

Empowered Women in the Selected Works of Amish Tripathi

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Abstract

In Literature, especially in Indian English literature, the Indian novelists have endeavoured to depict the powerful position that women enjoyed during the ancient times. In this category may be included the works of Amish Tripathi. He in his *Shiva Trilogy* and *Rama Chandra Series* has revitalized the image of Indian women. He very skillfully attributes the qualities, generally associated with man to woman to show that woman has always been powerful. Tripathi has done away with the stereotypical image of women in a patriarchal society by creating a world of women and bringing them out of gender bias.

Keywords: Empowered Women; Femininity; Feminism; Gender equality; Women un-gendered.

Indian *Sanatan* knowledge system with its rich line of stories (mega-narratives) and archetypal characters has been an area of interest among authors across the globe; to this area belong Ashok Banker, Devdutt Pattanaik, Anand Neelkanthan, Ashwin Sanghi, Anuja Chandramaouli, Shubha Vilas, Kavita Kane, Samhita Arni, Mani Suri and Amish Tripathi. They all have attempted to re-tell Hindu mythology with a novel perspective. In general, myths have existed as androcentric texts highlighting virtues of heroes and male supremacy; thus mythical discourse largely remained patriarchal. Re-visiting of myth is an emerging trend in Indian literature in English, particularly with reference to post-feminist perspective of giving voice to the voiceless, describing *Sanatan* women's talent and capabilities and creating a new identity for them, wrongly portrayed as inferior to men.

In Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy and Rama Chandra Series*, women have not been portrayed as struggling for their basic rights and respects. They have not

been presented as meek, submissive and weak; instead they are self-sufficient, strong, pragmatic, brave and courageous possessing intelligence, specialization in their fields and enjoying name and fame. He has skillfully un-gendered them and makes them equivalent to that of men by giving them their due status such as attaining skills, education, administration and warfare. Thus, Tripathi has done away with the stereotypical image of women by creating a world of women and bringing them out of gender bias. As a matter of fact, he accords new feminine patterns to his women characters. He in his book *Immortal India*, says about the central female character Sati in *Shiva Trilogy*, "Lady Sati decided to enter my imagination through a novel interpretation in my book *The Immortals of Meluha*. I visualized her as a strong woman with a mind of her own" (*Immortal India* 22). In an interview about his female characters, he advocates femininity by saying:

Women have always held an important place in ancient India and they were always very strong-headed and powerful. Our ancient culture used to teach respect for women. I am simply portraying the way women were in our ancient culture through my book. In fact, a lot of people are not aware that some hymns of the *Rigveda* (one of the India's oldest texts) were written by *Rishikas* (female sages). (Mukhopadhyay)

The word femininity may be defined as a set of attributes, behaviours and roles generally associated with women and girls. Although femininity is socially constructed yet researches indicate that some behaviours considered feminine are biologically influenced. Femininity is distinct from biological female sex, for both a male and a female can exhibit feminine traits. Traits traditionally cited as feminine include gentleness, empathy, humility, sensitivity, cooperativeness, expressiveness, modesty, affection and tenderness, though traits associated with femininity vary across societies and individuals, and are influenced by a variety of social and cultural factors. In contrast to this, the term 'masculinity' refers to the roles, behaviours and attributes that are considered appropriate for boys and men in a given society. Masculinity is constructed and defined socially, historically, and politically, rather than being biologically driven. General traits associated with masculinity include strength, courage, independence, assertiveness and leadership.

When one thinks of feminism, the names that come to one's mind readily are Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Adrienne Rich, and Elaine Showalter as they set about the task of theorising the needs of women in

a society where their inner feelings should be articulated loud and bold. Feminism as a critical theory emerged in the West to question the male supremacy and marginalization of women's position in the society and literature. According to Western critic Pam Morris:

...feminism is a perception based on two fundamental premises: (1) that gender difference is the foundation of a structural inequality between women and men, by which women suffer systematic social injustice, and (2) that the inequality between the sexes is not the result of biological necessity but is produced by the cultural construction of gender differences. This perception provides feminism with its double agenda: to understand the social and psychic mechanisms that construct and perpetuate gender inequality and then to change them. (Morris 63)

