

# **THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES**

## **Power/Knowledge Dynamics, the Politics of Domination and the Assertion of Identity by the Oppressed: Amish's *Shiva Trilogy* in Perspective**

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**Abstract:**

*In Amish's Shiva Trilogy, the crucially significant issue of identity is intimately associated with the dynamics of power and knowledge. While Meluha attempts to discursively construct the identities of the other sections of the Indian society in order to perpetuate its power structures, those oppressed groups assert their respective racial, ethnic or national identities, thereby questioning and contesting this politics of representation and subordination. Hence, by liberating the marginalized voices instead of endorsing the dominance of any single discourse, Amish has rendered his trilogy a polyphonic<sup>7</sup> text, a site where the dialogic interaction of multiple discourses continuously re-determine and re-define the matrix of power.*

In the *Shiva Trilogy*, Amish<sup>1</sup> has imaginatively re-created the India of 1900 B. C. This imaginary landscape is permeated with the dynamics of power and the political matrix it gives birth to. As John Fiske declares: "Society ... is not an organic whole but a complex network of groups, each with different interests and related to each other in terms of their power relationship with the dominant classes. Social relations are understood in terms of social power, in terms of a structure of domination and subordination that is never static but is always the site of contestation and struggle." (305) This observation of Fiske's proves particularly relevant in the context of the world created by Amish: here, all the nations and states engage in a never-ending struggle for attaining absolute power over the others. This struggle, however, does not take place only in the military level, but more importantly, in the level of representation and discourse. Fiske also observes: "... the idea of an objective, empirical "truth" is untenable. Truth must always be understood in terms of how it is made, for whom, and at what time it is "true." Consciousness is never the product of truth or reality but rather of culture, society, and history." (306) Michel Foucault declares that knowledge is inextricably associated with networks of power, that:

power produces knowledge...that power and knowledge directly imply one another: that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. (27)

In this context, Barry Smart significantly observes:

Knowledge is inextricably entwined with relations of power and advances in knowledge are associated with advances and developments in the exercise of power. Thus for Foucault there is no disinterested knowledge; knowledge and power are mutually and inextricably interdependent. A site where power is exercised is also a place at which knowledge is produced. (64)

Indeed, Amish's trilogy depicts the inalienable, dynamic relationship between power and knowledge. The structures of power in Meluha continually attempt to establish Meluha's colonial domination over Swadeep and consequently over the whole of India by constructing bodies of knowledge that justify and legitimize the colonial enterprise<sup>2</sup>. The Meluhan colonial discourse makes a binary division between Meluha and Swadeep. Each is assumed to exist in opposition to the other: Swadeep is represented as everything that Meluha is not, its 'alter ego'. It is important to note that this colonial discourse reveals by proxy more about those who represent (i.e. the Meluhans) than the people and places that are being represented<sup>3</sup> (i.e. the Swadeepans): the Meluhan culture tries to consolidate its identity by constructing Swadeep as Meluha's dark Other<sup>4</sup>.

From the very beginning, Shiva is fascinated by the apparently 'perfect' Suryavanshi way of life, and is almost taken in by their ideological framework. Even before reaching Meluha, Nandi tells him: "Meluha offers you a lifestyle beyond your wildest dreams." (Amish, *Immortals* 2) And, indeed, at first sight, Meluha appears to him a 'paradise':

He truly believed that if there was a paradise somewhere, it couldn't have been very different from Meluha. This was a land of abundance, of almost ethereal perfection! It was an empire ruled by clearly codified and just laws, to which every Meluhan was subordinated, including the emperor ... It seemed to be a flawless society where everyone knew his role and played it perfectly. They were conscious, nay obsessive, about their duties. (35)

The city of Srinagar-- the first Meluhan city that Shiva visits-- is entirely "a picture of cleanliness, order and sobriety" (11). When Shiva inquires about the significance of the name of the Suryavanshi race, Nandi proudly explains to him:

We are strong and steadfast. We honour our word and keep our promises even at the cost of our lives. We never break the law. We deal honourably even with those who are dishonourable. Like the Sun, we never take from anyone, but always

give to others. We sear our duties into our consciousness so that we may never forget them. Being a Suryavanshi means that we must always strive to be honest, brave, and above all, loyal to the truth. (40)

