

Mythic Genders and its Nuances in Retellings with Relation to Tradition and Modernity: A Study of Selected Characters from Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy Series

Arya Raju¹, Dr. Babitha Justin²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIST

²Associate Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIST

Abstract

Mythic retellings usually present the divine or epic characters in human nature, often detaching the godliness in them as much as possible and attributing them to the contemporary times of the world. Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy, *The Immortals of Meluha*, *The Secret of the Nagas*, and *The Oath of the Vayuputras* follow the same pattern. Shiva and Sati (Shakti) are a celebrated concept in the Indian scenario, where the former is equated to masculine principle and the latter to feminine principle. The paper uses textual analysis to understand how mythic masculinity and mythic femininity are represented through selected characters in the texts, and how these characters are fashioned to suit the gender understandings of contemporary times. Indian mythic masculinity in its traditional sense has generally been equated to warrior masculinity which can be traced to the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Indian mythic femininity can be defined as the convergence of beauty, sacrifice, and purity (often the binary opposite of mythic masculinity). However, the retellings, like the Shiva Trilogy series, attempt to break away from the strict stereotyping of Gods and Goddesses, and provide a new framework to re-write the traditional understanding of mythic masculinity and mythic femininity. Further, the Shiva trilogy series is set in a background where technology and nature are intertwined in myriad ways. Thus, the paper also brings into question the various aspects of modernity and tradition in relation to gendered spaces and performances. The paper aims to gain more insight into how myths, that are closely fabricated into the Indian psyche, can be reinterpreted and utilized as powerful motivators of change in the contemporary scenario.

Keywords: Mythic Characters, Gendered Spaces, Gendered Performance, Binary, Modernity, Tradition.

1. INTRODUCTION

The tension between tradition and modernity has been a recurring theme across nations, especially when intertwined with orientalist endeavors to rediscover cultural roots. The terms, tradition and modernity, are used "within commonsense everyday discourse as well as [in] reasonably influential intellectual current" (Chaudhuri 2012, 282). The meaning and understanding of these two terms change with different contexts. The paper explores the terms in the Shiva trilogy by Amish Tripathi in the context of contemporary gender and culture studies. The trilogy comprises three books namely, *The Immortals of Meluha* (published first in 2010), *The Secret of the Nagas* (2011), and *The Oath of the Vayuputras* (2013). This paper analyses the

concept and impact of tradition and modernity exclusively on gendered spaces and gendered performances.

Gender is a complex concept influenced by social, religious, communal, and cultural factors, constantly evolving due to feminist, masculinist, and third-gender politics. The World Health Organisation has defined gender as that which “refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men, such as norms, roles, and relationships of and between groups of women and men. It varies from society to society and can be changed” (qtd. in Newman 2023). The paper aims to do a qualitative textual analysis to substantiate three primary objectives choosing selected characters from the narrative. The article uses theories like remasculinization, Butler’s gender performance, and Carver’s understanding of micro-power relations.

Firstly, the Shiva trilogy presents Indian mythic genders, such as mythic masculinity and mythic femininity, in a manner that aligns with contemporary gender expectations. Mythic genders refer to the gender expressions of mythic characters, often seen in Indian epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana, where masculine characters are portrayed as heroic warriors and feminine characters embody passive and nurturing qualities. However, the trilogy adapts these gender expressions to suit contemporary understandings, emphasizing the need for gender-neutral conditions.

Secondly, this contemporary interpretation of mythic genders in India reflects a clash between modernity and tradition, where these terms extend beyond the duality of technology and nature to encompass different perspectives on gender. Specifically, the paper focuses on how modernity and tradition influence gendered spaces and performances within the text, highlighting the interconnectedness of tradition, modernity, and gender dynamics in the trilogy.

Thirdly, reinventing mythic genders can result in three outcomes: neutralized, biased-neutralized, or re-gendered spaces and performances. Neutralized spaces are where gender expressions are not strictly categorized as male or female, aligning with modern gender-neutral ideals. Biased-neutralized spaces appear completely neutral but upon closer examination, reveal underlying gendered tendencies. For example, someone may appear gender-neutral at work but maintain gendered behaviours at home, such as associating cooking with femininity. The concept of re-gender stems from “re-masculinization” (Skelton 2002), referring to spaces that become more masculine or feminine in the pursuit of neutrality.

These three objectives aid us in understanding the different nuances of tradition, modernity, and gender, especially mythic gender as perceived in the present times.

