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## A Brief Survey of Myth and the Contemporary Indian English Popular Novel

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### **Abstract:**

*The present study is a critical commentary on the most recent phenomena witnessed at the Indian literary marketplace: the remarkable response received by works of fiction that are founded on mythology - Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy, Anand Neelkantan's Asura and Ajaya, Krishna Udayashankar's Aryavarta Chronicles, Rajiv G. Menon's The Ascendance of Indra, Sharath Komarraju's The Winds of Hastinapur, Kavita Kane's Karna's Wife, and Shamik Dasgupta's Ramayan 3392 A.D. Series. The paper focuses on examining how these texts display an array of divergent attitudes towards the characters and incidents in the Indian Epics and Mythology, how these versions of ancient texts reinterpret the mythical past, and how the respective authors utilize myth creatively for coming to terms with the predicament of the present. The study of popular literature has gained importance since the advent of postmodernism and today the line between serious and popular literature is blurred. Popular literature has been accepted as a noteworthy expression of people's reading interests as well as a distinctive field of literary creativity. It is no longer rejected as trash. In this scenario it becomes important to look critically at some of the most significant contemporary Indian English popular texts. The focus of the present discussion is mainly on myth as it has been used by contemporary Indian popular writers. Myth has always given creative impetus to the authors over the ages. In this*

*paper the significance of the reworking of ancient Indian myths has been brought to attention.*

**Key words:** Myth, Popular literature, Indian English fiction, Contemporary literature

The Indian literary market is dominated today by novels dealing with the mythical past. These novels often rework the Indian myths creatively to address contemporary concerns as well as eternal human issues. This reworking of mythological subject matter through new modes of expression has proved to be an effective strategy that connects one to the cultural past on the one hand and helps to assert the present cultural and socio-political identity on the other. This paper surveys some of today's most popular Indian English texts to examine how the contemporary authors are reworking the Indian mythological subject matter to make significant expressions that are an essential part of the contemporary Indian literature in English.

The trend of successful novels having mythological content started in 2003 with Ashok Banker's bestselling eight-volume Ramayana Series. The international acclaim received by Banker and the commercial success of his novels indicated the interest of the people in the mythical past. Many novels followed the tradition started by Banker and today, the novels that are retellings of the Indian mythological stories top the charts. Among the texts considered in the foregoing discussion, Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* is the most popular. It comprises of *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010), *The Secret of the Nagas* (2011) and *The Oath of the Vayuputras* (2013). *The Immortals of Meluha* is set in 1900 BC; in the geographical area that we call as the Indus Valley Civilization. The novel begins with a Tibetan tribal Shiva who, along with his tribe, is invited in the Meluha Kingdom which is ruled by the Suryavanshi kings. The Meluhans are at constant war with another nation of the Chandravanshis aided by the group of cursed tribals, the

Nagas of their savior Neelkanth. Shiva turns out to be the Neelkanth as his throat turns blue after consuming the healing potion somras. Shiva falls in love with the Suryavanshi king Daksha's daughter, Princess Sati. However, he is not permitted to marry her because Sati is considered as Vikarma, carrier of bad fate, due to sins committed in her previous births; hence she is an untouchable. Shiva decides to dissolve this obsolete law and Daksha then permits them to get married. Somras, the potion that is the secret of the longevity of the Meluhans, is manufactured on the Mount Mandar by using the water of the river Sarswati. This river is on the verge of extinction. Shiva visits mount Mandar and develops a close Friendship with the chief scientist Brihaspati there. However, after coming back to the capital, this manufacturing unit is destroyed by the enemy and Brihaspati goes missing. Shiva declares war on the Chandravanshis. They attack Swadeep, the land of the Chandravanshis, defeat the Swadeepans and the Chandravanshi king is captured. However, the Chandravanshi king is enraged after seeing Shiva on the Suryavanshi side because the Chandravanshis too had been awaiting the arrival of their savior Neelkanth who was prophesized to aid them in destroying the Suryavanshis. Shiva is surprised after discovering this fact. Shiva and Sati go for visiting the famous Ram temple in the capital of Swadeep Ayodhya. There Shiva learns from the priest that he is not the first Mahadev to be isled. It is not actually his task to destroy 'evil'. He is required for the most important task and the most important task is to answer the most important question, 'What is evil?' Shiva is burdened with the bold of the Chandravanshis who were considered as 'evil' by the Suryavanshis. He has now discovered that the Chandravanshis consider the Suryavanshis as evil and have been expecting him to eliminate that evil. As he comes out of the Ram temple, he finds his wife Sati has followed him to the temple. He notices a Naga behind a tree preparing for attack. The novel ends with Shiva rushing to save Sati.