Typical Meluhan pride in their racial superiority is evident in Ayurvati's remark: "We're Meluhans. We are capable of handling any situation." (20) Thus, the Suryavanshis stand for law, order, culture, refinement, honesty, integrity and moral uprightness, and thus, appear to be the epitome of virtue. In stark contrast to this, the Chandravanshis follow the principles of 'Shringar', 'Saundarya and 'Swatantra' (Passion, Beauty and Freedom). The Swadeepan capital, Ayodhya, embodies the contrast to the values that Meluha represents:

None of the Ayodhyan houses were similar, unlike the Meluhan cities where even the royal palace was built to a standard design. Here each house had its own individual allure. The Swadeepans, unencumbered by strict rules and building codes, created houses that were expressions of passion and elegance ... A vibrant city, with exquisite beauty existing side by side with hideous ugliness, Ayodhya disgusted and yet fascinated the Meluhans. (Amish, *Immortals* 373)

Thus, the very architecture of Ayodhya emphasizes the Chandravanshi love for individualism and freedom. The narrator depicts the lifestyle of the Chandravanshis in the following words:

The people were living embodiments of the Chandravanshi way of life. The women wore skimpy clothes, brazen and confident about their sexuality. The men were as fashion and beauty conscious as their women- what Meluhans would call dandies. The relationship between the men and women could only be characterized as one teetering on extremes. Extreme love coexisting with extreme hate, expressed with extreme loudness, all built on the foundations of extreme passion. Nothing was done in small measure in Ayodhya. Moderation was a word that did not exist in their dictionary. (373-4)

But, the Meluhan colonial discourse uses this difference as an excuse to establish Meluha's cultural imperialism: it valorizes the Suryavanshi way of life, while, at the same time, demonizing the Chandravanshi way. Daksha, the king of the Suryavanshis, says about the Swadeepans: "They are untrustworthy people. No follower of the Suryavanshi way will dirty his soul by even speaking to a Chandravanshi willingly." (111) The Swadeepan government is "hideously inefficient" (372). Parvateswar, the Meluhan general, tells Anandamayee, the Ayodhyan princess: "It disgusts me to see the way this empire has been managed. You have no norms. No control. No laws." (379) The Chandravanshis are represented as symbolizing disorder, lawlessness, dishonesty and lack of refinement, and hence, are described by the Suryavanshis as evil. Thus, while the Chandravanshis are, indeed, different from the Suryavanshis, what the Meluhan colonial discourse does is to construct a stereotypical, exclusively negative image of the Swadeepan society-- thus glossing over all its positive aspects-- which at once validates Meluha's superiority and justifies its right to 'save' the Swadeepans and 'reform' their their way of life. Daksha solemnly highlights Meluha's 'noble' reformistic motive behind its attack on Swadeep:

I believe that the people of Swadeep themselves are not evil. It is their Chandravanshi rulers and their way of life that has made them evil. The only way forward for us is to save the Swadeepans themselves ... Save them from the evil philosophy that infests their soul. Save them from their treacherous rulers. Save from their sorry, meaningless existence. And we can do this by giving them the benefits of the superior Suryavanshi way of life. ... it is the unfinished task of Lord Ram. (Amish, *Immortals* 114)

