

Man-Woman Dynamics in *The Immortals of Meluha* and *The Secret of Nagas*

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Abstract: In this paper, I deal with the portrayal of women characters in *The Immortals of Meluha* and *The Secret of The Nagas* (The Shiva Trilogy -Part I and II), a modern retelling of the Shiva Puran. Amish Tripathi, through his debut work, *The Immortals of Meluha*, (The Shiva Trilogy -Part I, 2010) firmly establishes himself among accomplished and confident storytellers, who weave many fine threads into their textual tapestry and seem to forget not a single one. The novelist brings out powerfully the psychological problems of women and discusses them artistically without crossing the barriers of art. The novel and its sequel, *The Secret of Nagas* depict both the diversity of women and the diversity within each woman, rather than limiting the lives of women to one ideal. After a very brief introduction to the Shiva's tribe, Amish proceeds to describe the prosperity of Meluhan Empire and then concentrates on a lively culture of Swadweepans.

Keywords: Amish Tripathi, Mythopoetic Imagination, Women.

The Trilogy of Shiva myth is a full-length study of transcendence of Shiva, the man to Shiva, the God. Book I comprises 26 chapters while Book II consists of 23 chapters. While myth is usually understood as an elementary belief in the concreteness of a metaphorical narrative, Amish recreates myth by the means of imagination. With his uplifting mythopoetic imagination, writer gives an account of life of Sati and Kali. While myths by their very nature are set in another world and have characters larger than life, Amish renders ordinary lives to the characters, the setting of the novel extends from Mount Kailash in Tibet to Kashmir, and covers the entire northern region of India. It is set in historical period of 1900 BC. Myths foster a shared set of perspectives and social values. They offer role models according which society patterns itself. The two novels, *The Immortals of Meluha* and its sequel, *The Secret of Nagas* display brilliant portrait of two generations of women. Veerini is the wife of Daksha, the ruler of Meluha. Sati and Kali, the former pampered and the later abandoned, are the two daughters of Daksha. Anandmayi, daughter of Dilipa, the ruler of Swadweep is another important character under study. There are several other women presented as minor characters in the novel, each different from other in their own way. All energy is basically feminine and yet it has to fight for recognition in the realms of formal, social and cultural set up. Rivers and earth are feminine symbols in the novel. While telling Shiva's transformative journey, the narrative probes into the lives of women. Amish dramatises the two poles of female reaction to male power: dissent, in the characters of Sati and Kali and

conformity in the character of Veerini. Both the kinds are subjected to the mechanism of social control that tend to reduce them either to an absence or silence. The fiction also offers an analysis of the family structure as the key element of patriarchal social organization. The family is a vital institution. It is the primary social unit in any community; the individual's opening into the wider social network. As the first site of development, the family provides sustenance to the individual and sets the conditions of growth. Challenged with the individual's desire for independence and growth, the family may be denotatively seen as a closed door or an open door; as a prison or a gateway to freedom. The selected novel and its sequel represents various aspects concerning women, motherhood, subjugation, abandonment, survival and independence. The stories of different characters deal with the adverse circumstances faced by women both at physical and emotional levels. The quest of Shiva and Sati represents the individual ego in the process of individuation. Sati's story revolves around the process of individuation. Mother plays a vital role in a family. Sati is brought up under loving care of her parents. Since her childhood, she has watched her father's 'goat' like behaviour as against Parvateshwar's 'tiger' like one. She is more influenced by Parvateshwar and calls him *Pitratulya*. She does not shy away in dangerous situations. Childhood is a stage when the ego begins to formulate. At this stage Sati appreciates her distinct self and forms a sense of identity. Like a true Kshatriya she has learnt to protect the weak. A childhood incident illustrates this. Daksha tells Shiva,

when she was just a child, she had jumped in all by herself, with nothing but her short sword, to save an old woman being attacked by a wild pack of wild dogs. She nearly got herself killed for her pains. (174)