The sequel *The Secret of the Nagas* takes up the story from the last incident of the *Immortals of Meluha*. Shiva has saved his wife from the attack of the Naga soldier who has fled leaving behind some coins. These coins have engravings of the king Chandraketu of the Branga. Shiva goes to Kashi to get more information about this because some of the people from Branga live in Kashi. At Kashi there is a riot of the Brang people and Shiva's General Parvateshwar gets seriously injured in his effort to pacify this riot. Parvateshwar is healed by the Branga lender Divodas who uses a medicine that grows on Panchavati which is in the Naga kingdom. Shiva learns that the Branga people suffer from a serious disease which can only be healed by the herbs of Panchavati. Because of this reason, the Branga are compelled to side with the Nagas against the Suryavanshis. Shiva decides to sail to Branga but Sati stays at Kashi. She is to help the king there in his battle against the lions that are attacking the people. Sati is about to lose this battle but some Naga soldiers led by Ganesh and Kali help them to win. Kali reveals that she is Sati's sister who was dumped by Daksha because of her deformities. Another revelation is that Ganesh is Sati's first child who was reported to be dead at birth.

After reaching Branga, Shiva has to continue his journey in search of Parshuram, a bandit who is the only person that knows the formula to the medicine for saving the Branga people. Parshuram does not allow anyone to approach him and kills anyone daring to do so. But Shiva successfully confronts him and discovers Parshuram is a Vasudev. The Vasudevs are the followers of Lord Vasudev, the trusted lieutenant of Lord Ram. After taking the medicine formula from Parshuram Shiva goes back to Kashi. He cannot reconcile with Ganesh because Ganesh was the one who attacked Sati at Ayhodya. Later, he forgives Ganesh when Ganesh rescues Shiva's son Kartik from lion's attack. On confronting Daksha, Shiva learns how Daksha killed Sati's first husband, dumped Kali, and lied to Sati about

her son. Daksha blames Shiva for causing a rift between him and his daughter. Sivaa then decides to go to Panchvati. Kali, the Naga queen, guides him but while they are on their way, they are attacked. They believe Daksha to be behind this attack. However, they are able to escape this attack and on reaching the Naga capital, Shiva finds Birhaspati alive there. The novel ends here but Shiva's quest to find the answer to his question 'What is evil?' is to continue through the next part *The Oath of the Vayuputras*.

In the final novel of this trilogy, Shiva discovers the source of the evil. Brahaspati tells him that the preparation of somras requires a lot of water. This has exhausted the Saraswati river. The waste byproduct is dumped in the Tsangpo River (Brahmhaputra) that has created a serious disease in the territories of the Branga and the Naga. Their babies are born with deformities due to the effect of Somras. The Somras causes high rate of multiplication of cells in the Nagas that results in deformities. Shiva has to take a journey to meet the Vayuputas to solve this question. The Vayuputra council is an ancient tribe left by Rudra, the earlier Mahadev, with a task to train the Neelkanth for destroying the evil whenever such need arises. Gopal, living in Ujjain is the chief of this council. After meeting him Shiva declares war on Meluha because it is the centre of manufacturing Somras. Shiva's first attempt to capture Meluha is unsuccessful. So he wants to get the weapon Brahmastra so that he could pressurize the Meluha. When he meets the Vayuputras again, he finds Mithra, chief of the Vayuputras, who also happens to be his maternal uncle. Mithra, suggests the use of Pahasupathiastra and gives it to him because Brahmastra is a weapon of mass destruction. Devagiri in the Meluha is the centre of Somras production. Shiva uses his astra to destroy the city and thus to destroy the course of evil. Shiva then goes to live at the foot of Mount Kailash in the Himalayas.

