
SUBVERTING TRADITION: CASTE HIERARCHIES AND MARGINALIZATION IN AMISH TRIPATHI'S SHIVA TRILOGY

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ABSTRACT

This paper, titled "A Subaltern Study: Subversion and Caste Hierarchy in Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy," explores the themes of caste hierarchy and marginalization as depicted in the Shiva Trilogy by Amish Tripathi. The paper aims to examine how Tripathi addresses the issues of caste-based discrimination and the subversion of social norms, focusing on the portrayal of marginalized groups within the narrative. The study begins by analyzing the system of caste hierarchy in *The Immortals of Meluha*, contrasting it with the traditional Indian caste structure. It further explores how marginalized groups are portrayed, particularly their exclusion from the mainstream Meluhan society, and the struggles they face in achieving equality and recognition. Through these depictions, the paper demonstrates how Tripathi subverts conventional notions of caste and critiques the social injustices faced by the oppressed. This paper concludes that the Shiva Trilogy serves as a significant work of subaltern literature, where caste hierarchy and marginalization are central themes. By using fiction as a medium, Tripathi offers a critique of these social constructs and challenges the traditional perceptions of caste in Indian society.

Keywords: Subaltern Study, Subversion, Caste Hierarchy, Shiva Trilogy

1. INTRODUCTION

Amish Tripathi is one of India's most popular contemporary fiction writers, best known for his mythological retellings. His Shiva Trilogy, comprising *The Immortals of Meluha*, *The Secret of the Nagas*, and *The Oath of the Vayuputras*, presents a unique reinterpretation of the myth of Lord Shiva, portraying him as a mortal leader. This trilogy explores complex themes such as caste hierarchy, marginalization, and social justice, reflecting not only the mythological underpinnings of ancient India but also the realities of the caste system in modern times. Tripathi uses the figure of Shiva to challenge and subvert the established social order, particularly the rigid caste divisions that have long dictated societal roles and individual identities. In his narrative, Shiva embodies the qualities of a revolutionary who seeks to dismantle the discriminatory structures of caste and promote a more meritocratic system based on karma rather than birth.

The Shiva Trilogy critiques the traditional power structures of the caste system by illustrating the subjugation of marginalized groups, such as the Vikarma, the Nagas, and the Chandravanshis. These groups, much like the Dalits and lower castes in contemporary Indian society, are subjected to systemic oppression and exclusion. Tripathi uses subversion as a literary device to highlight the unjustness of this social order, positioning Shiva as an agent of change who rejects the notion that one's worth is predetermined by birth. Instead, the trilogy advocates for a society where individual potential and virtue are recognized and rewarded. This paper aims to examine the ways in which *The Shiva Trilogy* employs subaltern themes to challenge the hierarchical caste system, using the lens of subaltern theory and postcolonial critique. Through an analysis of the trilogy's narrative structure and character development, this study will explore how Tripathi reimagines mythology to comment on contemporary social issues, particularly caste-based discrimination and marginalization. By doing so, the paper will highlight the trilogy's relevance to both historical and modern discourses on caste, justice, and equality in India.

Subaltern Studies: An Introduction

Subaltern Studies is an academic field that focuses on the histories and voices of those who have been marginalized or oppressed within society, particularly in the context of colonial and postcolonial societies. The term "subaltern" itself, originating from the work of Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, refers to groups in society who are socially, politically, and geographically outside the hegemonic power structures. These groups include peasants, workers, women, and other oppressed classes who are denied access to political representation and social mobility. In the Indian context, subaltern studies emerged in the 1980s as a radical historiographical approach, spearheaded by scholars like Ranajit Guha, who sought to rewrite history from the perspective of the masses rather than the elite.

