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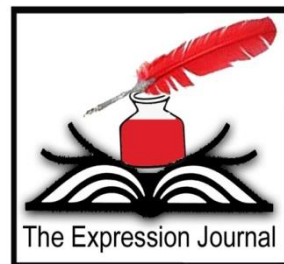
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Indian Mythology through the Lens of Retelling: A Scholarly Inquiry

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Abstract

In the modern literature myth and history have acquired a great significance because the modern writers find myths as a means to understand as well as to portray the life of the contemporary man and their own perception of it. In order to view the contemporary human situation, several writers have traced the mythical situation and characters in the modern context and their relevance to it. It helps the writers to leave an impact upon readers because of their previous knowledge of myths. Actually, each retelling presents an entirely novel perspective and a fresh and original piece of writing. Exploring the enduring power of Indian mythology in contemporary fiction, this paper investigates how different Indian authors reinterpret common mythological texts in unique ways. It critically examines myth as tradition, history, and belief, and evaluates the impact of these "modernized" retellings on the modern world. Beyond a general focus on Indian mythological retellings, the paper also delves into those that re-evaluate Indian myths through a female lens, analyzing the depiction and roles of women. Additionally, it considers existing scholarship on Amish Tripathi's mythico-historical narratives, specifically his portrayal of Indian mythology as a path to salvation.

Keywords

Fictional Writing, Literary Modernism, Modernity, Retelling

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Introduction

Indian Writing in English has altered immensely to meet the expectations of contemporary readers. Modernist literary texts often emerged as a response to perceived limitations of singular, rigid modes of thought, such as disciplinary narrowness or binary exclusions. "Modernity" in literary context refers to a flexible framework encompassing the historical evolution of modern societal structures, technological advancements, and shifts in consciousness. Within these dynamics of modernization, there have consistently been significant, albeit broadly defined, trajectories of "mystical" cultural reflection that often act as a counter force. Fictional writing serves as an ideal subject for analyzing this phenomenon. Beyond its relevance to literary scholarship, its immersive nature allows for the observation of how various cultural discourses and forms of knowledge converge, blend, clash, or undergo de-essentialization. As a medium for social and cultural reflection and exchange, modern literature particularly the novel plays a crucial role in mediating between abstract knowledge and diverse personal experiences. Literary modernism holds a unique position in this history due to its symptomatic reaction to the cultural schism between rationality and spirituality. It's important to note that humanism, a rationalist perspective emphasizing human agency over divine or supernatural concerns, holds distinct meanings across different cultures and societies. There's a significant risk of mistakenly equating the term "religion" with doctrines and methodologies that have lost their relevance and are no longer capable of addressing contemporary challenges. This paper examines how Indian mythology is reinterpreted by various contemporary Indian writers, critically analyzing myth's roles as tradition, history, and belief, and assesses the lasting influence of Indian mythology on modern fiction and its impact on the contemporary world. While primarily focusing on Indian mythological retellings, the paper also considers those that evaluate Indian myths from a female perspective, specifically

regarding the characterization and portrayal of women. Furthermore, it reviews scholarly works on Amish Tripathi's mythico-historical narratives, particularly his use of Indian mythology as a source of salvation.

Understanding Myth: Tradition, History, and Belief

Throughout the years, mythology has proved an indispensable source and subject for literary investigation. Despite the criticisms and complaints made regarding the uncertainties about their credibility and authenticity, authors have been reinterpreting myths. It seems that the primary motivation of the authors for their insatiable fascination with mythology is to figure out the significance of their current situation in light of their ancient past (Singh, V., 2016).