Tripathi has selected the most charismatic of the Indian gods- Shiva, but he has presented Shiva as a mortal human

being, asking “ What if Lord Shiva was not a figment of a rich imagination, but a person of flesh and blood? Like you and me. A man who rose to become godlike because of his karma. That is the premise of the Shiva Trilogy, which interprets the rich mythological heritage of ancient India, blending fiction with historical fact” (Tripathi:2012). The search for the meaning of evil is the theme that runs through these three novels . Shiva is first led to believe that the Chandravanshis, Nagas and the Branga are evil. But he discovers that they are not so. Through the course of action of the novels he discovers that good and evil are sides of the same coin. Evil is not a person but a situation. The story tries to rationalize the magical element of the Shiva myth.

*Thundergod: The Ascendance of Indra* (2012) is the first book in the proposed ‘Vedic Trilogy’ by Rajiv G. Menon. Like Tripathi Menon has selected a god as his protagonist, but Indra is not a god popular with the story tellers. In many of the myths Indra is presented as a power thirsty, selfish, deceitful, even cowardly god. Menon attempts to revert all that with his research amalgamated into an adventure thriller set in mythical times with Indra as the hero. Here Indra is presented as the son of a tribal leader and celestial being Daeyus who is killed while Indra is a child. Mitra, a sage and a former warrior, brings up Indra along with four other orphans Vayu, Agni, Varuna and Soma. Indra is prophesized to be a leader who will unite the different group of Yavanas, Adityas, Ikshvaakus, Devas for the fight against their common enemies, the Asuras. Indra’s way to ascendance is not easy. He has to acquire the leadership of the Devas by his own skill. He, along with Agni, Vayu, Varuna and Soma goes out to win the territory from the Euphrates River to the Harappa. There is also the story about Indra and Sachi, his lady love whom he marries. On the whole, the novel presents Indra as the leader who established the Aryans into the Indus Valley.

Krishna Udaysankar’s series *The Aryavarta Chronicles*

has three novels *Govinda* (2012), *Kaurava* (2013), and the forthcoming *Kurukshetra*. A retelling of Mahabharata, the novels are set in second millennium BCE. In the first novel *Govinda* shows the Aryavarta region divided into several tiny kingdoms as a result of clash between two powerful groups. One is the dynasty of the scholar sages, the descendants of Vasistha Varuni and the other is the Angirasa family, the erstwhile weapon makers to the kings. The Angirasa have the secret knowledge of powerful weapons and when the last secret keeper dies, everyone in Aryavarta tries to get hold of this knowledge so as to become the sole power dominating everyone in the region. Vyasa, from the clan of the scholar sages, puts the family of the Kurus on the throne of Aryavarta. But they are the vassals of Magadha Kingdom ruled by Jarasandha. The protagonist Krishna is called Govinda shawei and he plans to replace the Kuru family with the Pandavas. He also wants to destroy the Angirasa. Aryavarta is led to a great war for dominance and imperial power, though Govinda has made the Pandavas, the rulers of Aryawarta through peaceful treaties, has ensured that various kingdom under Aryarvarta remain unified.

In the second novel *Kaurava*, Dharma Yudhisthir, the ruler of the Aryavarta empire, loses his empire in the gamble. Govinda Shauri now has the difficult task of making the Pandavas the rulers again. He also discovers that he is actually a prince and heir to the Suransena throne. The rivalry between the scholar sages (the Firstborn) and the Angirasa (Firewrights) continues in this second novel. Govinda himself is a trained Fire wright, but he is bent on destroying the Angiransa clan. The focus of this novel is on the Kauravas, particularly on Duryodhana who is called as Suyodhan. The third book *Kurukshetra* is yet to be released. It is expected that this thirs part will bring a resolution to the conflict. Govinda is supposed to play a leading role in bringing about peace after the great war will be fought.

