

Myth, Memory, and the Feminine Script: Representation of Women

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Abstract—This paper focuses on the influence of legendary women characters on popular emotions, social values, and everyday gender practices through a critical reading of Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy and Ram Chandra Series. Where the research will hold Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Stuart Hall's concept of representation, and cultural memory theory, the study explores how women characters such as Sita, Kali, Sunaina, and Anandmaya function not merely as narrative figures but as cultural scripts shaping collective love, moral imagination, and social behavior. How do legendary women enable gender performativity in everyday social life? How does popular culture shape collective love for certain feminine ideals? In what ways do contemporary retellings revise cultural memory of women? Does rewriting myth transform social behavior or merely update ideology?

Tripathi's reinterpretation of mythological women presents them as warriors, administrators, and ethical decision-makers, thereby revising traditional epic ideals of passive femininity. Through Butler's framework, the paper analyzes how these characters offer alternative performances of womanhood while also interrogating whether such performances produce genuine subversion or new normative expectations. Hall's theory of representation is employed to examine how popular mythological fiction constructs and circulates images of empowered femininity within contemporary ideological frameworks. Cultural memory theory further situates these women as enduring memory figures whose repeated circulation in popular culture sustains emotional attachment and social influence.

Index Terms—Mythological Retellings, Gender Performativity, Cultural Memory, Representation of Women, Popular Indian English Fiction, Popular Culture and Myth

I. INTRODUCTION

Retelling Indian mythology requires a delicate balance between respecting ancient, sacred traditions and ensuring they resonate with a modern audience. Winners write history, and the powerful

choose which myths we remember. We've spent centuries praising heroes, but what about the people they stepped on to arrive there? What if the quiet queen was the one really in charge?

If myth is an idea, mythology is the vehicle of that idea. Mythology constitutes stories, symbols, and rituals that make a myth tangible. Stories, symbols, and rituals are essentially languages languages that are heard, seen, and performed. Together they construct the truths of a culture. Myth is essentially a cultural construct, a common understanding of the world that binds individuals and communities together. - Myth and Mithya (Pattanaik)

Pattanaik's view on mythology illustrates how it represents a tangible shift from myth to culture through various aspects. By that time, English writing in India welcomed many genres. Mythology retelling is one of the genres that has grown through the contributions of people like Shashi Tharoor, Ashwin Sanghi, Amish Tripathi, Kavita Kane, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anand Nilkanthan, Devdutt Pattanaik, Krishna Udaysankar, Koral Dasgupta, Volga, and many more.

Amish Tripathi is the name of a top and popular figure in the mythological retelling. He is among the fastest-selling authors in Indian publishing history, known best for The Shiva Trilogy and the Ram Chandra Series. Amish Tripathi's fiction is defined by a "radical" reimagining of Indian mythology and history, where gods are portrayed as extraordinary humans whose deeds and karma eventually lead them to be worshipped as divine. He rose to fame with the Shiva Trilogy—The Immortals of Meluha, The Secret of the Nagas, and The Oath of the Vayuputras, which transforms Lord Shiva into a Tibetan tribal leader who becomes the savior of a scientifically advanced but decaying civilization. Following this, he launched the Ram Chandra Series including Scion of Ikshvaku, Sita: Warrior of Mithila, Raavan: Enemy

of Aryavarta, and The War of Lanka employing a unique "multilinear narrative," with the first three books following different protagonists until their paths collide.

In the introductory chapter in the book, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* by John Storey, it is presented that "to speak of popular culture usually means to mobilize the second and third meanings of the word 'culture'. The second meaning culture as a particular way of life would allow us to speak of such practices as the seaside holiday, the celebration of Christmas, and youth subcultures, as examples of culture. These are usually referred to as lived cultures or practices. The third meaning culture as signifying practices would allow us to speak of soap opera, pop music, and comics, as examples of culture. These are usually referred to as texts." According to his views on popular culture, one can consider how human lives are culturally constructed through the practices and various rituals that have emerged from literature itself. Amish Tripathi has contributed Hindu mythology to the phenomenon of Indian popular culture in the form of novels, podcasts, TV hosting, and diplomacy. This appeals to a wide range of readers worldwide.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The growing popularity of mythological retellings in Indian English literature has prompted scholarly attention toward the reinterpretation of epic narratives for contemporary audiences. Amish Tripathi occupies a significant position within this tradition, as his *Shiva Trilogy* and *Ram Chandra Series* reimagine mythological figures through a rational, historical, and ethical framework. Critics observe that Tripathi demystifies divine characters by presenting them as human agents shaped by social systems, moral choices, and political structures, thereby making mythology accessible and relevant to modern readers (Doniger).