Even Shiva is taken in by the Meluhan version of the 'truth'. Mesmerized by the messianic zeal of Meluha, Shiva says to Daksha: "This is a big task to take on.... It is sweeping in its kindness and reason. But it is a very big task. You will need soldiers to defeat their army and missionaries to bring them to your side." (114) Under the delusion that the Chandravanshis are the living embodiments of evil, he declares a holy war, a crusade against this 'evil' way of life, and leads the Meluhan army to a crushing victory over the Swadeepans. However, significantly enough, Amish has also left space for resistance. Though the Chandravanshis are defeated in battle, they put up a strong resistance to Meluha's cultural imperialism: they steadfastly refuse to accept the Meluhans' claim of being culturally superior to them. Nor do they acknowledge the Meluhans' right to *reform* their way of life. When Parvateswar says, "All your lives will improve with our way of governance", an agitated Anandamayi retorts: "Improve? We are not perfect, I agree. There are many things that our empire could do better, I agree. But at least we give our people freedom. They are not forced to follow some stupid laws mandated by an out of touch elite." (378) Thus, the Swadeepans propagate a counter-discourse that represents the Suryavanshis as 'evil', and upholds the virtue of the Chandravanshi way of life. Soon after the battle, Shiva, too, realizes his mistake: "These people aren't evil. They're just different. Being different isn't evil." (Amish, *Immortals* 391) But when Shiva tells Daksha about the Chandravanshis, "I don't think they are evil", Bhagirath, infuriated by the Suryavanshi attempt at stigmatization of his (i.e. the Chandravanshi) race, says: "We don't need a certificate from a foreign barbarian to tell us what is obvious! We are not evil!" (Amish, *Nagas* 13) Thus, the Chandravanshis boldly assert their racial and national identity, and firmly deny any outsider (even the Neelkanth) the right to judge their culture.

Even greater victims of the exclusionary politics of the Meluhan society are the Nagas. All the physically deformed children born in Meluha, along with their parents, are banished for ever from the Sapt Sindhu. They are forced to retreat to the 'cursed' lands of the Panchvati. The physical deformities of the Nagas are considered to be the true reflection of their innate viciousness. When Shiva first hears of the Nagas, he asks about them, and Nandi explains in the following words the popular idea about them:

They are cursed people, my Lord. They are born with hideous deformities because of the sins of their previous births. Deformities like extra hands or horribly misshapen faces. But they have tremendous strength and skills. The Naga name alone strikes terror in any citizen's heart. They are not even allowed to live in the Sapt Sindhu. (Amish, *Immortals* 59)

Daksha says to Shiva about them: "My Lord, they are pure evil." (Amish, *Nagas* 14) They are popularly believed to be terrorists and evil creatures with supernatural powers. The terrified headman of a Meluhan vilge tells Shiva: "... Nagas! They are supernatural, blood-thirsty killers! What chance do we have against such evil?" (Amish, *Immortals* 246) It is important to note

that even the Chandravanshis are no less indoctrinated with such ideologies than the Suryavanshis. Dilipa, the Swadeepan king, refers to Nagas as “the dark forces” (Amish, *Nagas* 14). It is significant that some of the Nagas, too, are deeply influenced by such ideologies. Their suffering and ostracization seem to them the ‘natural’ manifestation of their fate. However, some others among the Nagas – like Kali, the Queen of the Nagas, and Ganesh, the Lord of the People -- refuse to accept this explanation of their suffering. They voice their protest against the wrong being continually done to them by the Indian society, and assert their human identity through their numerous acts of charity and kindness, thus challenging and contesting the Meluhns’ and Swadeepans’ discursive construction of their stereotypical diabolic image. Shiva, who was initially led to believe in the innate viciousness of the Nagas, later feels troubled by their generosity and humane conduct towards the hapless and the oppressed: “The Nagas are obviously the people who are evil, right? Almost everyone seems to agree. And yet, the Nagas helped a man in need, in the interests of justice. That’s not how evil is supposed to be.” (Amish, *Nagas* 275)

The last, but definitely not least significant, is the issue of the Vikarma people, since it reflects the politics of subordination and ostracization within the Meluhan society. And in this case, too, such politics has as its bedrock the superstition and prejudice rampant in the Indian society. Nandi explains to Shiva:

Vikarma people are people who have been punished in this birth for the sins of their previous birth. Hence they have to live this life out with dignity and tolerate their present sufferings with grace. This is the only way they can wipe their karma clean of the sins of their previous births. Vikarma men have their own order of penance and women have a different order. ... They have to pray for forgiveness every month to Lord Agni, the purifying Fire God, through a specifically mandated puja. They are not allowed to marry since they may poison others with their bad fate. They are not allowed to touch any person who is not related to them or is not part of their normal duties. (Amish, *Immortals* 92-3)