Sati remains high spirited even when she grows up. Shiva appreciates this quality of hers. He fondly remembers

He (Shiva) replayed the magical moments when he had seen her fighting. Not the most romantic of sights for most men of his tribe. But for Shiva it was divine. He sighed recalling her soft, delicate body, which had suddenly developed brutal, killer qualities upon being attacked. (64)

Despite the hardships Sati underwent before meeting Shiva, her ardent commitment to life and responsibility as a princess is quite visible in both the novels. Before meeting Shiva, Sati has no identity of her own. Her identity, nature and actions are defined and acted out vis-a-vis her father, Daksha. Sati's story narrates the painful and agonised life history of a sensitive, insightful and perceptive vikarma (marginalized) woman. Her story brings into light not only the humiliation, cruelty and pain inflicted on vikarma people but also the hypocritical nature of the royalty. Vikarmas are considered impure and anyone touching vikarma should undergo *shudhikaran*. Sati, in the novel faces personal discrimination as she had given birth to a still born and on the same day her husband had accidentally drowned. This system of labeling of Vikarma is not based on

caste but as Nandi explains:

Vikarma people, my Lord 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. ... They are not allowed to marry since they may poison others with their bad fate,. They are not allowed to touch any person who are is not related to them or is not part of their normal duties. (IM, 93).

The lawmakers do not realise that there is no nobility in forced suffering. Self-respect is the highest incarnation of purity. Once *vikarma*, Sati is forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation. 'She felt sympathy for the blind man. She knew the torment of having even your touch considered impure.' (197). She is denied basic rights of living. Due to her *vikarma* status Sati is expected to forsake her previous identity and accept herself as one who committed sin in her past birth and thus should lead a passive life in penance. Now she becomes overly self-identified with external aspects of her life in adulthood. The process of individuation involves the recognition that we are not solely the conscious parts of ourselves but there are other forces as well that determine our motivations and the state of our emotional contentment. The willingness to contact those hidden parts of us and begin to move away from the strict identification with only our ego is the first step towards the integration that characterizes individuation. (Jung, 72). Sati has learnt to play the social role of *vikarma* in her consciousness. She relates to the outside world in the mask of *vikarma*. Persona in psychology mediates between one's individuality and the social expectations. Sati has rigidly blocked her individuality to meet the role of *vikarma*. Sati severely represses her individual qualities as they are unacceptable to her ego ideal and Meluhan Laws. Jung in his book writes "Suppression of individuality through the predominance of collective ideals and organizations is a moral defeat for society". (303) Though the King pretends to follow the footsteps of Lord Ram, the *Maryada-Purushottam*, but lacks compassion, tolerance and a sense of justice. The series of incidents that take place in the life of Sati enables her to discover herself as a woman. We find equal participation of Sati and Shiva in all spheres of life. In spite of society being patriarchal, ideologically forces of opposing polarity, male and female is supposed to give balance and harmony that create stability in the universe. Thus the gender ideology seems to be based on equality. Shiva meets Sati for the first time at the steps of Brahma Temple and falls in love at the first sight. Sati who has become habitual of shunning her consciousness, for the first time begins to face consciousness on meeting Shiva. Shiva strongly criticises the karma theory of rebirth and hates the idea of *sudhikaran* after touching his beloved. Sati's dance reflects how she has shunned her individuality. Her Guruji praises her steps but the emotions are conspicuous by their absence on her face. The *Natya Shastra* states that "rasas arise from the bhavas when they are imbued with the quality of *samanya* (universality)" (Chatham 21). But, "She (Sati) was moving in a mechanical manner; the

uninhibited surrender that is characteristic of a natural dancer was absent"(73). Indian dance is closely linked with emotions. The *Abhinaya Darpana* states that: wherever the hands go, there the eyes should follow. Wherever the eyes go, there the mind. Wherever the mind goes, there the feeling. Wherever the feeling goes, there the mood (*rasa*) or flavor is found (Coomaraswamy 36). *Rasa* is an aesthetic experience culminating into bliss. Shiva explains to Sati,

... the mudras and the kriyas were all technically correct. But the bhav or emotion was missing. And a dance without bhav is like a body without a soul.... The bhav is something that you cannot learn.