Feminist scholarship on Indian epics has long examined the marginalization of women characters, who are often idealized as embodiments of sacrifice, chastity, and moral endurance. Scholars such as Sangari and Vaid argue that epic women frequently function as cultural symbols rather than autonomous subjects, reinforcing patriarchal norms through narrative repetition (Sangari and Vaid). Within this context, feminist revisionist mythology seeks to reinterpret mythic narratives to foreground

women's agency and suppressed voices (Ostriker, Rich).

Studies on Tripathi's fiction have begun to address this revisionist impulse, particularly in relation to characters such as Sita and Kali. Sita: Warrior of Mithila has been read as a deliberate departure from the traditional portrayal of Sita as passive and submissive, instead presenting her as a warrior, strategist, and administrator (Tripathi, Sita). Similarly, Kali's portrayal in the *Shiva Trilogy* draws attention to bodily difference, social exclusion, and marginalization, complicating the binary of divine beauty and moral worth (*The Secret of the Nagas*).

The cultural impact of such representations can be further understood through cultural memory theory. Halbwachs argues that myths serve as collective memories, shaping social values across generations (Halbwachs). Jan Assmann extends this idea by emphasizing myth as a medium through which societies preserve and transmit normative ideals (Assmann). Although current research recognizes Tripathi's creative retellings, there has been insufficient focus on the role of his female characters as cultural memory figures and its representation that shape societal affection, gender norms, and everyday social imagination. This study aims to bridge this gap.

Objectives

- To examine the representation of women characters in Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* and *Ram Chandra Series* through the lenses of gender performativity, representation, and cultural memory.
- To analyse how female figures such as Sita, Kali, Sati, and Anandmayi negotiate power, embodiment, and authority within mythological retellings, and how these narratives shape popular perceptions of ideal femininity.
- To explore how Tripathi's reinterpretation of legendary women contributes to the reconstruction of cultural memory, influencing contemporary readers' emotional attachment and social understanding of women's roles in Indian popular culture.

Amish Tripathi has portrayed women characters in very different ways. His women characters are from epics and are molded by modern traits. He has done an excellent job of producing stories that meet the current demands by retelling the *Ramayana* and

Shiv Katha. Here is a list of the women characters with their brief introductions, along with their characteristics.

III. RAM CHANDRA SERIES

Sita	Sita is the princess of Mithila and the adopted daughter of King Janak. She is portrayed as a formidable warrior, a brilliant administrator, and the prime minister of Mithila before her marriage to Ram. She is also the secret Vishnu.
Kaikeyi	The youngest wife of King Dashrath and the mother of Bharat. She is a brave chariot warrior and a strong-willed queen who deeply loves her family but is driven by intense ambition and political survival.
Shurpanakha	Ravan's sister. In this series, she is portrayed as a complex character whose encounter with Ram and Lakshman leads to a pivotal conflict. She is resilient and plays a major role in the shifting dynamics of the story.
Mandodari	Mandodari is the queen of Lanka and the wife of Ravan. She is a woman of immense grace, wisdom, and patience, often acting as a moral compass and a voice of reason against Ravan's more destructive impulses.
Manthara	Manthara is a wealthy and influential businesswoman in Ayodhya. Unlike traditional retellings, she is a powerful player in the kingdom's economy and politics, driven by her history and motivations.
Sunaina	The Queen of Mithila is Sita's mother. She is a wise and pragmatic woman who plays a key role in Sita's upbringing and the governance of Mithila.

