CONTEMPORIZING MYTHOLOGY: A CRITICAL STUDY OF AMISH TRIPATHI'S WORKS

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Myths are a community's legacies that are passed on over generations. They are open to interpretation, re-interpretation, re-creation, and review. This gives myths a transient quality and the narrators and writers of myths a license to revitalize them and change who the reader sees as hero, villain, reliable, un-reliable, good, bad, deity and human. Literary retellings of myths often focus on specific characters and tell their story from a perspective that may or may not have been told in a dominant narrative. The retelling of myth also contemporizes it in so far as it includes the contemporary socio-cultural sensibilities in it. The paper shall focus on how certain modern retellings of ancient Indian myths contemporize the context so that the reader is no longer reading the epic or a moral fable but rather an interesting novel that serves as a constant companion during lunch breaks or during metro rides. Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy that focuses solely on the life and actions of Shiva as a human, his Ram Chandra Series with focus of one book on Ram's tale, another only on Sita's perspective and the third that is due sometime this year from the point of view of Raavan are but a few examples of writings that make a shift from the normative narrative of epics. Devdutt Pattanaik's books on Indian myth, Anand Neelakantan's partisanship of the so-called villains from the epics, Kavita Kane's and Anuja Chandramouli's excavation of the minor women characters from myth and epic, Amruta Patil's subversive graphic texts that delve deep into the Mahabharata and the Puranas, Samhita Arni's The Missing Queen, which takes the end of the Ramayana further, show their readers how retelling of myth lays emphasis on contemporizing it and making it relatable in the present context. A major part of making re-creations relatable is of relieving characters from the roles of Devas and Danavas. The paper proposes to focus on the fiction of Amish Tripathi and engage with the contextualization of characters according to the contemporary times for contemporary readers.

In the retelling of the story of Shiva, Ram and Sita the author creates humans who are not invincible, incorruptible and are prone to folly. This shift from an exalted position of God to the status of human charters a new character in a new light for the readers. This moves away from the brahmanical, patriarchal dominance in the Indian epics and system as Badri Narayan states in his work "Honour, Violence and Conflicting Narratives: A Study of Myth and Reality" (Narayan 22). These are a few issues that the paper proposes to discuss.

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"Myth," Karen Armstrong writes in her explanation of the subject, "is about the unknown; it is about that for which initially we have no words. Myth therefore looks into the heart of a great silence." Myth, she asserts further, is rooted in "the fear of extinction." "All mythology speaks of another plane that exists alongside our own world, and that in some sense supports it." The survival of many myths, some of them very ancient, is precisely due to the fact that they have been readdressed, readjusted and reinterpreted through the ages. The relationship between people and the mythic events they commemorateboth in story and in their rituals has always been fluid. Myths have gained relevance in the contemporary context with writers giving old stories a fresh flavour and relatable twist and with readers appreciating a work that is no more a grandma's tale but rather a story, replete with romance, high-end action, sci-fi sequence, family drama and much more.

Armstrong speculates that today it is novelists who can partly fill the void left by myth. Reading a certain novel "can be seen as a form of meditation," she writes. "A powerful novel becomes part of the backdrop of our lives."This statement holds true for works of writers like Tripathi, Pattanaik and so on who are being treated not as writers only of an age old story but rather as people who have successfully constructed characters that fit into the modern psyche and can be related to. These books are successfully redefining mythology for a large chunk of young readers.

"The stories of our gods have constantly evolved, retaining the best of the old, but adding in the attractiveness of the new, thus keeping our myths relevant, ever-contemporary and alive," says Tripathi in his first non fiction book Immortal India.

While there is an issue with Tripathi assuming that the Gods that he speaks of are a collective 'our' Gods and not 'Hindu' Gods specifically, he does seem right in assuming that the Hindu myth had great potential in being refurbished to suit contemporary readership needs and hence the writers of the genre have exploited the platform to the fullest and commercial success of his books is speaking for itself. In fact Tripathi's retelling of myth is perhaps the best example of making myth a novel. With other writers of the same genre we have facts stated from a different mouthpiece or facts stated from a philosophical rather than historical perspective. With Tripathi the reader has got their hands on, for the first time, a work of complete fiction with improvisations in plot and many geographically sound statements that make a reader believe, 'this is how it must have happened in history'. This is one major difference between Tripathi and the rest. Secondly, because he believes so firmly in a balanced blend of the old and the new, his stories are not only about a love struck Shiva gazing at his beautiful Sati in a temple, and luring young readers to buy his books for sake of a gripping narrative with sufficient romance but they are also about giving his readers a strong message in the end much like the old Amarachitra katha and Panchtantra tales.

