

Humanising The Divine: Ethical Agency and the Remaking of Heroism in Amish Tripathi's Mythological Fiction

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Abstract—Amish Tripathi's mythological fiction reshapes familiar sacred figures by placing moral choice, human limitation, and public responsibility at the centre of their greatness. This paper examines how the Shiva Trilogy and the Ram Chandra Series transform divinity from an inherited supernatural status into an ethical achievement. Shiva, Ram, Sita, and Raavan are presented as embodied individuals formed by suffering, doubt, discipline, love, anger, and the consequences of action. Through close reading of *The Immortals of Meluha*, *The Secret of the Nagas*, *The Oath of the Vayuputras*, *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku*, *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, and *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta*, the paper argues that Tripathi remakes heroism as accountable agency rather than flawless power. His heroes become worthy of reverence because they choose duty under pressure, question inherited systems, accept responsibility, and remain capable of moral revision. At the same time, his treatment of Raavan shows that talent and suffering do not automatically produce virtue; greatness depends on how a person responds to injury and power. Tripathi's popular retellings therefore bring myth into dialogue with contemporary concerns such as caste, gender, law, leadership, ecological responsibility, and social inequality. The resulting vision is accessible but ethically demanding: the divine is humanised not to diminish it, but to make moral greatness imaginable as a possibility within ordinary human life.

Index Terms—Amish Tripathi, mythological fiction, ethical agency, heroism, dharma, humanised divinity, myth-making

I. INTRODUCTION

Myth survives because it can be retold without becoming empty. In India, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, and the stories of Shiva have never

existed as single, closed narratives. They have travelled through oral performance, regional languages, temple traditions, poetry, theatre, television, and modern fiction. A. K. Ramanujan's account of the many Ramayanas reminds readers that variation is not a modern violation of tradition but one of the ways in which the tradition has remained alive (24–25). Amish Tripathi writes within this long culture of reinterpretation, but his method is shaped by the expectations of contemporary popular fiction. He combines myth, fantasy, political debate, scientific explanation, romance, and adventure in order to make revered figures emotionally and intellectually accessible. The gods of inherited memory enter his novels as people who can be wounded, mistaken, uncertain, impatient, loving, prejudiced, and capable of change. Their divinity is not denied; it is relocated from miraculous birth to moral conduct. The phrase “humanising the divine” may initially suggest that sacred figures are being reduced to ordinary proportions. Tripathi's fiction does something more complex. Humanisation becomes a way of explaining why a person deserves to be remembered as divine. Shiva is not automatically the Mahadev because his throat turns blue. Ram is not heroic merely because he belongs to the Ikshvaku line. Sita is not significant only because she becomes Ram's wife, and Raavan cannot be understood only through the label of villain. Each figure is placed within a field of ethical pressure in which action carries consequences. This paper uses ethical agency to mean the capacity to choose, judge, revise, and accept responsibility within difficult circumstances. Heroism, in this framework, is not freedom from error. It is the willingness to act for

others while remaining answerable for the harm that action may produce.

The most direct statement of Tripathi's humanistic myth-making appears in *The Immortals of Meluha*. Shiva arrives in Meluha as a Tibetan tribal leader, not as an omniscient god. He is physically brave, but he is also troubled by guilt, haunted by earlier failures, and uncertain about the Neelkanth prophecy. The blue throat gives him symbolic authority, yet the novel repeatedly asks whether appearance and prophecy are enough. Shiva must decide what the title means through his actions. His final public message removes the Mahadev from the logic of privileged birth and links sacred status with the defence of the good: "A man becomes a Mahadev only when he fights for good. A Mahadev is not born from his mother's womb" (Tripathi, *Immortals* 344). This statement is central to the remaking of heroism in the trilogy. The Mahadev is "made" in history rather than delivered complete into it. Ethical identity emerges from struggle, and the ability to oppose evil becomes a possibility shared by all human beings. The phrase does not make every act of combat heroic; the trilogy continually complicates the meaning of good and evil. It does, however, reject the belief that greatness belongs naturally to a particular body, caste, lineage, or sex. The sacred becomes democratic because moral courage can be practised. In this sense, Tripathi's humanisation of Shiva does not secularise him completely. It turns the divine into an aspirational category: a name given to a person whose choices enlarge the moral possibilities of the community.

The same argument appears in the trilogy's treatment of merit and social identity. Meluha describes itself as a society founded upon order, law, and achievement, yet its apparent perfection is sustained by exclusion. The vikarma system places inherited blame upon individuals for misfortunes they did not choose, while the Nagas are treated as polluted or monstrous because of bodily difference. Shiva's growth depends on his ability to see that a stable social explanation can still be unjust. He gradually moves from accepting Meluhan categories to questioning the structures that produce them. Heroism therefore involves more than courage in war; it requires an ethical revision of one's own assumptions. Tripathi makes the hero educable. Shiva listens to Sati, Kali, Ganesh, Brahaspati, and the

Vasudevas, and each encounter exposes the limits of the story he previously believed.