The core objective of Subaltern Studies is to bring to light the experiences of the subjugated, particularly those whose voices have been historically suppressed or silenced. The approach critiques the dominance of colonial and nationalist narratives that primarily focus on the actions and perspectives of elite groups, leaving out the agency and struggles of the oppressed classes. Subaltern scholars argue that the history of the masses has been shaped by the political and economic forces imposed by colonial powers, and later by nationalist elites, both of whom disregarded the contributions

and aspirations of the lower classes. In the context of Indian historiography, subaltern studies have redefined how we view movements like anti-colonial struggles, social revolutions, and caste dynamics. The scholars of the Subaltern Studies group explored how peasants, tribal groups, lower castes, and women contributed to India's social and political transformations, independent of elite control. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a prominent figure in postcolonial theory, expanded the concept of subalternity, particularly focusing on gender and the doubly marginalized status of women in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Spivak famously asked, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" challenging the very possibility of giving voice to the truly oppressed in the absence of representation in dominant discourses. This paper incorporates subaltern theory to examine how The Shiva Trilogy reflects and critiques caste-based marginalization, drawing parallels with the historical and contemporary struggles of India's subaltern groups. By using a fictional narrative, Amish Tripathi's work mirrors the subalterns' fight against oppressive power structures, promoting ideals of justice, liberation, and equality.

Caste Hierarchy and Social Critique in The Immortals of Meluha

In The Immortals of Meluha, the first book of Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy, the concept of caste hierarchy is central to the social and political organization of the Meluhan society. Tripathi's fictional world mirrors the rigid caste system that has historically shaped Indian society, with divisions based on birth rather than merit. The caste system in Meluha, much like the traditional Indian varna system, categorizes people into four distinct classes: Brahmins (teachers, priests, and intellectuals), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (traders and craftsmen), and Shudras (farmers and laborers). These roles are determined at birth and enforced through strict social and cultural practices.

In Meluha, this caste hierarchy is symbolized through the use of amulets, which denote one's caste and role in society. Each caste is expected to adhere strictly to the duties assigned to them, and social mobility is practically nonexistent. However, The Immortals of Meluha presents a critical view of this system, as it explores the consequences of a society rigidly bound by birth-based hierarchies. Lord Ram, revered by the Meluhans, originally proposed a merit-based system where a person's caste was determined by their abilities and karma rather than their birth. Over time, however, this system became corrupted, with caste being determined solely by lineage, resulting in a rigid and unfair social structure. Tripathi uses the character of Shiva, a foreigner to Meluha, to question and critique the caste hierarchy. Shiva, initially unaware of the intricacies of the Meluhan caste system, gradually becomes an advocate for change as he realizes the inherent injustices within it. The novel emphasizes the subversion of the traditional caste order by showing how a rigid, birth-based system can lead to stagnation, inequality, and oppression. Through Shiva's journey, The Immortals of Meluha advocates for a return to a more meritocratic society, where one's worth is determined by their actions and capabilities rather than the circumstances of their birth. This section of the paper explores how the caste hierarchy in The Immortals of Meluha serves as a reflection of the historical caste divisions in India and how the novel critiques the rigidity of this system. It also examines how Tripathi's narrative advocates for the dismantling of caste-based discrimination and the promotion of equality and meritocracy, using the mythological setting as a vehicle for contemporary social commentary. Through this exploration, the paper seeks to highlight the parallels between the fictional society of Meluha and the real-world implications of caste in modern India.

