

Original Article

Mythology as a Mirror of Contemporary Values in the Fiction of Amish Tripathi

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Abstract

Amish Tripathi's mythological-historical novels, especially The Shiva Trilogy and The Ram Chandra Series, reinterpret classical Indian myths to address present-day social, political, ethical, and cultural issues. This research article explores how Tripathi reshapes ancient mythological narratives into contemporary stories that emphasize humanism, scientific reasoning, gender equality, ethical leadership, and cultural identity. By portraying deities as extraordinary yet human figures, explaining rituals through rational perspectives, and presenting legendary characters as morally complex individuals, he makes mythology meaningful for modern readers. Using close textual analysis supported by theories of myth criticism, cultural studies, and postmodern literary criticism, the study contends that Tripathi's fiction not only reflects the aspirations and values of contemporary Indian society but also provides a creative space for redefining cultural memory and negotiating ideas of national identity in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Amish Tripathi, mythology, contemporary values, humanism, rationalism, gender equality, cultural identity

Introduction

Indian mythology has long functioned as a vibrant arena of cultural negotiation, where social values, beliefs, and identities are continuously interpreted, challenged, and redefined. In the twenty-first century, this process has found renewed expression in popular fiction, with Amish Tripathi emerging as one of the leading writers of contemporary mythological fiction in India. Beginning with *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010) and continuing through *The Secret of the Nagas* (2011), *The Oath of the Vayuputras* (2013), *Scion of Ikshvaku* (2015), *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* (2017), and *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta* (2019), Tripathi's novels have attracted an extensive readership, establishing him as one of the most successful Indian authors writing in English. Tripathi has consistently emphasized that his retellings are not meant to be religious texts but literary explorations of universal human ideals. As he observes, "My books are not about gods; they are about heroes who make choices" (Tripathi, Interview, 2017). By presenting mythology as a form of ethical and philosophical fiction relevant to contemporary readers, his works demonstrate the enduring significance of ancient narratives in addressing present-day social, cultural, and moral concerns.

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This study examines how Tripathi's mythological fiction embodies modern values through seven interrelated perspectives: humanism, rationalism, ethical governance, gender equality, moral complexity, national identity, and the accessibility of mythology to contemporary audiences.

Humanism and the Demystification of the Divine

One of the most distinctive aspects of Amish Tripathi's mythological fiction is his consistent humanization of divine characters. Rather than portraying gods as all-powerful supernatural beings, he presents them as ordinary humans who attain greatness through courage, ethical conduct, and a sense of duty. This reinterpretation shifts the focus from divine privilege to individual responsibility and moral achievement. In *The Immortals of Meluha*, Shiva first appears not as a deity but as the chief of the Gunas, a Tibetan tribe: "Shiva, the leader of the Gunas, was not born divine; he was made so by his deeds" (Tripathi, *The Immortals of Meluha*, 23). This characterization reflects a deeply humanistic philosophy in which divinity is the outcome of righteous actions rather than birth or supernatural origin. Such an approach resonates with contemporary meritocratic ideals, emphasizing that an individual's identity and greatness are determined by character, choices, and actions rather than destiny. Likewise, in *Scion of Ikshvaku*, Rama is portrayed as a principled yet emotionally vulnerable prince who must confront personal setbacks and public criticism. Reflecting on failure, he states: "Failure is not destiny. Destiny is shaped by how you respond to failure" (Tripathi, *Scion of Ikshvaku*, 87). Through these reinterpretations, Tripathi transforms mythological figures into relatable human heroes whose struggles, decisions, and moral growth inspire modern readers. Consequently, mythology functions not merely as sacred tradition but as a practical source of ethical guidance, resilience, and personal development in the contemporary world.

Rationalism and the Reinterpretation of Myth

A significant feature of Amish Tripathi's mythological fiction is its rational reinterpretation of traditional myths and supernatural events. Rather than attributing extraordinary occurrences to divine intervention, Tripathi explains them through science, logic, and human innovation. This rationalist perspective makes ancient mythology more accessible to contemporary readers, who often seek empirical explanations for extraordinary phenomena. In *The Secret of the Nagas*, the legendary **Somras**, traditionally regarded as the nectar of immortality, is presented as a scientifically engineered substance rather than a divine gift: "The Somras was not magic; it was a chemical formula.