The Oxford Dictionary defines a 'myth' as a traditional story, often focused on a community's early history or explaining natural or social phenomena, typically involving supernatural elements. This definition highlights two crucial aspects: 'tradition' and 'history'. According to another research by A. J. Dorairaj titled 'Myth and Literature' (2003) asserts that myths are remarkable phenomena. Myths are nearly impossible to dissect and analyze due to their vast diversity. They possess a dual nature, being both local and universal; ancient but relevant today; fixed yet fluid; consistent while also adaptable; excessive and yet revered; imaginative yet highly organized; divine and simultaneously human, relating to both deities and people alike. Although they originate from pre-literate and prehistoric times, they continue to manifest in every era and are part of our modern culture. While rooted in primitive religion and studied by anthropologists, folklorists, and phenomenologists of religion, myths are also essential to literature and other forms of art.

Laura Cruz and Willem Frijhoff (2009), in their research on "Introduction: Myth in History, History in Myth" have given detailed narrative about the evolution of myths. They explain that myths initially served as origin stories ("mythos" meaning story in Greek). However, the Enlightenment positioned myths as contradictory to modern logic and evidence, associating them with superstition and deception. Consequently, academic history emerged as a more objective and reliable method for understanding the past, contrasting with the perceived unreliability of myth.

For Pattanaik (2006), 'myth' is fundamentally "a cultural common understanding of the world that binds individuals and communities together. This understanding may be religious or secular". Sanghi (2010) articulates, "Myth ceases to be merely primitive and becomes universal. It ceases to be false and becomes true. It depicts the human condition". For Sanghi, myths serve as ideal 'analogies for explaining complex concepts' like karma and the intricate relationship between cause and effect. He believes that a myth's significance extends beyond its original story, becoming a powerful explanation of the human experience and the challenges faced in a world far removed from the myth itself. Balachandran R. (2010) asserts that modern writers breathe the new life into myths. Consequently, contemporary literature often explores historical experiences to tackle current challenges. Myths serve as sources of fresh interpretations. As characters such as Rama, Ravana, Sita, Draupadi, Krishna, Ekalavya, Sambooka, Arjuna, Karna, Sabri, Bali, Urmila, Soorpanakha, Shikhandi, Shakuni, Bharata, and Laxmana, among others, are commonly referenced in everyday conversations in India, these figures are frequently taken and reinterpreted within new social, political, and cultural frameworks.

The most well-known authors in India including Amish Tripathy, Novoneel Chakraborty, Durjoy Dutta, and numerous others are a part of the popular literary tradition of India, which is based on ideas, viewpoints, attitudes, images, and other phenomena prevalent in a certain culture. (Anindita Chatterjee, 2014). Shah, Nadia, (2021).Devi (2023), in her work 'A Story Embedded in Philosophy: A Depth Study of Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy, views mythology as a captivating genre globally, and highlights mythology's enduring relevance in addressing ethical dilemmas and moral struggles through engaging stories. Nadia Shah (2021) states that the close link between myths, tradition, and history reveals their deep connection to the places, communities, cultures, and people they originate from. In some societies, myths and legends are so deeply ingrained that they are considered true accounts of a distant past, effectively becoming intertwined with their historical narratives. However, it's important to remember that calling something a myth inherently suggests its 'fictional' or make-believe nature. Nevertheless, myths are undeniably linked to 'religious traditions', often spiritual in essence, and are frequently associated with cults and rituals.

Indian Mythology and Modern World

Myths are used for shaping the lives of people to teach the moral lessons and shape the conduct of human beings. As M.H. Abraham (2006) says in this context:...a system of which hereditary stories of ancient origin were once believed to be true by a particular group, and which served to explain why the world as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives.(22)

Ashwin Sanghi (2010) masterfully blends 'history, theology, and mythology' in his fictional works. In 'Chanakya's Chant', he delves into historical narratives influenced by mythology, leveraging the enduring legend of Chanakya. Chanakya, renowned as a brilliant and cunning strategist working for the state's benefit, finds a compelling fictional counterpart in the novel's character, Pandit Gangasagar Mishra.

Devdutt Pattanaik (2006), known for his ability to blend traditional concepts with the modern world, also uses myth uniquely in his writing. He often finds inspiration for business and commercial ideas within Indian epics.