It comes to you if you can create the space in your heart for it.'(74)

Sati is not the woman without emotions, but she has worn a hard mask to cover her emotional state. She leads a restrained and conservative life as per social norms. Shiva initiates her and teaches her to invoke Mother Earth and ask for energy. 'we believe that everything in the world is a carrier of shakti ...but the biggest carrier of energy that we are physically in touch with is Mother Earth herself.'(78). Psychologists describe persona as 'an archetype of adaptation'. They describe the term as being 'connected with the effort made by the individual towards adapting to the outside world and its demands, or in other words persona is the face that one projects in a society. Sati not only wears this mask that hides her true nature but also denies her true nature to herself. Shiva helps her to have a clearer perception of this mask, with the passage of time she seems to have lost sight of who she is as an individual and has become the social mask that she wears to adapt to society. The Shiva -Sati relationship maybe studied under Foucault's perspective. Foucault claims that power is everything and everywhere. It can be in the form of resource, domination, or empowerment. He also analyses the way it is produced and functions within society (Foucault, 1980). Foucault takes positive view and claims that power is productive and produces truth and reality for us (Foucault, 1978). At the heart of the formation of power is discourse. He (1980) explains that:

In a society... there are manifold relations of power, which permeate, characterise and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse. (93)

Foucault holds that a relationship exists between power and knowledge. For Foucault the two are so intertwined that it is hard to separate them. He further claims that knowledge only comes from discourse. Foucault holds discourse or communication at the root of power relations. Communication plays important role within the power structure of the dominant versus the oppressed within society. In a same manner Orbe explains that:

...in every society a social hierarchy exists that privileges some groups over others. Those groups that function at the top of the social hierarchy determine to a great extent the communication system of the entire society. Over time, the

structures of this system-that reflect the "world-view" of dominant group members-are reinforced as the appropriate communicative system for both dominant and nondominant group members, (8)

Pandit of Mohan Jo Daro makes Sati approachable to Shiva. He explains 'transactions are threads that when woven together make up a society, its culture. Or in the case of a person, weaves together their character.' (IM,215). He then asks Shiva to guess what does she expect before responding to his love and advises:

I know it comes naturally to you to want to protect any good person who appears in need. But control that feeling in relation to Sati. *Respect her*. And she will feel irresistibly drawn towards you. (IM,217)

Sati gets an opportunity through Shiva to challenge Tarak and invoke the right of *Agnipariksha*. She had endured all the humiliations for herself but insult to Shiva was intolerable to her. Shiva provides her opportunity to vent out all the repressed anger. She forgives the collapsed and defeated Tarak. Discourse and communication shape the power relation of Shiva-Sati and they in turn determine the communication system of Meluhan society. The Vikarma Law of Meluha dissolves due to their love and a brave soldier like Drapaku gets the opportunity to fight in the *Dharmayudh*. Motherly and sisterly love is presented in its pristine beauty through Sati, Kali and Lord of the People (Ganesh). Much doting father but equally manipulative king, Daksha keeps Sati ignorant of the truth that she has given birth to deformed son and misinforms her of still born birth. Her mental fortitude is best portrayed in her determination to live with her son and sister despite the most mortifying pressures of family and society. She is most daring and sensible in nurturing the next generation than her mother Veerini. No sooner Sati delivers a Naga baby than Daksha decides to get rid of him so that Sati escapes the horrors of being a Naga mother. But Sati rises like a lioness and declares: "They are not deformed animals! They are my family!" (SN327). Veerini had however, several years back, surrendered before her husband Daksha when Kali was born and separated from her.