The Secret of the Nagas deepens this moral uncertainty by refusing to locate evil permanently in one community. The Nagas initially appear through fear, rumour, and political propaganda, but the gradual revelation of Kali and Ganesh dismantles the easy opposition between normal and monstrous. Physical difference does not determine moral value. More importantly, the novel shifts the struggle from external enemies to the divided self. At Kashi, Shiva receives an explanation that makes ethical agency inseparable from self-knowledge: "There is a god in every single one of us. And there is evil in every single one of us" (Tripathi, *Secret* 114). The sentence brings divinity and evil into the same human interior. A hero cannot simply destroy an impure group and imagine that goodness has been secured. The decisive struggle takes place in repeated choices, especially when fear, grief, loyalty, or anger make injustice appear reasonable. Shiva's early desire for revenge against the Nagas is understandable, but understanding does not make it ethically correct. His willingness to alter his judgement becomes more heroic than the certainty with which he begins. Tripathi thus replaces the flawless epic hero with a morally developing consciousness. The hero's authority comes partly from admitting that the categories used to interpret the world may be wrong. This ethical openness also changes the meaning of truth. In a conventional heroic narrative, the protagonist often moves steadily towards a final revelation that separates good people from bad people. Tripathi repeatedly postpones such certainty. The Suryavanshis and Chandravanshis possess different social virtues and different weaknesses; the Vasudevas and Vayuputras disagree despite their commitment to civilisational balance; even institutions created for good purposes may become harmful. The narrative asks the reader to judge actions without treating any social identity as a guarantee of virtue. Ethical agency is therefore relational: characters learn by encountering those whom their society has misread. The divine hero becomes an attentive reader of human complexity. In *The Oath of the Vayuputras*, Shiva discovers that evil is not always an alien force. The Somras once appeared to be an unquestionable good because it extended life and supported Meluhan prosperity.

Over time, however, its ecological and human costs become impossible to ignore. The drying of the Saraswati, the suffering caused by toxic waste, and the dependence of society upon the drink show how a benefit can become destructive when consumption is separated from restraint. The philosophical language of the novel places creation and destruction within one process: “Creation and destruction are the two ends of the same moment. Everything between creation and the next destruction is the journey of life” (Tripathi, *Oath* 62). This understanding transforms heroism from the discovery of a fixed enemy into the recognition of historical change. Shiva’s task is not to condemn the original creators of the Somras as evil people. He must decide when a good institution has crossed an ethical threshold. The question is demanding because societies often become emotionally and materially dependent upon their achievements. Tripathi’s ecological argument is also an argument about leadership: a hero must be able to question the very system that benefits his supporters. Moral action may require loss, political isolation, and conflict with honourable opponents. The trilogy thereby separates goodness from comfort. Shiva becomes divine not because every decision is pure, but because he accepts the burden of acting when inaction would preserve a destructive order.

The Ram Chandra Series offers a different model of ethical agency. Whereas Shiva is instinctive, emotionally expressive, and willing to revise rules, Ram is formed by discipline and a deep faith in law. *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku* does not present this commitment as an uncomplicated virtue. Ram’s attachment to legal order grows from a society damaged by corruption, hypocrisy, economic decline, and arbitrary authority. Law promises equal treatment and a structure larger than private anger. His childhood education gives this belief its clearest expression: “Laws are the foundation on which a fulfilling life is built for a community. Laws are the answer” (Tripathi, *Scion* 48). Ram’s heroism lies in his attempt to submit himself to the principles he expects others to follow. He does not claim exemption because he is a prince or because his motives are honourable. Yet the novel also stages the pain produced when law and immediate justice diverge. The murder of Roshni tests Ram’s position, while Bharat and Lakshman voice the moral anger that strict legality cannot contain. Ram’s later exile

becomes self-imposed accountability for the prohibited use of a divine weapon, even though the act saves Mithila. Tripathi therefore does not portray ethical agency as choosing between obvious good and obvious evil. Ram must decide which responsibility is greater, then live with the moral remainder of the choice.

This law-bound hero differs from the conventional image of divinity as effortless certainty. Ram suffers because principles do not remove doubt; they make him conscious of what each decision sacrifices. His strength is restraint rather than invulnerability. The narrative repeatedly shows him controlling humiliation, anger, and the desire for approval. At the same time, it allows other characters to challenge his rigidity. Sita’s pragmatism, Bharat’s emotional intelligence, and Lakshman’s protective loyalty expose dimensions of human need that law alone cannot resolve. Heroism becomes dialogic: the central figure is ethically strengthened by voices that resist him.