However, actually, the Vikarma system is not a natural universal law as is popularly believed, but rather a social construct designed to serve specific political ends. When a bewildered Shiva asks, “But if the birth law could be changed, why couldn’t the law of vikarma?,” Brahaspati points out the real reason: “Because there aren’t enough noble families affected by that law. That is the harsh truth.” (Amish, *Immortals* 204) These prejudiced views about the Vikarma play a crucial role in consolidating the existing power hierarchy within the Meluhan society by ‘naturalizing’ its unequal power relations. As Shiva later points out to Sati:

The Vikarma system, like every system that governs human lives, was created by us. ... Don’t you see how illogical this entire concept is? How can one believe that an innocent child is born with sin? It’s clear as daylight: a new-born child has done no wrong. He has done no right either. He has just been born. He could not have done anything! ... It’s a system designed to control people. It makes those who suffer or are oppressed, blame themselves for their misery. Because you believe you are paying for sins committed either in your own previous lives or those committed by your ancestors, or even community. Perhaps even the sins of the first man ever born! The system therefore propagates suffering as a form of atonement and at the same time does not allow one to question the wrongs done unto oneself. (Amish, *Vayuputras* 55-6)

Thus, the Meluhan society maintains its hegemony<sup>5</sup> by interpellating<sup>6</sup> its residents: it convinces them of the supposed ‘divine justice’ inherent in their plight, and calls upon them to accept their fate as a ‘natural’ consequence of their previous misdeeds, and thus to suffer willingly in an attempt to achieve redemption. It is significant that the citizens of Meluha who have been branded as ‘Vikarma’ by the society, deeply believe in the veracity of these ideologies, and willingly go on playing the roles attributed to them by the society, thus allowing the oppressive society to rule over them with their consent. As Brahaspati points out to Shiva, even a wise and intelligent woman like Sati “genuinely believes that she deserves to be a vikarma.” (Amish, *Immortals* 202) Much later, Sati, who deeply believes in the concept of karma extending over many births, argues: “... why were the Nagas born deformed? Why did I live like a Vikarma for so long? Surely it must be because in some sense we’d deserved it. We were paying for our past-life sins.” (Amish, *Vayuputras* 55) However, after Shiva proclaims the injustice inherent in these socially constructed laws, the Vikarma people gradually start fighting back this injustice by asserting their identity as independent human beings who deserve respect. When Tarak insults Sati for being a Vikarma and even Shiva for not respecting the Vikarma law, Sati becomes furious. Having “tolerated too many insults for too long ... with quiet dignity”, Sati now bursts out in rage, and invokes the ‘trial by fire’. In the trial, she is “[d]efiant when under pressure, yet magnanimous in victory.” (Amish, *Immortals* 234) The trial becomes a vent for her repressed anger: “Sati’s face had the expression of the mother goddess in fury. Eighty five years of repressed anger had surfaced in that instant.” (Amish, *Immortals* 234) If this is an individual instance of assertion of identity, its manifestation in a mass scale is seen during the battle of Dharmakhet. When the Meluhan army is at a loss about how to meet the two-pronged attack of the Swadeepan army, the brigade comprising only the Vikarma men go on one of the most dangerous missions possible, thus ensuring the victory of the Meluhan army. Their tremendous courage gives a lie to the popular conception of them being weak:

It took less than an hour before the vikarma brigade was marching out of the camp. The sun was high up in the sky and practically the entire camp was awake, watching the soldiers set out on their mission. Everyone knew the terrible odds the vikarmas were going to face. They knew that it was unlikely that any of these soldiers would be seen alive again. The soldiers, though, did not exhibit the slightest hesitation or hint of fear, as they walked on. The camp stood in silent awe. One thought reverberated through all of them. *How could the vikarmas be so magnificent? They are supposed to be weak.* (Amish, *Immortals* 333)

Thus, in Amish’s *Shiva Trilogy*, the crucially significant issue of identity is intimately associated with the dynamics of power and knowledge. While Meluha attempts to discursively construct the identities of the other sections of the Indian society in order to perpetuate its power structures, those oppressed groups assert their respective racial, ethnic or national identities, thereby questioning and contesting this politics of representation and subordination. Hence, by liberating the marginalized voices instead

of endorsing the dominance of any single discourse, Amish has rendered his trilogy a polyphonic<sup>7</sup> text, a site where the dialogic interaction of multiple discourses continuously re-determine and re-define the matrix of power.

