



DAYDREAMING AND POPULAR FICTION: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF AMISH TRIPATHI'S *SHIVA TRILOGY* AS A SEMINAL PIECE OF POPULAR FICTION

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ABSTRACT

“Phantasy...can become a source of pleasure for the hearers and spectators at the performance of writer’s work.¹” expounds Sigmund Freud, in an informal talk given in 1907 which was subsequently published in 1908 under the title Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming. In his discourse, he presented his idea on the relationship between unconscious fantasy and creative art. Notably, he presented this relationship centring the “authors of novels, Romances and short-stories²” and not “the authors of epics and tragedies³” whom he refers to as “most highly esteemed by the critic⁴”. Thus, he talks about popular literature, literary works that have yet to pass through the test of time to certify its creative sustainability. Fantasy is the nucleus of Popular Literature which according to Freud “[he] (an adult) is expected not to go on playing or Phantasying any longer, but to act in a real world”. It may be the reason why Popular fiction or Genre fiction is usually looked down upon by academics (an adult) through the concept of the semi-educated mass reader vs. the highly educated class reader. Popular fiction must connect and satiate the literary appetite of the so called mass reader of popular fiction as opposed to class reader of literary fiction or artistic fiction. In the process of connecting with the readers, it posits itself to deal with either the trivial or the profound popular beliefs of the time. Thus, it triggers the topicality of the period, something that is pre-eminent to make people aware, adept and cope up with social mobilizing. So it has its own particular faculty to serve. The success of popular literature is prominently scaled by its high sales and its capacity to entertain, rather than its position in the literary canon. In the history of Indian publishing, Amish Tripathi’s fiction Shiva Trilogy that includes the series of three novels- Immortals of Meluha (2010), The Secret of The Nagas (2011), and The Oath of Vayuputras (2011) has become the fastest selling book series with 2.5 million copies in print and over 70 crores in sales. Shiva Trilogy, usually categorized as fantasy myth, is a blend of Myth, Fantasy, Science fiction, Gothic, and Thriller with

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Historical Romance; notably all the sub-genres of popular fiction. My article analyses diverse characteristics that qualify the fiction Shiva Trilogy to be at the top rank in the category of Indian Popular fiction. It also presents a symposium on myth and reality attached to popular fiction.

Keywords: *Popular Fiction, Literary Fiction, Mass reader vs. Class reader, Mythology, Fantasy, Catharsis, Neurosis, Egocentric Hero*

INTRODUCTION

The characteristics and definition of Popular fiction and Literary fiction are quite overlapping. The definition of the term *Popular fiction* stems itself from its etymology i.e. fiction that has become popular and unquestionably the scale to measure its popularity is ascertained by its high sales. Popular fiction is a commercial fiction that is written primarily to make high profits by opting either the themes concerning everyday life or pure fantasy. In order to commercialize the fiction, the writer brings the fiction down to the level where it lends easy reading to the readers of all classes and ages. It may not be the fiction depicting the marginalized.

Major genres of Popular fiction are romantic fiction, crime thrillers, fantasy fiction, gothic or horror fiction, science fiction, mythic fiction, inspirational fiction besides others. Among these crime thrillers, horror fiction, fantasy fiction and science fiction usually feed on fantastic imagination and are written with the absolute aim to entertain while romantic fiction, mythic fiction and inspirational fiction usually encapsulate certain social commentary. Thus, it teaches as well as provides entertainment. There is scarcely a sub-genre of Popular literature that is so absurd to be condemned. For Example, the Crime Thriller *The Sign of Four* written by Arthur Canon Doyle presents an insight in Indian Mutiny of 1857 from the perspective of the British. Horror fiction has always an undercurrent of good vs. bad conflict where supernatural agents are: the outcome of human avarice and neglect as in *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelly; a tool to avenge the evil and set the things aright as in *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole. The horror of the gothic usually has same guiding impact on people as is the psychological fear of God. Science fiction helps to expand the rational boundaries to acknowledge scientific acceptability. Obviously people without the faculty of rationality would believe in myths rather than in Darwin's theory of evolution.

