

Subaltern Environmentalism: Towards Social and Environmental Justice in Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy*

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Abstract

Amish Tripathi, a prolific Indian writer, chronicles writing mythical novels, as he believes that it makes more Indian. His postcolonial treatment of the ancient myths and legends shows his substantial engagement with environmental and social issues. As he questions the inimical effects of social structures on human beings, in *Shiva Trilogy*, his approach to environmental issues could be said to be informed by Subaltern environmentalism, an emerging trend in literary studies that is concerned with people who are marginalized socially as well as environmentally. This paper tries to explore the ecological and social consciousness of Amish Tripathi in his *Shiva Trilogy*. By critiquing the social dimension of environmental abuse, he unmasks the exploitative hegemony in an ancient culture that could very well be seen reflected in the contemporary global scenario. The paper dramatizes clearly the way a group of privileged people exploited nature, women and minority social groups in hierarchical social system, in its oppression of human beings and exploitation of nature creates a significant marginal "other" that gains a subaltern identity. It also endeavors to show Lord Shiva as an environmental and social activist.

Key Words: Environmental Subalternism, Somras, Marginalisation, Environmental degradation, Social justice, Environmental justice.

INTRODUCTION

Nature lends its hands to human beings in myriad ways, when they are in trouble. Nature is not only capable of creating and preserving the earth, it is also capable of destroying the whole earth if abused continuously. Due to globalization human beings have moved away from Nature and this has given rise to various environmental issues like air pollution, drought, famine and global warming. Hence it is the duty of mankind to protect it from devastation. Many alternative ideologies and epistemologies have been developed over the years to advance the environmental concerns of human beings. Among this plethora of ideologies, Subaltern Environmentalism is a theory in Eco criticism that works on the significant links between Environmental and social problems along with an insistence on conservation and preservation of the environment.

Antonio Gramsci coined the term 'Subaltern' to refer to a group of people who are deprived of their rights socially and politically. They are also referred to as marginalized 'other' who are ill-treated by the society. Subaltern environmentalism is fairly a recent term that is multidisciplinary and is applied in literature also to examine the unfair treatment of the socially inferior people by the socially privileged people. These people in the lower rungs of the society are marginalized not only by their oppressors but also because of the oppressor's abuse of nature. Michael Egan in his work *Subaltern Environmentalism in the United States: A Historiographic Review* says:

When a group of people is faced with both social and environmental subordination they are the victims of environmental injustice. This subordination is manifest in the disproportionate siting of environmental hazards in poor or minority communities and also in the inequitable distribution of ecological resources both of which perpetuate the marginalization of the subaltern groups (22).

SHIVA TRILOGY

Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* focuses on the exploitation of nature by the socially dominant group of people and how these people mysteriously dump the toxic wastes of Somras in the places which belong to socially inferior people. Tripathi has discussed many environmental hazards that threaten mankind in *Shiva Trilogy*. Lord Shiva who is popularly known as the destroyer of evil is the protagonist of the novel. He is the leader of the Guna tribe. There is a constant fight between Gunas and the Prakritis, another warrior tribe in Tibet. During this time Nandi comes from Meluha and offers Lord Shiva and his tribe a chance to settle in Meluha. Lord Shiva agrees to it and reaches Meluha. As it is the custom of every immigrant to drink the somras after entering Meluha, Lord Shiva too drinks it and his throat turns blue.

The Meluhans begin to worship Lord Shiva as the Neelkanth and the savior who has come to rescue them from evil. Daksha, the emperor of Meluha, introduces the various practices of Meluhans and through this Lord Shiva comes to know the manufacturing of Somras. The somras factory in Mount Mandar is destroyed by the Nagas, a deformed minority that suffers the ill-effects of Somras. But the Suryavanshis secretly run a backup of the Somras factory. In the beginning Lord Shiva, mistakes Chandravanshis and Nagas as evil people.

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Endangered River is one of the environmental issues that is put forth in *Shiva Trilogy* by Amish. Somras is manufactured for nearly eight million people; hence the river Saraswati is exploited by the Suryavanshis. Due to its tremendous usage, it starts to diminish and ceases to reach the Western Sea and gradually it stops flowing and ends its journey in the inland delta of South Rajasthan. Brahaspati warns about the drying up of the river. Lady Sati realizes the importance of river Saraswati and reasons thus:

River Saraswati is the mother of our entire Saptasindhu civilization.... Yes. Even our preeminent scripture the Rig Veda sings Paeans to Saraswati. It is not only the cradle but also the lifeblood of our entire civilization. What will happen to our future generation without this great river?. The Vedic way of life is at risk. What we are doing is taking away the lifeblood of future progeny so that our present generation can revel in the luxury of living for two hundred years or more. Would it be so terrible if we lived for a hundred years instead? (OOV 18)

Environmental degradation occurs when natural resources are abused by human beings. Maharishi Bhṛigu and Emperor Dakṣha misuse their power and exploit nature for their personal needs. Even after Lord Shiva's warning on the demerits of Somras, they do not stop using it. They are concerned only with the longevity of their life. Dakṣha is one hundred and eighty-four years older but still, he has the appearance of a man of thirty years. Maharishi Bhṛigu is even ready for a war but will not destroy the Somras factory.

Social Ecologists argue that environmental problems and the dominating attitude of the authoritative people are interrelated. Socially inferior classes of people are affected by the dominant class of people as well as the environmental problems instigated by them. River Saraswati is created by the convergence of two rivers, Sutlej and Yamuna. In the beginning the rivers Sutlej and Yamuna are used equally by the Meluhans and the Chandravanshis. Due to a minor earthquake Yamuna starts to flow eastwards and joins the river Ganga, which belongs to the Chandravanshis. The Meluhans suspect the Chandravanshis for the river Yamuna's change of course and wage a war against them and restore the river Yamuna to its original form and exploit it to produce Somras. They do not desire to have any diplomatic relationship with the Chandravanshis as they think it is beneath their dignity to do so. This incident shows Chandravanshis as subaltern who are subdued and conquered.