Sita: Warrior of Mithila widens Tripathi’s idea of the divine by placing a woman at the centre of political, military, and philosophical action. The novel does not simply give Sita weapons while leaving the meaning of heroism unchanged. It represents her as an administrator who studies inequality, urban planning, poverty, policing, and the responsibilities of government. Shruti Das describes this kind of rewriting as counter-narration because it gives agency and performative authority to a figure often contained within patriarchal retellings (117). Tripathi’s Sita is not valuable because she imitates a male warrior. Her heroism joins courage with judgement, public service, and the ability to question prejudice. Her opposition to reverse prejudice is especially important. Sita understands the social damage caused by patriarchy, but she refuses to treat collective hostility as justice. In her conversation about Samichi’s distrust of men, the novel states: “Hating all men because of one man’s actions is a sign of an unstable personality. Reverse-bias is also bias” (Tripathi, *Sita* 115). The statement reflects the novel’s larger commitment to ethical consistency. Sita’s agency is not presented as permission to reproduce the exclusions from which women have suffered. Her leadership depends upon judging individuals, protecting vulnerable people, and holding power accountable. This distinguishes

empowerment from simple reversal. The narrative also makes Ram's admiration for Sita part of its remaking of masculinity. He seeks a partner before whom he can bow in respect, and their relationship is imagined as a meeting of intellectual and ethical equals. Sita's elevation towards Vishnuhood is therefore not an exceptional reward added to a traditional feminine role. It changes the field of the heroic by showing that governance, strategy, compassion, and martial courage can belong to the same woman.

The humanisation of divinity becomes most challenging in *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta*. Tripathi gives Raavan intelligence, artistic sensitivity, administrative ability, emotional attachment, and a history of humiliation. The purpose is not to erase his brutality. It is to show that villainy, like heroism, is made through responses to circumstance. In an account of his approach to the character, Tripathi stresses the older Indian tendency to see Raavan through moral complexity rather than a purely black-and-white division (Tripathi, "Complexity"). Recent criticism similarly reads Ram and Raavan as figures who inhabit competing and unstable understandings of dharma rather than fixed metaphysical opposites (Bhusal and Bhattarai 44). Raavan's story is crucial because it prevents humanisation from becoming sentimental excuse. Suffering may explain anger, but it does not remove responsibility for what anger becomes. Vedavati recognises both the warmth and danger within him, and the novel frames ethical life through intention as well as action: "In the field of dharma, intentions matter as much, if not more, than the act itself" (Tripathi, *Raavan* 145).

The line does not mean that good intentions cancel destructive acts. Raavan's tragedy lies in the widening distance between his capacities and his choices. His brilliance produces wealth and power, yet grief, pride, and the desire for control harden into violence. He possesses many qualities associated with epic greatness but fails to place them within an ethical relation to others. In this sense, Raavan is the negative image of the humanised divine. He shows that extraordinary ability is morally incomplete without accountability, self-restraint, and the capacity to hear correction. The series remakes heroism by setting Ram's disciplined responsibility, Sita's balanced leadership, and Raavan's self-consuming agency beside one another. Across both series,

Tripathi brings mythological characters close to contemporary readers without entirely converting them into modern individuals. Their concerns with dharma, karma, social order, kingship, and cosmic balance remain grounded in an imagined ancient world, but the moral questions are recognisably current. The novels ask whether birth should decide status, whether bodily difference justifies exclusion, whether law can remain ethical when society changes, whether technological progress can become ecological violence, and whether leaders may place themselves above the rules they enforce. These questions make myth a form of public reasoning rather than a storehouse of unquestionable answers.

The accessible language of the novels has sometimes led critics to classify them only as commercial fiction. Such a judgement overlooks the cultural work performed by popular narrative. Tripathi's fiction reaches readers who may not approach classical texts directly, while its simplifications and anachronisms invite legitimate critical debate. Its importance lies less in historical accuracy than in the ethical habits it encourages: questioning inherited labels, examining the effects of institutions, and judging greatness through conduct. The divine figures retain symbolic power, but they are no longer beyond moral scrutiny. Indeed, reverence becomes meaningful because scrutiny is possible. Tripathi's heroes are also collective rather than solitary. Shiva depends upon Sati, Kali, Ganesh, Brahaspati, and communities willing to resist the Somras. Ram's ethical identity develops through the disagreement and support of his brothers, teachers, and Sita. Sita's public work depends upon trust, education, and political collaboration. Even the cry "Har Har Mahadev" expands sacred potential beyond one chosen man. Heroism is thus remade as a shared moral capacity. The exceptional figure may lead, but the ethical world cannot be repaired by a single body.

Amish Tripathi humanises the divine by making greatness answerable to choice. Shiva becomes the Mahadev through the struggle to recognise and oppose changing forms of evil. Ram's dignity emerges from his willingness to place law and public duty above personal comfort, even when that commitment wounds him. Sita expands the heroic beyond masculine power by joining courage with administration, equality, and critical judgement. Raavan demonstrates the opposite possibility: talent,

pain, and ambition can create a tragic anti-hero when ethical agency is surrendered to pride and violence. Together, these characters show that divinity in Tripathi's fiction is neither inherited perfection nor supernatural exemption. It is an unstable moral achievement. This remaking of heroism gives the novels their contemporary force. Readers are not asked merely to admire gods from a safe distance. They are invited to consider how ordinary decisions either strengthen or weaken the divine possibility within human life. The heroes doubt, fail, learn, and carry consequences; their vulnerability makes responsibility more visible rather than less important. Tripathi's myth-making therefore preserves reverence while changing its basis. The divine is honoured not because it escapes humanity, but because it realises the highest ethical capacities available to human beings.

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