2. Tradition, Modernity, and Gender

Generally, there is a tendency to link tradition with nature or a community’s inherent customs, while technology is associated with modernity. Through the central character of Shiva, Tripathi aims to blend mythology, history, and fantasy elements into an epic narrative. At a customary glance, the narrative explores the conflict between technology and nature in a literal sense. It follows the journey of Shiva, a tribal leader, from Mount Kailash to technologically advanced civilizations. However, the story concludes with Shiva returning to Mount Kailash after realizing the drawbacks of excessive technological progress. The trilogy’s plot revolves around Shiva navigating through societies with diverse blends of tradition and modernity, starting with the Suryavanshi community and progressing to the Chandravanshi, Naga, Vaishyas, and Vaayuputras. The narrative illustrates how remarkable scientific discoveries, such as the aging-slowing medicine called Somras and powerful weapons like Brahmastra and Pashupatiasra, evolve into something sinister, causing humans to lose their humanity and empathy. Shiva or the Neelakanth

emerges to confront this evil and save humanity. Here, the plot explores the clash between tradition and modernity in its literal sense.

In terms of gender, Maitrayee Chaudhuri explains that “modernity changes the functioning and meaning of the public and private spaces” (2012, 283). While there are many spaces and characters that retain the societal expectations of gender in the trilogy, the narrative experiments with many other spaces and central mythic characters undoing gender as well. This paper initially looks at how the spaces and performances that are traditionally considered gendered are neutralized in the trilogy.

2.1. Neutralized Spaces

The epics usually present the stories of extraordinary battles by great warriors or kings who possessed divine powers and “celebrates king’s heroism” (Sahgal 2015, 13). Tripathi’s series also comprises many small battles which ultimately lead to the final battle of upholding dharma. In the narrative, the ultimate evil is the somras which symbolize technological advancement. Somras is the “drink of the Gods” (Tripathi 2022a, 412), which is capable of slowing down aging and helping people to remain young and healthy. Hence, the notion of ‘warrior masculinity’ is important in understanding Indian mythic masculinity, especially since battles and warriors occupy the majority of the pages in Tripathi’s narrative. To understand how the author attempted to neutralize the masculine space of battlefields, we analyze two characters; Sati and Kali. Sati is the “royal princess of Meluha . . . married to Shiva” and Kali is “Sati’s twin sister and queen of the Nagas” who got abandoned by King Daksha at birth for her deformity (Tripathi 2022b, xxii). Both Kali and Sati are strong warriors on the battlefield. Sati even invoked an Agnipariksha (“a duel unto death”) with Tarak when “Agnipariksha was extremely rare And for a woman to invoke the right was almost unheard of” (Tripathi 2022a, 229). Kali is the responsible queen of Panchavati who had a significant role in leading successful battles, where her army consisted of women warriors as well. Further, the human body is an important site of gender performance on the battlefield. Battle wounds are considered sacred by warriors, especially mythic male characters. It can be understood that even in the 21st century scars on the body are a gendered space, that is,

Men’s tattoos, circumcisions, scarrings, or piercings, for example, often signify an achievement: success in a hunt or in warfare, for instance. Because so many of the practices are painful, they also serve as an important test of a man’s strength and courage, which demonstrates his fitness as a man. Women, on the other hand, often receive their tattoos or scars to enhance their beauty and to make them marriageable. (Demello 2014, 120)

These battle scars have a prominent space in the entire text of trilogy, where the characters are proud of their scars and them as an appreciation of their valor or as their reminder for revenge in war. In the story, Sati gets a scar on her face in the battle of Devagiri. Eventhough there was an “ugly blemish on her left cheek” (Tripathi 2022b, 345), Sati did not undertake the cosmetic surgery offered by Ayurvati, chief of medicine at Meluha. She wanted to be reminded of her battle failure and avenge the death of her fellow soldiers. Thus, in the text, wounds are inflicted during battles irrespective of gender differences.

Further, there are also other subtle instances where characters like Sati and Parvateshwar undergo many changes in terms of gendered performance. Parvateshwar is the “Head of Meluhan armed forces” (Tripathi 2022a, xviii). Both these characters follow the Suryavanshi way of life in the trilogy, which is modern in terms of technological advancement, but they are also extremely rooted in tradition. The Suryavanshi tradition and culture frown on public displays of intimacy between couples. As the plot develops, Sati and Parvatheshwar fall in love with Shiva and Anandmayi (Ayodhyan princess) respectively, who express love passionately. Thus, the plot reveals the blurring of lines between tradition and modernity in terms of

gendered roles, as a more modern and ideologically liberal Shiva and Anandmayi enter the life of traditional and custom-clad Sati and Parvateshwar respectively.