In the early stage of first-wave feminism, Mary Wollstonecraft's work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1759) advocated equal opportunities of education for both men and women. Similarly, John Stuart Mill, an English philosopher in his work *The Subjection of Women* (1869) revealed the marginalization of women in the society in legal, social, and economic spheres. Thus, the first phase was mainly concerned with fight for social justice by political activists. Later, in the beginning of 20th Century, Virginia Woolf in her book, *A Room of One's Own* (1929) recommended opportunity for women's career and economic independence. In the mid 20th Century, the dimension of gender was added to the feminist movement by Simone de Beauvoir, who in her epoch making work *The Second Sex* (1949) gave concepts of 'alterity' or 'otherness' of women compared to the man's self and gender as a social construct. According to Beauvoir, "woman is objectified and pushed to the lower rung of the social ladder by superior male consciousness and man's dominant position in society by controlling the economic, political and religious fronts" (143). Simone de Beauvoir aptly says, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a Woman...It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature... which is described as feminine" (Abrams 125). In America, Kate Millet's groundbreaking bestseller *Sexual Politics* (1969) was launched to show patriarchal power. She developed the notion that men have institutionalised power over women, and that this power is socially constructed as opposed to biological or innate. She challenged the notion of female subservience being somehow natural and puts as-

Sex is deep at the heart of our troubles..." wrote Millet, "and unless we eliminate the most pernicious of our system of oppression,

unless we go to the very centre of the sexual politics and its sick delirium of power and violence, all our efforts at liberation will only land us again in the same primordial stems (qtd. in Bindel).

Feminism in India appears to be portrayed as a movement dependent on Western feminist theory and is perceived as a facile copy of Western discourse. Because of this reason, Western feminists believe that Indian feminists are not true representative of Indian women. Jasbir Jain's work-*Indian Feminisms* is an attempt to reshape and rescue Indian feminism out of certain allegations of mimicry and foreignness. She traces the roots of feminist consciousness in literary, religious, and cultural texts believing that feminism in India cannot be interpreted in monolithic universal terms ignoring cultural differences. She feels that needs of women folks living in different countries are different as they are conditioned by their familial, social, racial, and individual consciousness. "Jasbir Jain's book *Indigenous Roots of Feminism: Culture, Subjectivity and Agency* also seeks to analyse the feminist movement in a historical perspective, free from the hangover of Western concerns. In six chapters, she undertakes this study of feminist discourse, textualising history and historicising texts" (qtd. in Nagarajan). She feels unhappy that women have not been 'visible' in our history and that they, have been treated as no more than 'objects' of men's desire. In her essay *The Feminist Perspective: The Indian Situation and its Literary Manifestations*, she divides Indian feminism into three phases: the first phase was for national freedom, the second phase of opposing social oppression for seeking justice and the third phase was an intellectual phase aiming at bringing change within the cultural norms (Jain 37).

In *Shiva Trilogy*, Sati is a major character and an epitome of women empowerment. She has been portrayed as a paragon of virtue. She is the daughter of Daksha, the emperor of Meluha and queen Veerini, mother of Ganesh and Kartik. Sati shows her bravery and courage on several occasions, among them one is at her young age of sixteen, when she protects a severely injured woman from a pack of wild dogs. Daksha rebukes her for this act as she has over-stepped in the boundary of works designated to males. Daksha cries out on her by saying, "Who asked you to be a hero?" (IM 269). Here, Daksha is behaving as a traditional patriarch, by not liking a woman behaving as a saviour. But Sati puts her argument by saying, "Was not it one of the Lord Rama's primary teaching that it is the duty of the strong to protect the weak" (IM270). Sati here appears to be outrightly rejecting the concept of women a weakling.

* The book "The Immortals of Meluha" is abbreviated as "IM"

Sati also protects Shiva from *Agnibana*, used by one Naga, proving herself as mother Goddess Durga. She also participates courageously in the war expedition of Mount Mandar, fighting shoulder to shoulder with her army. The height of her courage and bravery is reflected while crossing the water-way by swimming to investigate the mystery of eastern palace, leaving Kartik of six months with Krittika. Similarly, she proves herself as a great warrior during an attack on her caravan by hooded figure, who are known for their strength and courage. She also depicts her warrior trait in *Agnipariksha* i.e., a duel unto death with Taraq; although she wins the fight but forgives her opponent showing her broad-mindedness. Likewise, she encounters a duel with skilled Egyptian fighter Swuth even when she has lost her four fingers of left hand while fighting with three previous fighters. Swuth considers woman a sex far beneath man, only little better than animals and simply a stupid baby producing machine. But during fight with Sati, Swuth thinks of her that she is a talented lady and she will be her 'final kill'; as per their traditions, his rest of the life has to be spent by worshipping this last victim after giving up his profession. He gives her an honourable death and whispers, "Killing you shall be my life's honour. My lady" (OV478).