Marginalization in The Shiva Trilogy

In The Shiva Trilogy, Amish Tripathi intricately weaves the theme of marginalization into the narrative, highlighting the struggles of various groups who are systematically oppressed and excluded from mainstream society. The trilogy explores how caste and social hierarchies contribute to the disenfranchisement of marginalized communities, particularly through the portrayal of the Vikarma, the Nagas, and the Chandravanshis. Each of these groups embodies the historical realities of marginalization, drawing parallels with contemporary issues faced by underprivileged sections of Indian society. The Vikarma, often seen as the most marginalized group in Meluha, are individuals marked by physical deformities or unfortunate circumstances that have led them to be ostracized. According to Meluhan beliefs, their condition is a punishment for the sins of their previous lives. This societal perception forces them into a life of isolation and suffering, denying them basic rights, such as marriage and social interaction with the non-Vikarma. They are subjected to rigorous rituals and societal stigma, leading to a vicious cycle of oppression. Through the character of Sati, who herself is labeled as a Vikarma after giving birth to a stillborn child, Tripathi illustrates the absurdity and cruelty of the social norms that govern their lives. Sati's story challenges the reader to confront the unjust treatment of those marginalized by society, urging for empathy and understanding. Similarly, the Nagas represent another layer of marginalization within the trilogy. Rejected by Meluhan society due to their perceived physical abnormalities and deemed as evil, the Nagas are forced to live on the outskirts, in a cursed land, symbolizing how societal fears and prejudices can lead to the dehumanization of individuals. Tripathi complicates this narrative by portraying the Nagas as nuanced characters with their own stories of resilience and strength. The journey of Shiva, who initially sees the Nagas as the embodiment of evil, evolves as he encounters their humanity and recognizes the unjust stereotypes imposed upon

them. This transformation serves to critique the inherent biases within society and calls for a re-evaluation of how marginalized groups are viewed and treated. The Chandravanshis, too, are depicted as a marginalized group, often looked down upon by the Meluhans. Their characterization highlights the social divisions that arise from historical conflicts and power struggles. The perception of the Chandravanshis as inferior reinforces the notion of cultural superiority among the Meluhans, perpetuating a cycle of discrimination and exclusion. Through the conflicts between these two groups, Tripathi reflects on the broader themes of social inequality, injustice, and the need for unity and understanding among diverse communities. The Shiva Trilogy serves as a powerful commentary on marginalization, urging readers to confront the realities of social exclusion and the need for systemic change. Tripathi's nuanced portrayal of marginalized groups not only enriches the narrative but also invites readers to empathize with those who have been historically sidelined. By presenting a story where the hero, Shiva, becomes a champion for the oppressed, the trilogy advocates for social justice, equality, and the recognition of the inherent worth of every individual, regardless of their caste or status. Through this exploration, the trilogy underscores the importance of breaking down barriers of marginalization to create a more inclusive and compassionate society.

2. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, The Shiva Trilogy by Amish Tripathi serves as a significant literary exploration of caste hierarchy and marginalization, engaging with themes that resonate deeply within the contemporary social fabric of India. Through the character of Shiva and the richly constructed world of Meluha, Tripathi critiques the rigid caste system and the injustices that arise from social stratification. By reimagining mythological narratives, he challenges entrenched societal norms that perpetuate discrimination and exclusion, advocating instead for a society rooted in merit, equality, and justice.

The trilogy's portrayal of marginalized groups such as the Vikarma, the Nagas, and the Chandravanshis illuminates the systemic oppression faced by those on the periphery of society. Through these characters, Tripathi highlights the absurdities and cruelties of a social order that assigns worth based on birth rather than individual merit. The struggles of these marginalized communities serve as a poignant reminder of the ongoing fight against caste-based discrimination in contemporary India. Moreover, The Shiva Trilogy underscores the potential for transformation and redemption. Shiva's journey from a misunderstood outsider to a leader advocating for the marginalized illustrates the power of empathy, understanding, and courage in challenging oppressive systems. By placing the narrative within a mythological framework, Tripathi not only entertains but also educates readers about the complexities of social injustice and the need for systemic change. Ultimately, the trilogy calls for a re-evaluation of how society perceives and treats marginalized groups, urging readers to confront their biases and strive for a more inclusive future. In doing so, Tripathi's work transcends the boundaries of fiction, offering profound insights into the human condition and the quest for social equity. As we reflect on the themes presented in The Shiva Trilogy, we are reminded of our shared responsibility to challenge injustice and advocate for a world where every individual is valued and empowered, regardless of their caste or social standing.

3. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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