Vikram Singh (2016), in his research study on 'Rewriting Myth: A Critical Analysis Of Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy', emphasizes Amish's exploration of religion, ethics, and philosophy. He states that continued reinterpretation of mythology raises authenticity concerns. Several studies suggest that authors are drawn to mythology to connect ancient narratives with contemporary experiences and discusses artistic license and historical authenticity in portraying mythological deities. He asserts that Amish creates compelling narratives that appeal to modern readers while remains rooted in mythological foundations.

Vigneshkumar and Boomiraja (2023) in their article on 'Mythological Revivalism: An Analysis of Amish Tripathi's Novels as Popular Literature', emphasizes Amish's exploration of religion, philosophy, and ethics through engaging narratives. His work, which humanizes deities like Shiva and Shakti and addresses contemporary issues within ancient mythological settings, has popularized Indian mythology-based fiction globally and encourages readers to draw parallels between the past and present.

Sivaranjini (2023) in her study entitled 'From Heaven to Earth: Rewriting Myth - An analysis of Ki Longfellow's Secret Magdalene and Amish's Shiva Trilogy', explains that rewriting myths emphasizes the human origins of gods. She recognizes Amish's portrayal of

Shiva as a tribal leader who becomes a god, making the myth accessible and relatable and places Amish alongside authors like Longfellow for their humanistic portrayal of divine figures.

Indian society is largely defined by its traditions and orthodoxy, creating a dynamic where 'modernity and tradition frequently overlap and sometimes clash' This interplay is clearly visible in Indian literature, where writers' deep commitment to their past and traditions serves as a constant source of inspiration (Dalmia, 2006). 'Hindu mythology', in particular, acts as a subconscious wellsprings of symbols and motifs for their works Indian authors often interweave mythology with contemporary themes, effectively modernizing the past and re-contextualizing the present. This 'juxtaposition has led to the creation of classic works of art and literature' Mukherjee, M. (2002). Indian writers are continuously experimenting with mythology, finding innovative ways to revisit and reimagine these ancient stories. Recently, there's been a notable focus on exploring 'minor characters and subplots', as Doniger, W. (2014) highlights the adaptability and multiple interpretations of Hindu narratives, which underlies the exploration of minor characters and subplots in modern retellings. Beyond enriching the individual work, incorporating myths and legends allows writers to 'situate their new creations within the broader literary landscape' of a specific culture or region, and even beyond Hutcheon, L. (2013).

The Enduring Power of Indian Mythology in Contemporary Fiction

Contemporary Indian essayists, including 'Amish Tripathi, Ashok Banker, and Ashwin Sanghi', are forging a new literary tradition by intertwining ancient Indian mythology with present-day realities [1]. Through this approach, these authors are effectively modernizing Indian myths. Amish Tripathi, for example, draws upon stories and tales passed down through his family, positing that Hindu deities may not have been purely mythical beings but rather individuals like us [2]. He approaches every character and setting in his series with a humanistic perspective.

This new generation of authors, such as 'Chetan Bhagat, Preeti Shenoy, Ashwin Sanghi, and Amish Tripathi' have revolutionized Indian fiction in English [3]. They've initiated a trend of writing about Indian myths, striving to blend the past with modernity. Against this backdrop, it's no surprise that mythology has remained a rich and ever-changing repository of incredible symbolism and a vast source of artistic expression [4].

However, the term "myth" still often carries connotations of illusion. Many who engage with India's intricate myths and legends perceive the events involving their heroes and heroines as exaggerated and unbelievable. In myths, miracles are commonplace: cities float in the sky or exist beneath oceans, and interactions between animals, serpents, birds, humans, and divine beings are routine [5]. Mythology often provides an additional, deeper meaning to everyday occurrences, offering a justification for all improbable happenings.