Romantic Fiction centers on contemporary youth and is written with the ages long formula in which there are sets of lovers, separated by external or internal agents which may range from a foul character to foul circumstances. The lovers go through vicissitudes of life until they are united. In every age, there is a plethora of Romeos and Juliets and social hurdles. Thus while writing Romantic fiction, a writer has naturally to deal with contemporary social



issues bothering the youth like: school time crushes, college life, love relationship at work and their struggle within the social and personal life. It doesn't deal with profound social issues but the day to day casual issues happening in the surroundings. Thus, it becomes a guide book for the youth and provides them a glimpse into their belief, needs, situations and probable solutions of their common problems. Thus it gains empathy of the young readers with its next door characters and happenings. They may even identify themselves with the characters. *Sigmund Freud* has compared this tendency with child-play in which a child creates his own fantasy world in the manner creative writer creates his own in his work. This world, as Freud points out, is out of his own wish to accomplish certain unattained desires or something that he experienced once and craves to re-experience as he states "hardly anything is harder for a man than to give up a pleasure which he has once experienced."⁵ When a person grows up, he shifts this ideal world of fantasy from child-games to fiction. When a reader finds a character doing what he wanted to do, achieve what he craves, perform what he desires, he begins to empathize with the character and connects himself with it. Freud who claims that catharsis of such fantasies is inevitable lest it should lead to neurotic disorder. He states, "If phantasies become over-luxuriant and over-powerful, the conditions are laid for an onset of neurosis or psychosis."⁶ At the same time, such fiction becomes a kind of social annotation of the time. Sometimes, its impact is negative as the fantastic romantic world of the fiction convinces them that the fantasy is the reality. The worst among them is erotic romantic fiction akin to pornography, most degraded in Popular literature.

Mythic Fiction accommodates the ages old mythology to the demands of the current times. As the belief system of the people is associated with mythology, especially religious myth, its reinventions makes the people connect with it more. Thus, the reinvention in mythological concept adds to the social progress of the people. Inspirational Fiction is directed to specific demography, such as Hindus, Buddhists, etc. The thematic concern is the belief system of the demography. For Example, *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari* written by Robin Sharma that has sold more than three million copies till 2013 and translated into more than 70 languages and published over 50 nations, centers around a person named Julian who visits India to find the secret of peaceful existence which he finds in the blissful yogic life of Indian Himalayan Saints whose life style is contrasted with the materialism of the West.

Popular fiction that is plot driven instead of theme driven, usually opt for common contemporary themes, use easy diction, straight forward prescriptive instead of descriptive narrative, bombastic dialogues, etc. In India, the novels of Amish Tripathi, Chetan Bhagat, Sudeep Nagarkar, Preeti Senoy, Nikita Singh, Ravindra Singh, Ashwin Sanghi, Durjoy Dutta, Kavita Kane, Vineet Vajpayee, etc. come under this category and form their own canon. Literary fiction as opposed to popular fiction is a genre that encompasses high literary value or literary merit. The scale to determine the literary value of the piece of work relies on different contentious features that are in contrast with the features of popular literature.



Instead of using pace in the plot, it focuses on theme and character in the utmost serious tone, presents complexities of situations and hurls the readers into the depths of emotion and psychology of the character through lofty language, high diction and intricate narrative. It requires patience in mental and emotional exercise which most people avoid. Thus, emerges the concept of *mass* and *class* readers.