### Notes

1. Amish Tripathi is an Indian author, born on 18 October, 1974. He is an alumnus of Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta. He worked for 15 years in the financial services, before starting his writing career. Now he is well known for the trilogy of his novels—*The Immortals of Meluha*, *The Secret of the Nagas*, and *The Oath of the Vayuputras*—together called the *Shiva Trilogy*. The trilogy is a fantasy re-imagining of the Indian deity Shiva's life and adventures. It chronicles the extraordinary journey of a man- Shiva- who rises to become god-like by virtue of his karma. In order to fulfil his destiny as the Neelkanth ('the destroyer of evil'), he goes in a relentless pursuit of knowledge about the nature, origin and function of 'Evil'. As is evident from a close textual analysis, in Amish's conceptual framework, Evil is not merely an abstract quality, but rather intimately related with the effects of the dynamics of power in the society on the material lives of the human beings.
2. Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson observe: "Colonialism (like its counterpart, racism), then, is an operation of discourse, and as an operation of discourse it interpellates colonial subjects by incorporating them in a system of representation." (3)
3. David Richards's observation is relevant in this context: "... the representation of other cultures invariably entails the presentation of self-portraits, in that those people who are observed are overshadowed or eclipsed by the observer." (289)
4. Edward Said's analysis of the Orientalist discourse in the context of European colonialism is also equally relevant in this context. In the introduction to *Orientalism*, Said emphatically points out that the Orient has been fundamental in defining the West "as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience." (2) The West identifies itself by proclaiming via Orientalist discourse everything it believes it is not. Consequently, Said claims that "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self." (3)
5. The term 'hegemony' was popularized by the Italian thinker, Antonio Gramsci. By 'hegemony', Gramsci refers to the domination of particular sections of society by the powerful classes not necessarily through threats of violence or the law but by winning their consent to be governed and dominated. Thus, hegemony refers to the processes – including ideology—through which the dominant classes maintain power through the consent of the people. As Pramod K. Nayar points out: "Ideology enables the dominant classes to reinforce their power over the oppressed and marginalized classes because ideology serves as a system of beliefs that naturalizes the unequal power relations, and leads the oppressed to accept it as natural, a given and as self-evident and therefore beyond questioning." (131) In this context, it is also relevant to remember that according to Terry Eagleton, Ideology works through six different strategies: by promoting values and beliefs congenial to it; by naturalizing these beliefs to render them self-evident; by universalizing these beliefs; by devaluing beliefs and ideas that might challenge it; by rejecting alternative or rivals forms of thought; and by obscuring social reality. (Nayar 132)
6. In relation to this, David Macey's observation is relevant: "In Althusser's theory of Ideology, interpellation is the mechanism that produces subjects in such a way that they recognize their own existence in terms of the dominant ideology of the society in which they live." (203) Thus, in Althusser's conception, Ideology precedes the individual and an individual is inserted into the existing ideological framework of the society. Pramod K. Nayar observes: "Interpellation is the process of consenting to ideology, accepting it and not being aware of it. It makes the subject believe that s/he is an independent being and not a subject at all controlled by outside forces." In other words, ideology interpellates the individual as a subject but makes her/him believe s/he is a free agent." (135)
7. The word 'polyphony' literally means 'many voices'. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Mikhail Bakhtin drew a distinction between the 'monologic' novels of Tolstoy and the 'dialogic' (or 'polyphonic') novels of Dostoevsky. In Tolstoy's novels, the various voices we hear are subordinated to the author's authority. However, Dostoevsky, in his novels, liberates multiple, independent voices. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin observes: "... Dostoevsky's novel is multi-accented and contradictory in its values: contradictory accents clash in every word of his creations." (15-6) In this context, Lynne Pearce observes: "In other words, for a text to be truly polyphonic, it has also (by definition) to be dialogic: the 'many voices' are necessarily defined by, and through, their relationship with one another." (225)

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