IV. SHIVA TRILOGY

Sati	She is a fierce warrior and a master of the sword. When Shiva first arrives in Meluha, she is living as a Vikarma (an "untouchable" by law due to sins in a past life). Despite her social status, she is deeply respected for her discipline and martial skills. She eventually marries Shiva and becomes his strongest partner in his journey.
Kali	Born with physical deformities (two extra functional arms), she was abandoned by her father, Daksha, and declared a Naga. She is introduced as a mysterious and formidable leader in the Naga capital, Panchavati. She is sharp-tongued, fiercely protective of her people, and serves as a vital bridge between Shiva and the Naga culture.
Ayurvati	She is the first person to recognize Shiva as the Neelkanth (the savior) after his throat turns blue. Ayurvati is one of the most respected figures in the empire, known for her unmatched medical knowledge and her ability to cure almost any ailment. She represents the scientific and intellectual advancement of the Meluhan society.
Anandamayi	Unlike the disciplined and rule-bound Meluhans, Anandamayi is spirited, outspoken, and flirtatious. She is a skilled archer and a brilliant diplomat. She is best known for her romantic pursuit of the stoic Meluhan General, Parvateshwar, and for providing a much-needed lighter, more vibrant perspective on life.
Kanakhala	She is the highest administrative authority in Meluha after the Emperor. Highly intelligent and efficient, she manages the empire's revenue, protocols, and internal administration.
Krittika	She is Sati's constant companion and a brave warrior in her own right. She eventually marries Veerbhadr, Shiva's closest childhood friend, further cementing the bond between Shiva's tribe and the Meluhans.

The characters mentioned above are not all from the primary texts; in addition to them, there are many female characters who contribute to the overall representation of women characters.

V. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis of selected novels from Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy and Ram Chandra Series, focusing on the women characters Sita, Sunaina, Kali, and Anandamayi. Through close reading, the research

examines narrative strategies, character construction, and thematic patterns. The analysis is theoretically informed by Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, Stuart Hall's theory of representation, and cultural memory theory. We use these frameworks to interpret how mythological women serve as gender scripts, ideological representations, and cultural memory figures in contemporary popular fiction. Secondary feminist and cultural studies scholarship supports the interpretative approach.

Kathryn Hansen wrote, The patterns of women's lives, their expectations and ideals, their orientation to social reality, are significantly shaped by the models of womanly conduct set out in stories, legends, and songs preserved from the past. Even the contemporary images of women promulgated in the mass media-cinema, advertising, popular music owe much to the prototypes of womanhood inherited from older sources.

Madhu Kishwar, one of the pioneers of feminist journalism in India in the 70s and 80s, expresses dismay at "the pervasive popular cultural ideal of womanhood" conveyed through mythic role models: It is woman as a selfless giver, someone who gives and gives endlessly, gracefully, smilingly, whatever the demand, however unreasonable and harmful to herself... Sita, Savitri, Anusuya, and various other mythological heroines are used as the archetypes of such a woman, and women themselves are deeply influenced by this cultural ideal. (Hansen)

अहिल्या द्रौपदी कुन्ती तारा मन्दोदरी तथा ।
पञ्चकन्या: स्मरेत्रित्वं महापातकानाशनम् ॥

Meditate upon the five virtuous devis eternally – Ahalya, Draupadi, Sita, Tara and Mandodari and all atrocities and sins will be destroyed (Brahma Puran). The given shloka highlights the significant importance of the devis and demonstrates how their worship and meditation can lead to the destruction of sins for common people. The ancient scriptures and epics are still alive in the daily rituals of Hindu deities. The situation allows us to understand how these traits shape culture and how humans consciously lead it from generation to generation. Even today, women continue to perform various vrata and engage in devotional deeds that are ongoing from the old days.

Mythology retelling comes to light in the shift of the post-millennial period. Henson raises questions

in his paper, such as whether the goddess serves to enhance women's status. Were goddess cults connected in their evolution to women's experience or self-perception? Does the goddess function as a model for emulation? Writers like Amish are very capable of answering these questions by portraying female characters.