Anindita Chatterjee (2014), in her research paper titled 'Chetan Bhagat and the New India', highlights how authors like Amish Tripathi, Novoneel Chakraborty, and Durjoy Dutta contribute to Indian popular literature. Author emphasizes cultural ideas, attitudes, and imagery embedded in Indian literary traditions. In this lineage, new Indian writers such as Amish Tripathi, Ashok Banker, and Ashwin Sanghi have established a new tradition by blending the mythology of the past with present-day reality. In doing so, these writers are modernizing Indian myths.

In her 2016 article, 'Representation of Lord Shiva as a Man in Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy', G. Sharmily examines Tripathi's portrayal of Lord Shiva as an ordinary human who

attained a God-like status through his actions (karma). 1 The article notes the emergence of modern mythological fiction writers like Ashok Banker, Amish Tripathi, Devdutt Pattanaik, and Ashwin Sanghi, who blend myth, fantasy, history, and science in their fiction. It explores Shiva's journey and delves into the concepts of 'Virtue' and 'Vice' and the law of Karma. Ultimately, the article conveys the author's view that Hindu Gods might have been historical human beings whose deeds led to their deification. Furthermore, through elaborate religious rituals, a rich artistic heritage, and an extraordinary collection of literature, these myths and legends have been so deeply ingrained in the minds of Indians that their powerful influence is evident in every aspect of Indian life and culture even today [6]. Almost every day on the Indian calendar is linked to a myth or legend, giving rise to festive days, auspicious moments, or planetary alignments. Numerous mythical objects and figures are present in the everyday consciousness of Indians, as religion and rituals are intrinsically connected to them. Consequently, millions of Indians believe that legends remain relevant in contemporary India, and this belief effectively merges the myths of the past with the present modern age [7].

Kharadi, Hemantkumar (2022), in his research study on, 'Linear Aspects of Theme in Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy', also compares and concludes that the Theme in Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy several other works have themes which blend legends, epics, and immense historical heritage of India. Like Devdutt Pattanaik delves into ancient Indian epics and mythology and has written extensively, offering insights into texts, narratives, symbols, and customs through retellings like Sita and Jaya. Jeelkantan Kauravas' in his Ajaya series, often highlighting the experiences of the defeated. Amitav Ghosh, a postcolonial novelist, weaves mythological and legendary elements into his narratives.

Sneha, and Tejal Jani (2020) in the research study on, 'Devdutt Pattanaik's Exploration on Myth', emphasize the universal appeal of mythological retellings. The researchers Argue that every retelling brings new insights and freshness, maintaining audience interest. However, this does not in the least leave the work monotonous or stagnant. Actually, each retelling presents an entirely novel perspective and is as fresh as an original piece of writing.

Parthivkumar Patel's (2020) research paper on Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy titled, 'Ethical Wisdom and Philosophical Judgement in Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy', highlights his exploration of equality, emancipation, liberty, and the importance of relationships. It also gives importance to human relationships, as a man does not exist in seclusion. The research draws parallels between the trilogy and ancient texts as sources of spiritual guidance for modern society. It also examines Tripathi's concepts of good and evil (Sura and Asura), his fictional systems, and his unique portrayal of Ardhanarishwar. Furthermore, Patel notes Tripathi's rational and scientific approach to myth-writing, evident in his explanations of elements like Somras and divine weapons.

Nirmla Rani (2019) in her study, 'Modernisation of Myth in Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy and Ram Chandra Series. Research Review', asserts that India has the richest mythology globally, preserved in texts like the Vedas, Upanishads, epics, Puranas, and oral traditions. In this literary lineage, contemporary Indian authors like Amish Tripathi, Ashok Banker, and Ashwin Sanghi blend ancient mythology with contemporary themes, creating a modernized tradition, thereby revitalizing Indian myths. Arthi and Thamizhmami (2019), in their research article on, 'Mythological Elements In Amish Tripathi's 'The Immortals Of Meluha'', asserts that Amish Tripathi's writing is rooted in Indian mythology, featuring deities and mythical settings like the Indus Valley Civilization. His characters, though divine, grapple with relatable human emotions and struggles. Through balanced narratives, Tripathi promotes

traditional values for a fulfilling life, encouraging spiritual contemplation and ethical awareness. Despite the mythical context, his characters, like Shiva, experience universal human emotions and challenges. Tripathi's balanced storytelling encourages readers to embrace traditional values for a contented and peaceful life, fostering spiritual reflection and highlighting the concepts of good and evil for virtuous living.