The concept of *mass literature* and *class literature* is badly prejudiced. *Mass literature* or *low literature* for *masses* is usually contrasted with *class literature* or *high literature* for an *exclusive class* of people. It is a derogatory term used by those who claim to have *high emotional sensitivity*. Then, they applaud themselves against those who are less inclined to it. We may even dub it class racism. Literature is the bower of emotion where one visits to satiate one's emotional urges. One may simply enjoy scenic beauty, another may find happiness in its tranquil atmosphere, and still another may simply rejoice in watching others enjoy. The level of perception from the same object differs from person to person. Different people read to fulfill their different emotional needs. A person connected to literature or humanities would most probably like to indulge in the most complex psychological and emotional piece of work with most bizarre themes and may relish it but the same can't be expected from students of commerce or science. They may be expert in their own fields but won't necessarily like the complexities of life presented in literary fiction. As such even a scholar of Humanities would be in the category of *mass* for a scholar of Geology because the former can't understand complex geological concepts. It applies to all levels. Some may be interested to go in depth into the psychological condition of *Maya* as presented in *Cry, the peacock* but to some, it matters only that she is doomed because of her husband's indifference towards her and the generation gap between them. Thus, the categorization of the readers in the derogatory term of *mass* and *class* is not sound. Undoubtedly, there was only one *Antony* and only one *Brutus* and rest are audience when addressing on polity in *Julius Caesar* but among the audience, there would be and must be other Antonys and Brutuses of science, mathematics, business, blacksmithy, carpentry, agriculture, etc.

The major function of science is to serve society with new scientific discoveries, commerce to maintain the economy and the function of Humanities is to make human acquaint with humanity, exercise the human brain with humanistic emotions and values so that the former two must not degrade the human lives into mere technicality and materialism. Hypothetically, I suggest, the reason for such imbalance in the global human society, when it has been infected with racism, classism, sexism, pervertism, cruelism, is due to the fact that the progress of Humanities has lagged behind and that it is not able to cope up with the development of science and commerce. The development of science and commerce brings structural shift in society and to fit in the newer structure, there must be shift in the popular belief system as well which is precisely the task of Humanities and that of fiction. If any one



of the systems lags behind, social imbalance is imminent. Certain sub-genre of Popular literature serve to fill this gap with its capacity to interact with the so called mass readers.

Though different characteristics are ascribed to both yet but it doesn't create any absolute distinction between the two forms. All popular fiction may not be popular. There are popular literary works too. For example, *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, *Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh, *Fasting, Feasting* by Anita Desai, *A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth, *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh, *The Immortals* by Amit Choudhari, *The White Tiger* by Arvinda Adiga, etc. So the notion that only popular fiction is saleable is questionable. People read everything in which they find something worthy. However, the question is, how a person would find out the worthy piece of fiction. There is a point to note that all the previously mentioned examples of *Serious literature* or *high literature* have become popular with soaring sales precisely after it got recognition from some literary organization. For Example, *The God of Small Things* was awarded with the prestigious Booker Prize in 1997, *Shadow Lines* won the Shahitya Akademi Award in 1989, *Fasting Feasting* was shortlisted for Booker Prize award in 1999, *A Suitable Boy* won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize award in 1994 and so on. When the literary merit of the work is certified, a section of the so called *mass reader* also begins to read it. It is like branding a product. Though people don't care much before taking simple headache or indigestion pills or buying artificial ornaments but when people invest in something exclusive, they are careful. What can be more precious than *time* that one spend while reading! The one who belongs to the profession of literary development, is responsible for certifying the merit of a literary work. Thus the concept of mass and class of people is ridiculous as the so called *mass* is *class* in their particular trades.

One major tool to ascertain the worth of literary fiction lies in the fact that it stands the test of time. It is believed that the popularity of the Popular literature collapses with time. Contrary to this argument is the fact that many works that were popular in their time have remained equally popular in the following ages too. For example, Major Shakespearean dramas were popular fiction of the time written to amuse contemporary audience but have remained invincible against the slow-chapping power of time. The credit owes to the fact that such literature encompasses universal theme and character. Conversely, there are works of popular fiction too without universal theme and character like; gothic fiction; *Castle of Otranto*, *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, etc. Mystery thrillers series like *Sherlock Holmes* by Arthur Canon Doyle, etc. that has been surviving and is read in all times.