In Hindu mythology, while Sati or Parvati represents marriage and motherhood, Kali stands for destruction. She is also the one who protects and sacrifices for her children. Shiva's destruction opens the path for the new creation. Kali's story is a tale of true grit and survival in the face of violence and verbal abuse. Focus is on the grief and anguish of women characters and their ultimate triumph over suffering. With dogged optimism, the characters resist living a life of compromise and submission and oppose vehemently and adamantly the injustices meted out to them. Thus the inner strength of women in the face of fear, repulsion, anxiety and helplessness is revealed. In the novel, the courage and strength of will, Kali displays at the moments of pain and suffering emerge as the most striking feature. She refuses to allow her pain to cause suffering. From a time of total wreckage she is able to create a new world

of her own. Daksha loves his daughter, Sati and does not consider her inauspicious. 'None of my pujas are complete and pure till I have seen your face. I don't care about the dammed law.' (130). But the same father abandons his second daughter born with deformities for fear of society and his status in it. In the *Mahabhagavata Purana*, Kali and Sati are identified as the same being. In *Sri Devi Atharva Shirsha*, the Supreme Goddess (*Mahadevi*) says that she is both bliss and misery, knowledge as well as ignorance, real and illusion. She is elemental and non-elemental. Shiva succeeds in luring Sati into remarriage and thus into the wider circle of worldly life from which, due to her vikarma status, she had been aloof. In, Book two, however, it is Sati who introduces Shiva to Kali and thus extends his circle of activity. At this point, Shiva involves in the act of destruction/ creation which is actually an act of arranging and producing order from chaos. In most popular myths, the origins of Kali is considered to be created through the anger or grief of other goddesses. In the novel, abandoned, angry and grieved Kali is sketched as:

Her entire torso had an exoskeleton covering it, hard as bone. There were small balls bone which ran from her shoulders down to her stomach, almost like a garland of skulls. On top of her shoulders were two appendages, serving as a third and fourth arm. (SN,238).

Kali, born as a deformed child of Veerini is deported out of Meluha and grows up in Dandaka Forest. She becomes the Queen of Nagas. Though she is projected as fearsome woman who wishes to avenge her father but is full of mother instincts. She pours all her love on Sati's child. Amish in a subtle and convincing way stresses the significance of the mother child bonding in the psychological development of children. The inner troubles of Kali, the Queen of Nagas and The Lord of People is related to the absence of mother. Without mother these characters are deprived of love, affections and understanding. They get unusual childhood. They have experienced total neglect and uncertainties and this emotional deprivation has devastating effect on their personalities. After been accepted by Sati, Ganesh tries to recapture his childhood while Sati showers all her love on him;

Sati had spent the previous week listening to Kali share stories of Ganesh's childhood, sharing in his joys and sorrows, understanding her child's personality ...right down to his favourite dishes. And she was satiating his stomach and soul with what she had learnt. (SN258)

Laing speaks of position of mother in a family. He compares a family to a flower with mother at its core and children as its petals. Absence of mother arouses insecurity, fears, disappointments and dissatisfaction in the hearts of Ganesh and Kali and thus an emotional vacuum is created. The ideal image of a loving, caring mother breaks and a picture of callous woman who has deserted her own son is formed in Ganesh's psyche. Lord of People is shaken on seeing the sight of a tribal woman frantically saving her child from the soldiers of Magadh. She is beaten to pulp and yet she does not yield before the soldiers who would use her child as a

labour. Such mother, according to him is the most precious creature on earth and hence to be protected and cherished.

The mother lay unconscious ...Her eyes closing due to tremendous blood loss. Her body shivering desperately... And yet she stubbornly refused to give up her own son. Her body protectively positioned in front of her son.