Sharma, Chinmay (2017), in his scholarly work, 'Many Mahabharatas : Linking Mythic Re-tellings in Contemporary India', examines the reinterpretation of mythological narratives across various contexts. His primary focus is on tales from the Mahabharata, showcasing Indian culture through diverse images and interpretations. The researcher also explores Hindi and English literature, television, poetry, and contemporary Indian theatre. He emphasizes prominent mythological narratives that have already been rendered in English, attracting both Indian and international audiences. All these stories are conveyed in straightforward language and highlight engaging events from the original epic. The researcher provides an analysis of Rajagopalachari's modern retelling of the Mahabharata, which has gained popularity in Indian English literature. This rendition reflects the intricate personal politics and social realities of the era in which the author lived. The researcher elaborates on notable writers such as Shashi Tharoor, Devdutt Pattanaik, Krishna Udayasankar, and Amrita Patil, whose works depict the cultural landscape of the 1980s to 2010s through the lens of the Mahabharata. He applies the theories of Lutgendorf and Richman concerning retellings in the cultural domain and incorporates the concept of 'psycho-narration' as defined by Dorit Cohn.

Mythology and Female Perspective

Kavita Kané, an Indian author specializing in mythology-fiction, brings to light the often-overlooked female characters within Indian epics. She reinterprets myths and their significance from a distinctly feminine perspective. Her well-known works include 'Karna's Wife: The Outcast Queen', 'Sita's Sister', 'Menaka's Choice', and 'Lanka's Princess' [1]. In 'Sita's Sister' centers on Urmila, Lakshmana's wife, a figure largely absent from mainstream mythical narratives. The novel explores Urmila's struggle when she's left alone after her husband, Lakshmana, accompanies Rama and Sita during their fourteen-year exile. This narrative offers a fresh, previously neglected viewpoint, told entirely through Urmila's experiences as she bravely navigates life alone. Through this, Urmila emerges as a woman of immense courage, conviction, and perseverance [2]. Thus, Kané uses myth as a vehicle to express her feminist principles.

Similarly, 'The Palace of Illusions' by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (2008), another female mythological author, retells the 'Mahabharata' from the perspective of Draupadi, another marginalized character. This novel also intertwines feminism with elements of myth, history, and fiction.

Kumari and Kumar's (2017) study, 'The Correlation of Myth and feminism as presented in Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy', examines the interplay between mythological narratives and feminist perspectives within Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy. Their analysis foregrounds the representation of female empowerment within a patriarchal societal structure, arguing that mythologically informed fiction possesses the capacity to challenge conventional constraints imposed upon women. The authors highlight Tripathi's portrayal of assertive and autonomous female figures, including Sati, Kali, Ayurvati, Kritika, and Kanakhala. Notably, the study emphasizes Ayurvati's position as a respected head physician and Kanakhala's role as Prime Minister, illustrating instances of female leadership. Furthermore, Kumari and Kumar analyze

Sati's experience as a widow navigating restrictive Meluhan legal frameworks, a context in which Shiva, by virtue of his elevated social standing, actively dissents. The research culminates in the assertion that Tripathi strategically juxtaposes a masculine principle of "life by laws" with a feminine principle of "life by probabilities," employing his female characters as reflections of contemporary female experiences in the 21st century.

Keshav (2021) in his research paper, *Women Empowerment In The Writings of Amish Tripathi*, contends that Amish Tripathi's female characters, particularly within his 'Shiva Trilogy' and 'Ram Chandra Series,' exhibit self-confidence and independence, drawing from the rich mythological heritage of ancient India. According to Keshav, these prominent female figures exemplify women's empowerment through their strength, dexterity, and self-reliance, achieving parity with male characters across various domains, including both artistic and martial pursuits. Keshav posits that Tripathi's representation of these mythological characters serves to present social and communal archetypes relevant to the 21st century.