Moreover, as the success and the increasing demand of popular fiction in our contemporary times are apparent, attempts must be exercised to utilize popular fiction as an effective tool to bring social awareness among the youth, present nation builders and future nation rulers. It must be used as a medium of character building of youth as the readers of popular fiction



largely consist of them. For this, writers must write sensibly with a vision of the impact of his words.

Amish Tripathi whose fiction series has made new records in the history of Indian publishing, states that it is wrong to believe that a novel sells itself. One has to take up proper marketing. In his interview with Namarat Bhawani, 5 December 2011 for *The Times of India* published with the title *Myth and Match: Talk with Amish Tripathi*, he states, “It’s a fallacy to think that a good book sells itself. I can give you a long list of books that I think should have been bestsellers but nobody’s ever heard of them. My management background along with marketing experience helped me devise effective strategies for promoting my book⁷”. He has always done intensive marketing for his books.

Still marketing attracts only a limited number of readers and it is their feedback that accelerates its sales. To generate favorable feedback not only from readers but from academics, magazines and newspaper as well, its content must be remarkable. Amish Tripathi has opted for the mythology related to one of the most revered gods, Lord Shiva of Hinduistic faith and has blended it with historical facts of the ancient Indus Valley or Saraswati Civilization. In his fiction Lord Shiva is not a god but a human endowed with all the attributes of Lord Shiva. In the Hindu religious concept, the Wheel of Supreme Time i.e. Mahakal that whose supreme power can’t be questioned, functions through three subsequent processes: Creation, Preservation and Destruction. Notably, destruction is not the doom but either libration or antecedent of creation. This process keeps on moving and so does the Wheel of Time. In Hindu mythology, the supreme deity to maintain the cosmic process of creation is Lord Brahma, the task of preservation or sustenance is performed by Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva is the destroyer of evil. According to Hindu mythology, the incarnations of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh or Shiva manifest themselves on the earth from time to time whenever righteousness declines. Such manifestation of the Supreme God is also revered, respected, referred to and worshipped as god or Bhagwan as they represent the Supreme God on the earth. This mythology has been employed by Amish to frame the outline of all three novels of the *Shiva Trilogy* series.

In the fiction, the archetype of Lord Shiva with the name *Shiva* is the protagonist. Three cosmic institutions of creation, preservation and destruction are turned into earthly institutions whose work is to train the perfect beings to fit them into the role of Brahma, Vishnu or Shiva whenever it is needed. The Egocentric hero, as alluded by Freud, is a normal person but with superhuman forte to overcome every hurdle and all the forces of universe seem to assist him. It is not the character’s ego but the readers’ ego that believes and wants him to triumph over all obstacles. In the Hindu pantheon of Gods, Lord Shiva wields supreme power and controls the cosmic energy so his archetype appeals more to the fantasy of the perfect egocentric hero/reader.



With the first work of the series, *The Immortals of Meluha*, it is established that evil has risen so its destroyer too must rise. He is rumored to have *Blue Throat* which itself is one of the attribute of Lord Shiva. Mythologically, during the churning of the ocean, both elixir or Amrita or Somras and poison or Halahal was extracted. In order to save all from the effects of the toxic halahal, Lord Shiva drank it and stored it in his throat which then turned blue. Symbolically it stands for the one that has the power to extract all evil from the world without being affected by it. Mysteriously, in the fiction, the perfect being Shiva rises with blue throat even without the acknowledgement of the institution of Destruction titled *Vayuputra*. Shiva is presented with all the characteristics features of Lord Shiva. For example: blue neck, a trident, marijuana, muscular strength, most compassionate nature and excellent dancing. His dance accelerates cosmic energy. He also has dedication towards his spouse, rebel attitude and is also a dispeller of evil, etc. the whole coterie of archetypes related to the Shiva myth i.e. Sati, Kali, Ganesh, Kartikeye, Parsuram, Daksh, Nandi, etc. makes its mythological parallelism more convincing and effective.