The author terms the writing of this story as a scientific inquiry. Krishna Udaysankar in her note to the novels mentions that she has consulted the mainstream as well as the alternative versions of the Krishna's myth after which "it becomes possible to construct a story of why things may have happened as they did, a plausible narrative with reasonable internal logical consistency. Something that could well have been history, something that stands firm not just on faith but also on logic and science" (Udaysankar:2012). In the contemporary times when divisive forces are at work in the nation, Udaysankar's novels recount a tale of unification. This can be seen as a thrust towards a sense of national and cultural unity.

Anand Neelkantans two novels *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished- The Story of Ravana and His People* (2012) and *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice -Epic of the Kaurava Clan #1*, are retellings of Ramayana and Mahabharata epics. In *Asura*, the story centers on Ravana depicted as the son of a Brahmin father and Asura mother. He is treated unfairly by his brother, the Emperor Kubera of Sri Lanka kingdom. Ravana is shown to be mobilizing forces and acquiring the throne of the Empire here. Sita is portrayed as Ravana's daughter who had to be abandoned due to a prophesy. She was ordered to be killed but she survives. Then she is kidnapped by Ravana when Ram and Lakshman are in exile. The story shows the Ramayana war and ultimate defeat of Ravana. Neelkantan has based the book on the alternative Ramayanas especially recited in the southern part of India. The story is narrated by Ravana and a fictitious character Bhadra who represents the common Indian person, gullible to the politicians. Seeta is presented as Ravana's daughter in the lesser known versions of Ramayana. But once this view is adopted, the whole motif of this story changes drastically. Ravana is not a ten headed demon here. The author gives symbolic explanation for the ten faces. The one dominant face is that of the intellect which must keep under control the

other nine base emotions of anger, pride, jealousy, happiness, sadness, fear, selfishness, passion, and ambition.

*Ajaya* is the version of the Mahabharata told from the Kauravas's perspective. Suyodhana (Duryodhana) represents the Kauravas and believes it to be his birthright to rule the kingdom. Pandavas are the royal princes who follow the rigid laws of caste and pay no need to merit, whereas the Kauravas believe in equality. Suyodhana makes Karna, son of a Charioteer, a king, only on the basis of merit. The book starts with a picture of the childhood days of the Pandavas and Kauravas where Pandavas are shown to be tormenting their cousins. Pandavas are enthroned but the Kauravas must get what is their birthright. The book ends with the gambling episode where the Kauravas win the kingdom with the help of the roll of the dice. In his note to the novel, Neelkantan explains the reason for choosing to write Duryodhana's story. He had visited a village in Kerala where the people regarded Duryodhana as a benevolent prince and celebrated in his honour a festival every year. Duryodhana, in return of the kindness shown to him by an old woman who gave him toddy to quench his thirst constructed a temple with no idol in it. He gave surrounding villages to the temple, appointed an outcast as the priest and it is still believed that he answers the prayers of the villagers. This prompted the author for research on the villainous figure of Duryodhana and he came to the conclusion that Duryodhana was-

...far removed from the scheming, roaring, arrogant villain of popular television serials and traditional retellings. Instead, here was a brutally honest prince, brave and self-willed, willing to fight for what he believed in. Duryodhana never believed his Pandava cousins to be of divine origin; and to modern minds, their outlandish claim now sounds chillingly similar to present-day political propaganda used to fool a gullible public. (Neelkantan 2013,7).

Sharath Komarraju's *The Winds of Hastinapur* (2013) is yet

another different retelling of the Mahabharata Epic. The Epic is narrated from the points of view of prominent women characters Ganga and Satyawati mainly. The novel begins where Mahabharata has ended. On the last journey, atop the climb of the ice mountain, when all the Pandava brothers are lying dead, Ganga is the last to survive. She knows that her end is near. She recounts the story of the great epic from her perspective in the first half of this novel. The second half is the story the fisher woman Satyawati whom the king Shantanu married. The story covers incidents from the time when Ganga come down to earth and married Shantanu. It concludes with the birth of Satyawati's grandson Dhritarashtra. The births of Pandu and Vidur are awaited. Komarraju actually brings to forefront the voices that are sidelined in the epic. Ganga and Satyawati, though performing very significant roles in the action of the Mahabharata, have never been given the power to express themselves. This retelling goes close to actually the rewriting of the epic.