2.2. Gendered Spaces and Performances

Parallel to all the spaces mentioned as neutralized earlier, there are instances in the Shiva trilogy that have adhered strictly to gendered performances. There are instances of confining gender to certain professions and body expectations. These gendered actions become ways of distinguishing what is appropriate in the binary expectation of male and female sexes. Butler considers gender “as a corporeal style, an ‘act,’ as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (Butler 1990, 190). The first instance is of associating certain professions based on gender. In the narrative, the medical profession is solely dedicated to females (Ayurvati- chief of medicine), and scientific ones are associated with males (Brahapati- chief Meluhan scientist).

Secondly, on one side, scars on the body are used to neutralize gender performance on bodies on the battlefield, and on the other side, the body itself becomes a space where gender is performed based on physique. John Beynon mentions that “in epics . . . the male body is connotative of power and strength, celebrated as manly spectacle” (2002, 65) and masculinity is defined “in terms of being tough and selfless, having courage, guts and endurance, a lack of squeamishness, a high resistance to pain and discomfort and tight control in emotional matters” (2002, 67). Most of the male warrior characters in the narrative get an elaborate introduction to their muscular bodies and battle scars. Karthik (younger son of Shiva and Sati, around 4 years in the narrative point of time) is praised for being “quiet, focussed and ruthless” (Tripathi 2022c, 344) in the hunting ground and battlefield.

Further, the cover page also has a pivotal role in giving shape to the literary image of mythic masculinity created in the plot. As the readers get accustomed to the cover page images, the mental image the readers have while reading the text is tailored to reflect the image on the cover page. Images (in this case, the cover page images) can have “genuine and far-reaching political, social and cultural ramifications stemming not only from the use of images, but from our understanding of their use” (Manghani 2013, xxvi). None of the cover pages reveal the face of Lord Shiva, though it presents a muscular physique with many battle scars and iconographical elements associated with Lord Shiva, like trident, matted hair, rudraksha beads etc. The Shiva Trilogy series, through its particular cover pages, emphasizes a particular body politics of mythic masculinity associated to Lord Shiva. Through repeated viewing of these three images, the particular type of body and mannerisms get imbibed into the reader’s consciousness as representing lord Shiva’s mythic masculinity.

2.3. Biased-Neutralized and Re-gendered Spaces

Biased neutralized spaces are environments that seem completely neutral at first glance, but upon closer examination, they reveal a subtle bias towards the gendered norms and dynamics prevalent in society. The paper analyzes the same characters and instances taken as examples in this paper to explain how neutralized spaces are created. However, these contexts are observed from different perspectives here.

Firstly, it was observed how Sati and Kali are portrayed as great warriors with strong fighting skills. However, they are projected as warriors while also being bound into the traditional essentialist gender role. Gender essentialism, defined from the standpoint of femininity is explained as “some property (or properties) necessary to . . . being a woman, like being nurturing, or being oppressed, or having a uterus” (Witt 1995, 320). The narrative inbetween brings out the nurturing quality of Sati and Kali for Karthik and Ganesh (Sati’s son in the first marriage whom she had thought was stillborn). Ganesh was practically raised by Kali after King Daksha abandoned this baby as well for being born with deformities. Kali, known

for her bad temper and serious demeanor, is shown playing with the village cleaner's children who "pulled her hair, jumped on her and laughed uproariously" (Tripathi 2022c, 233). The binary of nurturing qualities becomes more evident as no male characters (except Shiva, Karthik's father) exhibit such emotions to the child. The male characters tend to see the child as an able warrior and co-fighter on the battlefield or hunting grounds.

Secondly, micro-power dynamics are evident in spaces like kitchens, where traditional gender roles often prevail and are commonly exercised in the foundational level, for instance, in families that follow the "rule of the fathers" setting (Carver 2003, 176). Despite Sati's relative freedom in certain gender roles, her fulfillment as a mother is depicted through scenes of nurturing and feeding the family. Similarly, though Shiva is portrayed as liberal in terms of gender roles as a householder, more focus has been given to his depiction as a warrior. Shiva's warrior quality even surpasses his disadvantage of being a lower caste in **The Immortals of Meluha**.

Thirdly, as mentioned in the section of neutralized spaces, Sati sustains facial injuries from fire during a battle near Meluha, prompting Ayurvati to propose cosmetic surgery. Despite Sati's refusal, the narrative underscores society's emphasis on female beauty. Interestingly, male characters are not urged to address their scars, revealing a double standard. This episode highlights both the admiration for scars on male warriors and the heightened sympathy for women with scars, though they are warriors.