What a mother! (thought Lord of People). (SN,40)

Kohut emphasises on mother's role, 'she not only takes notice of some of the infant's requirements and achievements but speaks to the child as an integral whole'. Having missed mother damages the self-esteem and thus the ability to relate to others with the spontaneous real self. Amish demystifies the patriarchal notion of motherhood and envisions new roles for the women. Motherhood is a source of empowerment and not entrapment for women. Veerini is a submissive personality who bears the pains of separation from her child in silence. She submits to her ordained role as a woman. Years later on being confronted by her lost daughter and grandson, she still does not lose her self control and remains restrained:

Shiva noticed Veerini's expression. Profound sadness. Eyebrows joined together, but her lips curled up slightly in a smile struggling to break through. Her eyes moist. *She knows too. And she loves them.* (SN325).

On the other hand, Sati asserts herself in atrocious situations. Besides being an embodiment of duty and unselfish love, Sati is also a fine prototype of mother courage and strong optimism. Sati gleans in her sensitivity, individuality and stubbornness to assert herself. In Kashi, Kali engages herself in play with the village children. In most of the traditional stories, Shiva appears to play a large role in the calming, and controlling Kali. Kali in Book2 *The Secret of Nagas* muses:

How different would my life have been if fate had blessed me with a man like Shiva. Maybe like didi, all the poison could have been sucked out of my life as well. Perhaps, even I would have found happiness and peace. (SN,332).

While Sati provides a traditional model for women in their relationship with men by being calm, approachable and docile, Kali's wrath and retribution presents her as aggressive and fiercely independent goddess. In the novel, Sati is brought up in civilized, orderly and refined Meluhan Kingdom while Kali's abode is wild raw and chaotic forest of Dandak. The dialogic discourse from the novels under study reveals self as a social construction. The characters in the novels choose the appropriate conversational style that reveals their relationship with each other. Veerini in her submissive compliance doesn't seem to display any sad, serious or hurt feeling of coerced abandonment of her daughter, Kali. Daksha completely controls and curbs her individual freedom and autonomy with constant snubbing and scolding. However the non-verbal communication reveals her grief and suppressed anger. In *The Mating Dance*, when Daksha examines naked, infant Kartik, and checks for any deformity, Veerini is irritated but keeps mum:

Veerini stared at Daksha, her eyes narrowed, her breathing ragged. She gritted her teeth, but kept her silence. (SN, 119).

Similarly when Daksha pampers Sati and says that none of his pujas is complete without seeing her face, Veerini's 'awkward smile'(IM,131) speaks out what her mouth never would. Thus most of the times it is seen that Veerini designs her communication to avoid offence and establish camaraderie with her husband, Daksha. She makes deliberate efforts to establish and maintain cordial relationships or minimize discord with him. On the other hand, unconditional love of Shiva for Sati is reciprocated by total surrender and compliance. Sati's fortitude is her strength. She is confident of Ganesh's acceptance by Shiva and scolds Ganesh for his distrust.

You are my son. You are his son. He will accept you. You don't know the size of your father's heart. The entire world can live in it. (259).

However on rejection by Shiva, who holds Ganesh responsible for Brihaspati's murder the perlocutionary response of Sati in her submissive compliance doesn't seem to display any suppressed anger as a result of being challenged to choose between husband and son. Conversely, in her very cooperative response, she neither argues nor self pities but patiently waits and gradually convinces him in the ongoing conversation. Indian culture, in general, does not believe in public display of affection in order to maintain a clean public reputation and image. Group solidarity is regarded more important than individual identity. Shiva, who comes from a tribal society does not care about this sophistry. At Bal-Atibal Kund, during puja ceremony:

Sati frowned at her husband, gesturing with her eyes that he should concentrate on his prayers. Shiva... blew her a kiss. A started Sati frowned even more. Her Suryavanshi sensibilities felt offended at such frivolous behaviour... Sati turned too, eyes closed, allowing herself a slight smile at the fact that she had been blessed with an adoring husband (SN, 28)

