the eyes of the reader not by virtue of his birth or

status, but only by means of his righteous principles, his love for people irrespective of their rank or position, his ability to empathize and the courage to pioneer a change, wherever he deems fit, in the way of life of the Meluhans. Indeed, to identify a flaw in a society which is universally recognized as ideal is not only quite analytical but also extremely prudent and judicious. Protagonist Shiva, time and again, stands up for what he believes in, commencing various transformations, revolutionizing the societies he comes in contact with. Further, he also stresses upon the ability of each one to recognize the God within themselves which allows one to draw a link with the individualized form of religiosity (6), a significant aspect of the secularization following modernism, which John W. Morehead discusses in his paper *The Truth is Out There: Postmodern Myth and Archetypes, Extra-terrestrial Salvation, and Mythic Apologetics*. The disenchantment, a product of the modern age, altered the way in which people connected with their religiosity, as a result of which the institutionalised forms of religion now gave way to a more secular and spiritual standing. This is more often referred to, in common words, as a preference for spirituality over religion. There could hardly be a better way to

realize this than by becoming conscious of a divine presence within oneself and a belief in one's ability to do the right.

Tripathi's novel concerns itself with the definition and understanding of good and evil in society. He juxtaposes the society of the Chandravanshis with the ideal state of the Suryavanshis, which stand respectively for dystopia and utopia. He creates binaries to set them against each other but as the tale progresses, the reader comes to the realization that these binaries are created just to have them

dissolved as one cognizes the complexity of the idea and the fallacy of drawing absolutes in a multi-faceted epoch. The post-modern standing of the dissolution of absolutes and the impossibility of drawing one is thoroughly consistent with this notion.

Jean-Francois Lyotard in his classic text *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, coined the term 'grand-narrative' and the rejection of the same in the postmodern era. A grand-narrative is a conceptual idea that claims to be an all-inclusive elucidation of historical events and knowledge. These narratives not only clarified, but also legitimized this knowledge. Critiquing all knowledge as narrative knowledge, Lyotard contended that in the post-modern world which is characterized by fragmentation, grand-narratives have no credibility as they are formed by excluding other narratives and are thus viewed as oppressive. In the post-modern world, grand narratives give way to anecdotes and other fragmentary tales, thus annihilating the presence of one absolute truth and allowing multiple standpoints.

Analyzing Tripathi's novel in this light, one can argue that Amish endeavors to do the same in his work. By incorporating fantastical elements in his work, not consistent with the narrative knowledge of generations, he rejects the oppressive chronicling of the past and allows for fragmentation and an alternate outlook. In post modernism, the rejection of a grand-narrative lays down the origin of various micro-narratives which take its place. These micro-narratives are alternate perceptions, new interpretations, tales which take into account the marginalized, etc. – all of which did not find a space in the oppressive dominant narrative of the years gone by. Ananya Roy Pratihari in her paper, *Folktale and Fiction: Transformation of*

„*Once Upon a Time* Formulas in Indian Popular Narratives argues that Amish's Shiva trilogy can be viewed as a micro-narrative of the Indian mythology, and believes that his modern viewpoint is based on historical, linguistic, cultural study (9) along with fantasy. Tripathi brings to the reader alternate explanations of various mythological phenomenon and strives to explain with rationality concepts like the

Shiva's blue throat, somras, Sati's death by fire, the elephant-head of Ganesh, etc.

This rewriting of the myth which is a product of the reinterpretation of the long-established set of codes also facilitates to uncover the truth from a cobweb of lies (Pratihari 9). Of course, it is impossible to distinguish lucidly facts from fabrication; but by allowing an unconventional interpretation to prevail, we keep the analytical wheels of the society running. These powerful encounter(s) with alterity (84), as David Gross chooses to term it, enable us to perceive our everyday in a new light.

The disenchantment with religion and folklore in the modern age was followed by a re-enchantment brought into force by the dynamism of globalization and pluralism in the post-modern age. In this context, Adam Possamai discusses the consumer culture which gives birth to 'hyper-real religions'. An important aspect of the modern, or more appropriately the post-modern mystical quest is the practice of building and preserving a sense of spiritual or religious identity through the activity of consumption. This is exactly what seems to be taking shape in the country today. Religion and mythology are being consumed in the popular cultural via a retelling giving rise to hyper-real religions. By hyper-real religion Possamai refers to a simulacrum of a religion partly created out of popular culture which provides inspiration for

believers/consumers at a metaphorical level (Morehead 7). Through this digression into popular culture, it is important to not overlook the fact that the concepts represented in the popular culture are essentially a product of the diverse mythic archetypes that are continuously drawn within the minds of people. This remains true for *Immortals of Meluha* as it incorporates allusions to several mythological figures and iterates the fundamental human predicaments.

The persisting presence of intertextuality in Tripathi's novel further underlines the postmodernist tendencies of the novel. The Meluhan empire bears reference to the ancient Indus Valley civilization of ancient India as the Naga characters in the text can be linked to the significant Hindu serpent deity Nagaraj. Additionally, the text consists of several names and terminologies from Indian mythological and historical sources which serve to draw a relation with the wider cultural framework, for example the character of Sati is a reference to the revered Hindu Goddess who is also the consort of Shiva, the vital Somras is a reference to the Soma which is considered a holy ceremonial drink related to immortality, Mount Kailash is an allusion to the mythical abode of the Lord and his

loyal companion Nandi shares his name with the bull that serves as Shiva's mount. Furthermore, the text features a fragmented non-linear narrative as it integrates shifts in time and flashbacks into the main storyline. It is recounted from multiple perspectives and with several parallel plotlines it has a dismembered structure. In addition to incorporating a very powerful social and cultural critique, Tripathi, very significantly, blurs the line between the real and the imagined and contests the customary conventions so as to generate a narrative that harbors the sentiments of the age.

CONCLUSION

In an age marked by globalization and cultural pluralism, Tripathi explicates the enduring relevance of mythology and contests our perception of tradition, mythology and identity. His work underscores the ability of mythology to irradiate the human condition and fashions a dynamic and developing relation between tradition and modernization. Tripathi's reinterpretation of mythology presents a compelling specimen of how postmodernism guides our comprehension of ancient narratives. By challenging conventional interpretations and presenting modern/postmodern ideals, Tripathi's novel not only bids readers to examine new standpoints on mythology but also reveals the continuing evolution of mythological and cultural narratives in a rapidly transforming world. Additionally, his reinterpretation of the popular Hindu God, focus on rationality, preference of spirituality over religions and the dissolving of absolutes aligns with the postmodern values and reveals the postmodern sentiment of the novel. It succeeds in demythologizing the lives and obliterating the supernatural for the common Indian reader. In doing so, at times, it does away with the nuances and compromises the vitality of the legends, but does acquaint us with a more personalized version of the most multi-faceted God.

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