The epic stories do not portray women as powerless but define their power as derived from self-effacement in a relationship of subjugation to the male (Henson). When we look at the major changes of representation of the character of Sita, we would identify vivid shifts, like from devoted wife to the warrior and potential Vishnu, from gentle and submissive to fierce and independent, from domestic and spiritual to martial arts and statecraft, and from driven by fate to driven by choice and strategy. Amish's Sita is woven into a narrative that reflects the political, social, and economic aspirations and values of many young, urban, educated Hindus who face the challenge of embracing and celebrating "traditional" Hindu identity while accommodating it to modern, liberal, and capitalist values (Pintchman).

VI. SITA AND SUNAINA - RAM CHANDRA SERIES

The selection of Sita as the prime minister of Mithila and her subsequent transformation into Vishnu are notable examples. It is a title given to the greatest of leaders, who are Propagators of Good. They lead their people into a new way of life. There have been six Vishnus in this present Vedic age that we live in. The previous Vishnu was the great Lord Parshu Ram (Tripathi 79). Sita was initially selected for Vishnu, but after meeting Ram, she chose to work in partnership with him and planned her swayamvara. Which is also a bright note by Amish, Sita who had convinced her father to arrange the swayamvar. The swayamvar was an ancient tradition where the father of the bride organised a gathering of prospective bridegrooms; and the daughter selected her husband from among the gathered men. Or mandated a competition. Sita was actively managing the arrangements. She had convinced Vishwamitra to somehow get Ram to Mithila for the swayamvar. An official invitation from Mithila to Ayodhya would not have gotten a response. After all, why would Ayodhya ally with a small and relatively inconsequential kingdom like

Mithila? But there was no way that Ayodhya would say no to the powerful Malayaputra chief's request just to attend the swayamvar. And, at the swayamvar itself, managed by her Guru, the great Malayaputra Vishwamitra, she could arrange to have Ram as her husband (Tripathi 185-186). In the book, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, A.S. Altekar notes that "the Vedic literature does not refer to parents controlling the marriages of their sons and daughters, though they must doubtless have played an important part in arranging and financing them. When society had conceded to grown-up brides the right to choose their own husbands, it was but natural that love marriages, arranged by the parties themselves, should have taken place with fair frequency. Some theorists went to the extent of advocating that it is not the father or the mother, but the bride herself, who has the right of giving herself away in marriage (Altekar 66). Amish has crafted his story to portray Sita with intricate historical details and characteristics, granting her sufficient autonomy to make her own decisions. Her marriage to Ram is depicted less as a fairytale and more as a powerful union of two individuals with different philosophies on how to lead. Ram believes in the Rule of Law, while Sita believes in the Rule of Result.

Sita enters the story as an adopted outsider by King Janaka and Queen Sunaina. Her relationship with her mother, Sunaina, builds Sita's ideology and perspectives about a leader. When Sita became the prime minister of Mithila, we could consider her a more impactful leader than any man in the region. She performed her role as a leader no less than any other role in her life. Here, readers witness Butler's concept of performative gender in a profound way. She addresses the question, "What does it mean that gender is performative?" in her response. Judith Butler: It's one thing to say that gender is performed and that is a little different from saying gender is performative. When we say gender is performed we usually mean that we've taken on a role or we're acting in some way and that our acting or our role playing is crucial to the gender that we are and the gender that we present to the world. To say that gender is performative is a little different because for something to be performative means that it produces a series of effects. We act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman (Butler). Sunaina's political negotiations

and diplomatic authority have been developed through her role as Sita, a warrior, and her moral discipline. Wherever we could find Janaka, he was more interested in philosophy than administration. His wife, as a woman, is effectively managing the administration in the kingdom. Representation of power by women characters is the key factor for Amish to portray the Hindu mythology in such a light for the young generation as well as for the pseudo-feminist theorists.

VII. KALI AND ANANDMAYI - SHIVA TRILOGY

The character of Kali is impacting the whole series as well as the heroine of the trilogy, Sati. Born as the twin sister of Sati, Kali was born with physical deformities (two extra, functional arms). In the strict Meluhan society, this branded her a "Naga" an impure being born of past sins. She has been a vikarma her entire life. Kali is one of the most complex and emotionally charged characters. Amish strips away the supernatural "demon-slayer" imagery and replaces it with a gritty, humanized portrait of a woman discarded by society who rises to become a powerful queen.