Thus, the process of re-shaping gendered spaces into neutral spaces can lead to biased-neutral spaces or re-gendered spaces. The concept of re-gender builds on Christine Skelton's idea of re-masculinization, which involves traditional female spaces becoming more masculine in the context of a study in 20 higher education institutions across England (2002). This paper extends this notion of re-masculinization to re-gendered spaces, where spaces intended to be neutral end up becoming more masculinized or feminized in the process. Essentially, re-gendered spaces reflect a shift towards either masculinity or femininity when attempting to achieve neutrality.

In the Shiva Trilogy series, certain spaces traditionally associated with gender were transformed into neutral environments, reflecting a positive aspect of modernity in addressing gender norms. However, the paper also illustrates how these seemingly neutral spaces were biased-neutral spaces. While some gendered aspects were made neutral for convenience, others remained ingrained in the background. This dynamic can inadvertently pressure individuals to conform more strictly to traditional gender roles, both masculine and feminine, within these spaces.

3. Relevance of the Study

Mythic gods and goddesses hold immense significance in the Indian psyche, influencing public consciousness through various media, including teleserials, as extensively discussed in scholarly works (Mankekar 1999; Rajagopal 2001). Actors and actresses portraying mythic characters often express the profound devotion of the audience, who seek blessings even when they are not in costume or makeup. This illustrates the huge impact of mythic characters on Indian society, to the extent that actors portraying these roles are revered. When considered within this context, retellings of mythic narratives hold particular relevance for the new generation, as they address contemporary issues while humanizing these divine figures. Works like the Shiva trilogy blur the lines between fantasy and reality by contextualizing gods and goddesses within Indian history, bringing researchers closer to the contemporary mindset of the people.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, mythic retellings play a pivotal role in bringing ancient characters and narratives into contemporary contexts, offering insights into the thought processes and societal dynamics of modern times. Specifically focusing on the 21st century, the era in which the trilogy under examination was released, these retellings bring mythic figures like Shiva, Sati, Karthik, and Kali into a modern perspective. Given the significant influence of religion and mythic characters on the Indian audience, particularly in a society deeply rooted in religious beliefs, modern retellings that incorporate contemporary gender expressions have the potential to wield considerable influence. Drawing on earlier studies examining the impact of television serials on public perception amidst significant historical events, such as the Babri Masjid issue in the 1990s, it becomes evident that mythic retellings presented in modern formats can exert a profound psychological influence on the youth of India. Therefore, understanding the interplay between myth, religion, and contemporary gender expressions is essential for comprehending the evolving cultural landscape of India in the 21st century.

References

1. Beynon, John. 2002. *Masculinities and Culture*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
2. Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
3. Carver, Terrell. 2003. "Gender." In *Political Concepts*, edited by Richard Bellamy and Andrew Mason, 169–79. Manchester UP.
4. Chaudhuri, Maitrayee. 2012. "Indian 'Modernity' and 'Tradition': A Gender Analysis." *Polish Sociological Review*, no. 178: 281–93.
5. DeMello, Margo. 2014. *Body Studies: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge.
6. Manghani, Sunil. 2013. *Image Studies: Theory and Practice*. New York: Routledge.
7. Mankekar, P. 1999. *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India*. Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India. Duke University Press.
<https://books.google.co.in/books?id=fZf8wmVdpaIC>.
8. Newman, Tim. 2023. "Sex and Gender: Meanings, Definition, Identity, and Expression." *Medical News Today*. March 31, 2023. <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/232363>.
9. Rajagopal, A. 2001. *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India*. ACLS Humanities E-Book. Cambridge University Press.
<https://books.google.co.in/books?id=PbgW2jTESKEC>.
10. Sahgal, Smita. 2015. "Situating Kingship within an Embryonic Frame of Masculinity in Early India." *Social Scientist* 43 (11/12): 3–26.
11. Skelton, Christine. 2002. "The 'feminisation of Schooling' or 'Re-Masculinising' Primary Education?" *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 12 (1): 77–96.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09620210200200084>.
12. Tripathi, Amish. 2022a. *The Immortals of Meluha*. India: HarperCollins Publishers.
13. 2022b. *The Oath of the Vayuputras*. India: HarperCollins Publishers.
14. 2022c. *The Secret of the Nagas*. India: HarperCollins Publishers.
15. Witt, Charlotte. 1995. "Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Theory." *Philosophical Topics* 23 (2): 321–44.