Tripathy's Mythico-Historical Narrative: India as a Source of Salvation

In an era of demythologization, Tripathy's fiction boldly presents a mythico-historical account that asserts India bestows sacrificial strength upon its inhabitants. Tripathy appears to believe that humans possess an active intellect but a passive sensibility. Brahma, in contrast, is depicted with an intuitive intellect capable of self-creation. Shiva, however, surpasses other humans in his ability to perceive sensory data in its unadulterated form, unlike the average person who, caught in life's complexities, perceives reality distorted by the constraints of space and time. (Chatterjee, Abhinaba; 2021)

Dharmadhikari (2013) in his study on 'New Bard of MacDonald Generation: A Critical Study of the Marginalised Voices in Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy' explains that by centering the experiences of marginalized figures within the mythological context of Lord Shiva, Tripathi endeavors to amplify their voices within postmodern discourse. He posits that the enduring marginalization of socially deprived communities stems from misinterpretations of religious texts. Through a process of mythological reinterpretation, Tripathi revisits the foundational aspects of Indian mythology, aiming to generate viable solutions to contemporary social issues, a venture in which he achieves notable success.

Milan Sharma (2011) in the published research titled, 'An Approach to Equanimity through Good and Evil in Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy', highlights Amish's thematic balance and narrative innovation in depicting philosophical conflicts. Milan explains that the Shiva Trilogy illustrates the significance of maintaining balance and equanimity between positive and negative forces, or the struggle between good and evil. He comments on innovativeness and craft of Amish as an author, by illustrating from the initial book of the trilogy, 'The Immortals of Meluha', where Shiva describes to Sati the subtleties of dancing and remarks that the art form's technicalities are mudra and Kriyas, but equally significant is 'Bhava'. In order to restore the balance between good and evil, the author researched countless stories and traditions and developed Shiva, a tribal leader who appeals to everyone not as a god but as a human who can become a god. Despite scholarly debates concerning the veracity and authenticity of mythological narratives, their reinterpretation by authors remains a prominent feature of the field.

The author taken up for the present study is one such writer whose retelling of the Shiva myth remains un-paralleled. Mythology and history are the themes of his books and the presentation of the ancient mythological deity Shiva from a Tibetan ethnic race is truly

remarkable. He has undoubtedly come up with a fascinating concept. Each of the three books in the trilogy has gained immense success, meaning that the first book was not a flash in the pan and the myth of Shiva is successfully narrated through all the three books.

Conclusion

To sum it up, the present paper shows how important myth is to contemporary Indian literature. Through an examination of the ways in which current writers adapt and update classic stories, it is discovered that these retellings are much more than mere sentimental exercises. By analyzing how contemporary authors reinterpret and modernize traditional narratives, it could be concluded that these retellings are far more than simple nostalgic exercises; they are vital tools for critically evaluating and understanding the modern world. The analysis revealed that authors deftly re-contextualize ancient myths to explore pressing contemporary issues, thereby proving the enduring relevance of these stories.

Furthermore, a critical examination of the portrayal of women in these texts highlighted a deliberate and powerful move toward re-evaluating long-held gender roles. By recasting female characters in a new light, these works challenge traditional patriarchal interpretations and offer fresh perspectives on power, agency, and identity. This is particularly evident when considering existing scholarly work on authors like Amish Tripathi, whose mythico-historical narratives not only reimagine the past but also frame mythology as a viable path to individual and societal salvation. Ultimately, modern Indian mythological fiction serves as a dynamic bridge between tradition and modernity. It shows that ancient myths are not static relics but living, breathing narratives that continue to adapt, evolve, and provide a lens through which to comprehend the complexities of the human condition. This paper has demonstrated the profound significance of myth in modern Indian literature.

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