This response of Sati may sound absurd or eccentric to the observers who are not in a position to share this socio-cultural factor of a special deference attached to the concept of the puja and the socio-cultural milieu in India. Such an understanding of the verbal and non-verbal act, especially of the readers from other socio-cultural backgrounds, may lead to the area of what Flowerdew (1988:77) calls, a socio-pragmatic failure. This displays that the question of the appropriateness of realization of the two communicative actions involved in the exchange is intricately related to the underlying social and cultural situation of the speech act in question. Anandmayi, the Princess of Swadeep is another interesting character to be explored. Sati, in the novel, is described as beautiful, but it is her devotion and asceticism that attracts Shiva to her. Anandmayi, on the other hand is portrayed as a seductive princess of Ayodhya:

... her doe-shaped eyes were in a seductive half-stare, while her lips were in perpetual pout that was sensual yet intimidating. She was

provocatively clothed.... She stood with her hips tilted to the side, exuding raw passion. (IM,365)

On Parvateshwar's vow of celibacy and his hesitation in accepting her love, Anandmayi (one who has potential to give bliss) does not shy away but asserts herself:

It's strange how life works,' ... 'A good man rebelled against an injustice in a foreign land more than two hundred and fifty years ago. Today, that very rebellion is causing me injustice...'(183)... look at me. I had nothing to do with that crime. I wasn't even born then. And yet, you are punishing me today for it.(205)

Anandmayi is embodiment of female beauty and the instigator of desire. She not only sexually attracts life-celibate Parvateshwar but also impresses him with her intelligence and warrior skills. She capably breaks the vow and Suryavanshi Laws and creates chaos in life of Parvateshwar. To Parvateshwar, Suryavanshi way had 'been the bedrock of life' and he had found this 'predictability *quite* (added) comforting' (SN,256). Anandmayi turns his, 'world upside down'. She represents the rhythm of physical world who impels creation. Amish's imagination has inspirational and initiatory power and thus he succeeds in constructing heroic archetypes and authentic inspirational universe through his fiction. His story does not seek for egoic wishfulfillment or self gratifying projection but rather shows the path of spiritual transcendence and even self-initiation. His work provides inspiration to those who wish to transcend the ego's limits. The archetypal foundation of myth derives from the collective unconscious and is experienced personally and subjectively through the individual consciousness. The two books of trilogy indeed have power to awe and inspire like any metaphysical treatise. Amish seems to convince that deep within the human consciousness lies the seeds of enlightenment which come into life when an individual sets on the inner journey of self-knowledge. Amish has the sharpness and penetration of vision of extraordinary degree. He seems to possess to a high degree of the intuitive power of seeing into the nature of things. He is gifted with acutely keen imaginative faculty with immense power of recreating incidents, characters and situations. The subtle portrayal of an inner sensibility as opposed to outer reality makes his fiction unique. He is not interested in surface reality and thus ropes inner truths. He explores human minds and is primarily concerned with building and maintaining harmonious human relationships. He stresses that no relationship can stand alone. The novelist succeeds in merging the past with the present by making association of the events and happenings of the present with those stored in the unconscious of the protagonists. The rebellious nature accompanied with sensitive heart separates his women characters from the crowd. The trilogy is highly relevant in today's modern society. The writer through psychological probing and sociological concerns strives to search the secrets of human happiness. Amish portrays women as vitalizers. They can bring vital

beings into the world. They hold power not only to give birth but to make, to create and to transform too. Women's power, not to be taken as political or economic, but of higher nature, lies in sustaining life. Amish's motive in recreating the Shiva myth may be summed in the words of Radhakrishnan, as he relates human distinctiveness to human responsibility:

Animals are conscious; men are self-conscious, and so have greater dignity than stones or plants or animals....The human individual has to work his/her evolution consciously and deliberately...he has to act responsibly and co-operate willingly with the purpose of evolution... human self-consciousness must grow into comprehensive vision, into illumined consciousness....There is as much discontinuity between the human and the spiritual as there is between the human and the animal. Spiritual life is not only negation but the fulfilment of the human life (1950: 28-30).

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