Its effects were scientific, not divine" (Tripathi, *The Secret of the Nagas*, 132). By replacing miraculous explanations with scientific reasoning, Tripathi reinforces the idea that ancient Indian civilizations possessed advanced scientific knowledge and technological sophistication. This reinterpretation not only modernizes mythology but also encourages readers to appreciate traditional narratives through the lens of rational inquiry. Sharma argues that this approach strengthens cultural confidence by celebrating indigenous knowledge systems while remaining compatible with modern scientific thought (Sharma 45). Questions of justice, governance, and responsible leadership occupy a central place in Tripathi's novels. His protagonists are repeatedly confronted with difficult ethical choices that reflect contemporary debates on public welfare, political accountability, and moral responsibility. In *The Oath of the Vayuputras*, Shiva struggles with the decision to eliminate Somras despite its historical significance: "A leader's duty is not to the few but to the many. If something causes pain, it must end, however great the cost" (Tripathi, *The Oath of the Vayuputras*, 298). This statement presents leadership as an ethical commitment to the collective good rather than personal or political interests. It reflects modern democratic ideals in which rulers are expected to prioritize justice, transparency, and the welfare of society. In contrast, *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta* portrays Raavan as an exceptionally capable administrator whose personal flaws ultimately undermine his greatness: "He had the genius of a statesman but not the heart of one" (Tripathi, *Raavan*, 215). Through these contrasting portrayals, Tripathi explores the complexities of political leadership and emphasizes that intelligence and power must be balanced by compassion, integrity, and ethical judgment.

Gender Equality and the Reimagining of Sita

Among Tripathi's most significant contributions to modern mythological fiction is his reinterpretation of Sita as an empowered and independent protagonist. In *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, she is portrayed not as a passive symbol of virtue but as a courageous warrior, strategist, and capable administrator. "Sita was not waiting to be saved. She was ready to fight, to lead, to command" (Tripathi, *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, 145). This representation challenges conventional portrayals of women in mythological literature and reflects contemporary ideals of gender equality, leadership, and female agency. Sita emerges as a figure whose strength lies not only in her moral character but also in her political wisdom and military competence. According to Nair, Tripathi's portrayal presents

"the complexities of Indian feminism by combining independence with a strong sense of social and familial responsibility" (Nair 67). Although elements of traditional patriarchal values remain, his reinterpretation offers a progressive model of womanhood that resonates with present-day readers. Unlike traditional mythological narratives that divide characters into absolute heroes and villains, Tripathi presents morality as complex and multidimensional. His protagonists possess weaknesses, while antagonists are portrayed with psychological depth and human vulnerability. In *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta*, Raavan is depicted not as a purely evil figure but as an individual shaped by suffering and difficult choices: "He was no monster, only a man who had been wounded too many times by life and chose the path of power over love" (Tripathi, *Raavan*, 301). Such portrayals challenge simplistic moral binaries and encourage readers to examine the motivations behind human behaviour. By emphasizing ethical ambiguity, Tripathi reflects contemporary philosophical perspectives that recognize morality as context-dependent rather than absolute. His narratives therefore invite readers to engage critically with issues of justice, compassion, and personal responsibility in an increasingly complex world.

Myth, National Identity, and Cultural Memory

Tripathi's retellings also contribute to discussions of cultural identity and national consciousness. By narrating ancient myths in contemporary English and presenting them as historically plausible accounts, he reconnects modern readers with India's cultural heritage while making mythology relevant to present social realities.

As Tripathi remarked in an interview:

"Our myths are not just stories; they are memories of who we are. They teach us values that are still relevant today" (Tripathi, Interview, 2018).

This perspective positions mythology as a repository of cultural memory that shapes collective identity and moral values. At the same time, scholars caution against treating fictional reinterpretations as historical evidence. Singh argues that although Tripathi's novels successfully popularize mythology, they should be appreciated as imaginative literary works rather than historical reconstructions (Singh 92). Nevertheless, his fiction plays an important role in preserving and revitalizing India's mythological traditions for contemporary audiences. Another major achievement of Tripathi's fiction is its accessibility. His straightforward prose, fast-paced storytelling, and dialogue-driven narrative style have introduced Indian mythology to a broad readership extending beyond traditional literary audiences.

Unlike classical Sanskrit epics that require specialized knowledge, Tripathi's novels are easily understood by students, young professionals, and readers across the Indian diaspora.

Kumar observes that "Tripathi has done to mythology what Chetan Bhagat did to campus novels—made it readable for the masses" (Kumar 58). This accessible style has transformed mythology from an elite literary tradition into popular fiction, ensuring its continued relevance in contemporary cultural life and attracting a new generation of readers.

Conclusion: Mythology as a Modern Mirror

Amish Tripathi's mythological fiction demonstrates the remarkable adaptability of ancient narratives in addressing contemporary concerns. Through the humanization of divine figures, rational reinterpretation of myths, promotion of ethical leadership, redefinition of gender roles, and exploration of moral complexity, he transforms mythology into a powerful medium for engaging with modern social and cultural values.

Rather than merely retelling traditional stories, Tripathi reconstructs them in ways that resonate with present-day readers while preserving their philosophical essence. His novels affirm that mythology remains a living cultural resource capable of illuminating enduring questions about identity, justice, leadership, gender, and morality. Consequently, his works occupy a significant place in contemporary Indian English literature by bridging the gap between tradition and modernity and demonstrating that myth continues to evolve alongside society itself.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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