One more retelling of the Mahabharata from a woman character's viewpoint is Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife*. This novel unfolds the story of princess Uruvi who got married to Karna. She is the daughter of king Pukeya and has married Karna because she loves him. As she has defied the social norms of caste, she has to bear the brunt of all her near and dear ones. She does not try to change Karna's loyalty for the Kauravas in favour of his brother the Pandavas. Her love for her husband is great; so she busies herself in doing whatever she can for him. She nurses the wounded soldiers of his army. In the end, when the Pandavas ask for Karna's son as the heir to the throne, she refuses to give him to them, showing loyalty to her husband's resolve even after his death. Both Komarraju's and Kane's versions have the common thrust. They present the erstwhile neglected feminine voices. The male dominated epics are thus presented in a new light and there is an effort to create a balanced view of the episodes from the Mahabharata.

Shamik Dasgupta's *Ramayan 3392 AD* has three volumes; it is a graphic novel series but the books are also aimed at adult readers. Prominent persons like Deepak Chopra and Shekhar Kapur conceived of this idea of setting Ramayana story in a futuristic time. The future depicted in these books is one where the lives of human beings are in danger because of the Asuras/demons. The Prince Ram, with his brothers, rises as a savior of the human race. The time shown in this text is that of after the third world war. The world is divided into two continents Nark and Aryavarta. Nark is the abode of the Asuras who continually attack the humans living in Aryavarta. Many changes have been made to the storyline of Ramayana. For example, Ram is sent to exile for holding a temporary truce with the Asuras (an act which he was compelled for due to the mortal injury to his brother Lakshman). Seeta is a woman with magical powers whom Ram meets in Mithila and he refuses to marry her though the sage Vishwamitra tells him that it is destined for him to act as a protector to this woman. As in all the graphic novels, the main focus is on action. The frequent skirmishes with the demons are the mainstay of these texts. The apocalyptic setting is an innovation that engages the interest of the reader here.

The brief critical survey in the foregoing discussion has brought to fore some common elements in the novels taken up for the present study. First and foremost is the fact that these novels are alternative versions of the popular mythological texts. They present the gods, deities, superheroes as common human beings and try to look at the characters as well as incidents in a rational manner. Secondly, the marginalized voices are given preference in these stories. Even in the *Shiva Trilogy*, Ganesh and Kali have been shown to be made outcasts whom Sati brings back. The voices of erstwhile villains Ravana and Duryodhana (who is specifically called as Suyodhana in all the versions mentioned above) are given expression and the reader gets acquainted with the viewpoint of the vanquished.

Thirdly, there is an attempt to give the women characters their due status and that is why some of the novels make it a point to tell the story from the feminine perspective. The post colonial authors seem to be deconstructing the domestic grand narratives here. The indication is that, not only the colonizer suppressed the voices of the colonized, but the dominant cultural groups within the colonized society also smothered the voices of the weaker sections. Finally, these stories are retold not only because of an interest in or a fascination for the mythical past but they also consist of commentaries on the present socio-political situation. For example, when the Kauravas win the game of the dice in Neelakantan's *Ajaya*, the narration connects the roll of the dice to the Indian situation in general, "That roll was a challenge, a dare to the fools that ruled India, from a tiny mountain kingdom on the outskirts of her ancient civilization. The Indians, who kept fighting each other for language, caste, religion, race, and petty egos, did not see, hear or feel the dice rolling over their holy land. The dice obeyed the foreign hand as usual"(Neelakantan 2013,411). Similar statements can be found in most of the novels mentioned in this study. The authors are far from taking the readers on a fantasy ride into the past. The premise of their fiction remains well grounded in the reality of the present situation.

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