In Tripathi's own words in an interview with Sanchari Pal, "According to ancient beliefs, a book without some philosophy is like a body without its soul. I strongly believe in this and hence, I do try to include some kind of philosophy or deeper message in my books."Tripathi does not give his readers Gods. He gives them vulnerable humans, prone to folly. He gives them people who are slaves to their anger, people who suffer from inferiority complex, people who want to love but are afraid of it, people who want more from life and most importantly people who change over the course of the narrative, for better or for worse because they are just like people who are reading them in those pages. One could also assume that he gives his readers heroes; people who are human but are accorded super human qualities by way of their determination to succeed and to aid people in need, no matter what the consequences. It is this selflessness of a hero that makes them a superhero and a role model that perhaps a reader would like to emulate. It is for these reason perhaps that Tripathi also assumes that his readers should learn the lessons that his characters learn. Sometimes, the lessons are as simple as, 'you cannot always get what you want and your resorting to means that could harm someone in reaching your goals is not worth it.' For a present day reader, listening to these lines from a well wisher may seem like a sermon but reading the same in a novel they likemay successfully drive the point home. This shift of his characters from an exalted position of God to the status of human presents them in a new light to his readers. This moves away from the brahmanical, patriarchal dominance in the Indian epics and system as Badri Narayan states in his work "Honour, Violence and Conflicting Narratives: A Study of Myth and Reality" (Narayan 22). The reader need no longer look at Shiva with reverence or se other women charactersserving simplified roles of 'only wife' or 'only daughter.' The reader now hears the voice of the untouchable, the reader can now take a peep into the heart of a Vishkarma woman and the reader can now see and critique the glaring faults of character in Ram or Shiva and see them become better in due course of time.

Similarly, while certain people study literature and language as a discipline, take exams in it and wish to choose a career related to it, for many others language is a means to an end and not the end in itself. They therefore write in an idiom that they are most comfortable in. As luck would have it for Tripathi, his style of writing is what a big part of the young reading audience is also comfortable with and very

few people in that population are students of literature or people who engage with a text critically. Tripathi says in an interview, "making the story and its message as easily understandable as possible is important. And using contemporary language and symbols of modernity helps accomplish this." Some writers find simple writing a boon and so do many readers. As a matter of fact, important critics have also pointed out that language need not be formal or scholarly to be considered worth critical acclaim or importance. Gloria Steinem once mentioned that she couldn't figure out why people are obsessed with saying 'discourse' instead of 'to talk.'

Tripathi gives an interesting example to explain his point when he says,

> "…The juxtaposition of the modern and the ancient can often give an interesting and unique makeover to an old story. The core remains the same, the soul remains the same, but the packaging can be fresh and new.

For instance, the famous 1996 film adaptation of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet by Baz Luhrmann. While it retains the original Shakespearean dialogue, the film's setting was modern — with the Montagues and the Capulets represented as warring mafia families and swords replaced with guns!"

A.K Ramanujan in his works like "Three Hundred Ramanayas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation," and "Classics: Lost and Found" has highlighted the nature and reason for retellings of the epics and provided readers with a new lens to study them. He explains in "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation" that no Hindu ever reads the Ramayana or any of their epics for the first time. Listeners of oral traditions and readers of the epics could take up the story and recreate the characters, the sensibilities, the theme, the plot and so on (Ramanujan, 131). This legitimized the status of retellings of epics thus opening platforms for critical study in the domain. Hence we see an upsurge in the retelling of myth and massive critique of those retellings on multiple levels. Tripathi speaks on similar lines, perhaps he takes from Ramanujan when he says that readers and listeners can and will want to listen to myth again and again in a newer way because it is interesting and can always be seen in a different light. He finds his readership bracket of 14-30 years very encouraging because he says that this means that market for newer versions of myth is here to stay.

That he feels that not just Hindu myth but almost all myths have a scope to be reinterpreted and made accessible to readers who might otherwise know nothing of them is evident in his statement where he says, "I also have ideas for stories on others civilizations like Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Anatolian. In fact, I have even left clues for these in my previous books. So, a future series may just be focused around a character from one of these foreign civilizations!"

With readers feeling affinity with the novelist and his novels if they are written in a sequence where each new part is closely connected to the previous or the next one, it seems like a good contemporary strategy to give them trilogies and series within retellings of Hindu myth and further in connection with myths from other civilizations as well. Many readers might want to take up a book simply to know how Anatolian people could be related at one point to Indians at all.

The concept of providing readers with next door humans who could achieve big tasks if they worked hard and tapped on their energies instead of giving them inaccessible Gods that they can only pray to but never actually see or touch is step one towards building a strong and loyal young audience for re-tellers of myth. Many young readers have never read and perhaps lack patience to read, let's say, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata or the Shiva Purana. But if the stories are presented to them on the small screen in a serialized manner as we saw with the 2011 Mahabharata, we see that TRPs shoot up. The case has been very similar with Tripathi's novels. Another strategy that works well with a contemporary audience is that of creating sense of anticipation for the next book by dividing them into many parts. The books are now no longer simple retellings of myths they did not read originals of; they are part one, two and so on of their favourite series just like any other thriller series they might be following. With regard to Tripathi's work, mythology has been contemporized at various levels within the novels but the way mythology has been marketed has also been done with an informed study of contemporary audience's taste. For an ex investment banker, to whom numbers would have mattered the most, the strategies have done their trick.

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