Brahaspati, the Scientist narrates to Lord Shiva that the Human body is made up of millions of cells and these cells are "the building blocks of life" (OOV 15). They blend and form the organs. These minute cells keep dividing and growing until it forms the entire body. There should be a limit to the growth of these cells if not the body will grow continuously having adverse effects. This is the reason why God has limited the division of cells. The Somras removes the limitation of this cell division and at the same time maintains the cells healthy. But in a few people this cell division gets out of control and leads to cancer. In some others there is a possibility that these cells continuously grow and cause deformities such as extra head or nose. Kali as a Naga expresses the pain of these deformities:

But one cannot even imagine the physical pain and torture that we undergo as children when these outgrowths occur..... our bodies get twisted beyond recognition so that by adolescence when further growth finally stops, we are stuck with what Brahaspati politely calls "deformities". I call it the wages of sins that we didn't even commit. We pay for the sins others commit by consuming Somras. (OOV 16).

Nagas are deformed people of society because of their deformities and they live in remote places of human beings. They are made to believe that the reason for their sufferings is the sin committed in their past lives. If pregnant women drink Somras for a longer period there are chances for that baby to be born with a deformity and eventually become a Naga. Veerini and Sati, who consumed Somras during their pregnancy, give birth to Kali and Ganesh who are deformed. In spite of deformities, Nagas are skilled warriors. They are affected both environmentally and socially but they are silent after knowing the ill effects caused by Somras. They ally with the Chandravanshis and demigods heart of Meluha i.e. the Somras manufacturing unit. But they are unaware of the fact that maharajah and Daksha have already constructed a Somras manufacturing unit secretly.

Dumping of toxic waste in water bodies is one of the global environmental issues today. Meluha who are considered as subalterns. Lord Shiva who has lived in Tibet for most part of his life is the first to know that the toxic wastes are dumped in Tibet. Dumping of toxic waste in the dwelling place is irredeemably destructive of both natural and social worlds. It is a threat to biodiversity and conservation also poses serious health hazards to the subaltern.

Plague is one of the deadly diseases that human history has ever witnessed. The contamination of Tsangpo River in Tibet reaches India as river Brahmaputra. The toxins in the river become reactive due to change in the aquatic temperature and causes plague in Branga. The people in Branga do not realize the cause of their environmental problems. It is through the chief Meluhan scientist, Brahaspati, Lord Shiva understands the plague is caused by Somras. It is the common man who faces the hazards of toxins produced by the politically and socially superior beings. Major Uma is one such victim. She begets a child after many years of her marriage. Unfortunately, the child contracts plague and dies. In a wretched, miserable state, she asks Lord Shiva, the savior why he did not come before to save her in her crisis.

Effects of Somras on Vikarma people:

Vikarmas are the indirect sufferers of Somras; they are secluded and marginalized by society. A person incurs a disease, that cannot be cured and if a woman gives birth to a stillborn child they are considered as Vikarmas. They are also treated as untouchables. Vikarmas, like Nagas, are made to believe that their suffering is because of the sin that they have committed in previous birth and they have to endure these present sufferings as a penance. Lady Sati is one such victim who endures the atrocities of the Vikarma law. She is made to believe that she has given birth to a stillborn child. She also loses her husband Chandandhwaj on the same day. Later she comes to know that her child is alive but because she consumed Somras, he has been born as a Naga. When Lord Shiva comes to know the social and psychological sufferings faced by the Vikarma people and in order to establish social justice, Lord Shiva scrapes the Vikarma law.

Lord Shiva as destroyer of Evil:

Lord Shiva is delineated in the novel as an enlightened forerunner of the present environmental movement. In his search for identity and the significance of his blue throat, he is guided by the pantheists through various philosophies and they tell him that "It is only the Mahadev who can recognize evil and the lead men against it. Before the evil raises its ugly head and extinguish all life" (IOM 397). Through Brahaspati, he comes to know the ill-effects of Somras and concludes that Somras is the evil that he was searching for. He takes a firm stand against the exploitation of nature and hegemonic victimization of human beings. He declares that anyone who favours the destructive Somras will become his enemy. He wages a bitter war against the supporters of Somras in which he loses his wife Sati. Even then he does not give up his quest of destroying the Somras and at last, he uses Pashupati astra and destroys Devagiri, putting an end to Somras.

Lord Shiva as an environmental and social activist has provided justice for both human and natural worlds. He is very humble and sympathizes, respects and consoles the people who are distressed and affected by various social problems. He even scrapes the Vikarma law which does injustice to the people. And after realizing his true identity, he fights for the cause of good overcoming the challenges he faces.

Conclusion

During Wordsworth's period man worshipped nature as God, but Industrialization led to environmentally destructive development. Day after day man's atrocities towards nature are increasing to the detriment of man himself. Whenever evil gains an upper hand and people suffer, Mahadev will arise in order to protect the people from danger; this is the reason why Lord Vishnu has taken various avatars and will take in the future. Amish Tripathi has utilized this myth and has delineated Lord Shiva as such an avatar in the form of a normal human being, who transforms into a legend and a savior and a kind of radical environmentalist.

Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* stands at the intersection of environmental and social concerns. It shows clearly the negative impacts of social domination and social hierarchy on not only human community but also on Earth's ecology. By drawing attention to various environmental issues, he seems to suggest

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justice is a key factor in the existence and survival of any social system. It calls for a commitment to practices that involve just and efficient use of natural resources in the development of the society as a whole, free from environmental hazards.

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