Amish has changed characteristics from traditional mythology to his own representation in a very profound way. Amish transitions from the manifestation of the goddess Durga to the discarded twin sister of Sati, from a supernatural goddess to a human with a genetic deformity, from destroying adharma to protecting nagas and seeking justice, and from a divine destroyer to a revolutionary leader and queen. The description of Kali leads us to believe that Amish has created her from the traditional form of Durga. Standing a little to her left was the Naga Queen. Her entire torso had an exoskeleton covering it, hard as bone. There were small balls of bone which ran from her shoulders down to her stomach, almost like a garland of skulls. On top of her shoulders were two small extra appendages, serving as a third and fourth arm. One was holding a knife, clearly itching to fling it at Sati. But it was the face that disturbed Sati the most. The colour was jet black, but the Naga Queen's face was almost an exact replica of Sati's (Tripathi 223). This is a countable representation by the Amish, which is rich enough to convey the cultural values and ethics found in the epics.

Kali exposes how bodies that fail to perform normative femininity are excluded and marked as "other." Butler's theory of gender performativity, Kali's exclusion show that gender is not merely about identity but about the successful performance of socially sanctioned bodily norms. Kali's body fails to "perform" acceptable femininity as defined by the cultural order, and as a result, she is rendered unintelligible within the dominant social framework. Her ostracisation is not a consequence of her actions but of her embodied difference, highlighting how power operates through the regulation of bodies. Kali's narrative exposes the deep-seated mechanisms of patriarchal and moral systems that discipline women's bodies, transforming their physical differences into social stigma and exclusion. Kali's leadership among the Nagas challenges dominant Aryavartan norms that link feminine authority to beauty, purity, and social acceptance. Her power emerges from lived experience, resilience, and political intelligence rather than bodily conformity. By re-signifying a stigmatised female body as By being capable of governance, Amish disrupts the normative representations of femininity. Kali thus embodies an alternative model of female authority grounded in survival and resistance rather than idealization. The point is that we have not formed that ancient world-it has formed us. We ingested it as children whole, had its values and consciousness imprinted on our minds as cultural absolutes long before we were in fact men and women. We have taken the fairy tales of childhood with us into maturity, chewed but still lying in the stomach, as real identity (Hansen). Hansen here proves that our performances are based on our culture, and it determines our gender through cultural memory. We are either consciously or unconsciously decoding the memory.

Anandmaya is the character of a woman who represents an alternative form of feminine authority grounded in intellectual autonomy and emotional detachment rather than physical power or sacrificial devotion. As a philosopher and mentor, she consciously rejects marriage and domestic roles, positioning herself outside normative expectations of womanhood. Through Anandmaya, Tripathi sets a model of femininity that performs authority through reason, ethical clarity, and self-discipline. Butler's idea is that gender is constituted through repeated acts rather than biological destiny. Her presence also intervenes in cultural memory by

recalling women thinkers like Gargi and Maitreyi, thereby reinscribing female intellectualism into popular mythological consciousness. Anandmaya thus expands the spectrum of empowered femininity beyond warriorhood and motherhood, offering a cerebral and ascetic counter-image to dominant representations of women in myth.

VIII. CONCLUSION

In Sandra Robinson's terms, the Hindu goddess's function may be viewed as primarily revelatory, in contrast to the role played by the epic heroines as exemplary women. The pattern of women's lives and their orientation to social reality are significantly shaped by the models of womanly conduct set out in stories, legends, and songs preserved from the past (Henson). In conclusion, Amish Tripathi's reimagining of women is a strong challenge to traditional archetypes. It turns them from mythological figures into leaders that people can relate to. By throwing away the supernatural, Tripathi highlights their agency, resilience, and intellectual depth. Sita emerges as a pragmatic "warrior-philosopher" focused on statecraft, while Kali represents the "revolutionary outcast" driven by social justice. Together, they redefine femininity in Indian literature, shifting the narrative from passive devotion to active leadership. Their journeys suggest that true divinity lies not in birthright, but in the courageous choices made for the greater good.

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