In the fiction, Shiva first has to find out what is evil or the nature of evil before destroying it. These searches give the novel the *cliffhanger* suspense of mystery thrillers. As in the detective yarn, at first the culprit has to be detected through different clues and then trapped to be exposed, caught and punished so in the work, Shiva, first, has to find out what is evil, then the one that operates the evil and then resolve it. The first novel of the *Shiva Trilogy* series, *Immortals of Meluha* begins with the Suryavanshis of Meluha's claim to Shiva that the Chandravanshis of Swadweep are evil. Suryavanshis intake an elixir named Somras that expands their lifespan and blesses them with undying youth but their manufacturing of Somras is hindered by depletion in the water of Saraswati River, an important element in the manufacturing of the elixir. The Suryavanshi hold Chandravanshis responsible for it and thus they are evil for them. In addition to this, the social ideals of the two differ extremely. Suryavanshis unfailingly abide by their lives by rules while the lives of Chandravanshi are governed by personal freedom and choices. After conquering the Chandravanshis, when it is established that they are not evil, the needle of evil points towards the Nagas, the physically deformed people who are shown first spreading terrorism. Their horrible physical stature is akin to grotesque creatures and their secret abode presents the element of the haunted castles of Gothic fiction. Their physical deformity is said to have been the result of their past sin. Throughout the book two, *The Secret of Nagas*, their secret abode is sought to be destroyed until it is revealed that their deformity along with cause of the plague in Branga and the depletion of Saraswati River is due to the side effects of the elixir Somras, a fact that the King of Meluha, Daksha is well acquainted with but doesn't acknowledge it due to his greed for the advantages attached to elixir. The third and the last work of the series, *The Oath of Vayuputra*, resolves the evil. Throughout the three, there is aura of mystery, suspense, awe and cliffhanger elements akin to Arabian Nights that draws the attention of readers.



Science Fiction or sci-fi is based on imagined future scientific or technological advances but on the contrary, *Shiva Trilogy* centers around the imagined past scientific or technological advances. The fiction series centers around the great scientific invention called Somras, an elixir that expands the life span of a person. It can be compared with the sci-fi *The Invisible Man* written by H. G. Wells; the invisibility attained by its central character Griffin during a scientific mishap energizes the action of the fiction.

The setting of the *Shiva Trilogy* is in the distant Indian history of Indus Valley Civilization or Saraswati Civilization which thrived between 3300 and 1300 BCE, the mature period of which was 2600-1900 BCE. The Saraswati civilization is the world's most ancient civilization along with ancient Egypt and Mesopotamian civilizations. The reason why this civilization collapsed is still an unsolved mystery. A speculation is that it might have collapsed due to the depletion of the Saraswati River. Amish has picked up this unsolved historical mystery of the decline of such a thriving civilization to frame the climax of his fiction. The Indus sites are noted for their urban planning, baked bricked houses, elaborate drainage system, water supply system, metallurgy, new techniques in handicraft, public baths, etc. Amish has fictionalized a developed society of the period on the basis of archeological records and surveys and has blended it with the vedic system of life as the Vedic era succeeds the era of the Indus Valley. The fiction deals with numerous social problems such as the Sati system, caste system, class system, widow remarriage, untouchability, etc. He has either redefined it in the modern frame or annihilated the dogmas attached to it. Freud states, "The motive forces of phantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every single phantasy is the fulfillment of a wish, a correlation of unsatisfying reality⁸." Freud speaks of only two type of wishes. First, personal ambitious wishes where one fantasizes to elevate one's personality and second, erotic wishes. However, there is a third very strong one too. It is one's wish as a 'perfect social being' where he doesn't fantasize about the elevation of the self but of the society in which he lives. Every sensible human, as a social being, dreams certain social changes to take it to perfection or at least hope for it. Such fantasies in the fiction that he trusts, satisfies him partially as a social being. The people of a country draw their pride from its great history and civilization along with the successful present. An Indian is always fascinated by the great historical past of the Saraswati and Vedic Civilization and for this reason the fiction series of Amish appeals to them strongly.

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