Throughout *Shiva Trilogy*, Sati emerges as a staunch follower of Lord Rama's principles. On one occasion she argues with her father not to include her in the Puja, as she was not allowed to attend puja being *Vikarma* (people who remain punished in this birth for the sins of their previous birth. Hence, they have to live this life with dignity and tolerate their present sufferings with grace) but Daksha says, "No puja of mine is complete unless I have seen your face. I do not care about the damned law" (IM 132). She did not relish her father's answer showing insult for the law. At another point, she argues with her father Daksha against giving Somras to Kartik by saying, "It is for all of Meluha, Kartik should not get any special treatment just because he is royal. This is against Rama's principles as well as against *Rajdharm*" (SN117).

One more remarkable incident also proves her faith in Lord Rama's principles as well as his righteousness. When Sati gets an invitation from Daksha for a peace conference, she sails in a merchant ship along with Nandi - a captain in Meluhan army and Ganesh. Nandi sees homing pigeons winging their way over head. Nandi advises to shoot one of them and know opponent's plans but Sati refuses saying, "It will give us only a small advantage but to behave without honour is against Lord Rama's way" (OV 450). Sati is also a staunch follower of *kshatriyadharm*, which she proves

when she goes on man-eater of Icchawar expedition, she speaks, "I am a *kshatriya*. It is my *dharma* to protect the weak. *Dharma* comes before anything else" (SN193). She is seen to take active part in discussions related to nation's interest viz; role of Daksha in conspiracy against Shiva, future role of general Parvateshwar in the forthcoming war from enemy's army side, about warfare strategy, discussion with temple priest Gopal about repercussions of proclamation made by Neelkanth. She reflects her compassionate nature and sensitiveness in her concern for martyrs for their ceremonies. Clarity of vision and sincerity towards duty are reflected in her actions and reactions.

Amish depicts Sati as a lady of esteem full of confidence. Once, she visits a temple and finds Shiva standing there and when she comes out of the temple, she still finds him staring at her. She walks up to him and asks in a firm but polite voice, "Excuse me, is there a problem?" (IM 50). Thus, it clearly reflects Sati's dashing and heroic nature in questioning a caste-unmarked, stranger immigrant. When Sati was coming out of the temple, she was attacked by accomplished warriors. Shiva recognizes the gravity of moment and comes in a fighting position. Sati draws her sword and both stand back to back in defensive partner position and succeeds in crushing the attack. At the end of this episode, Sati thanks Shiva for this help, "No it is not that, said a smiling Shiva. It is just that in our society, women do not fight. You do not wield your sword too badly for a woman'. 'Excuse me? She said, a slightly belligerent tone creeping into her voice, clearly upset about the 'for-a-woman' remark' "(IM 54).

Here, she is of the opinion that it is only patriarchal society that has restricted women within prescribed boundaries to sustain male supremacy. Beauvoir rightly says, "Man defines woman not in relation to herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as autonomous being". She also says, "This has always been a man's world, and none of the reasons have offered in explanation have seemed adequate" (qtd. in Kumari & Kumar 285). *Shiva Trilogy's* male protagonist also has great reverence for feminine characters. Shiva's deep regard for women is reflected when Ganesh touches his father's feet to seek blessings before proceeding to attack Ayodhya. At this moment, Shiva says, "My blessings are not as potent as those that emerge from your mother's heart. But I know that you will make me proud" (OV216). Through this incident, Shiva's faith in mother-*shakti* Durga (mother of divine power) is clearly observed. Shiva also acknowl-

** The book "The Oath of Vayuputras" is abbreviated as "OV"

*** The book "The Secret of the Nagas" is abbreviated as "SN"

edges that Sati is auspicious to him, when he utters, "I know that for as long as you are with me, you will always keep me centered on the right path" (OV 209).

Kali is another significant female character in *Shiva Trilogy*. Kali is the twin sister of Sati and queen of the Nagas. She is Daksha's abandoned daughter who has been depicted as a lady full of hatred against *Brahmins* and persons engaged in manufacturing Somras- an anti-ageing agent, believing that pollution due to Somras production has resulted in deformity; generating Nagas. She proves herself an intelligent ruler and administrator as she attends Rajya Sabha, takes timely decisions and makes fruitful strategies. She is highly skilled in developing strategic alliance during war. Maharishi Bhrigu speaks about her temper, "Kali would kill me if she had half a chance. Her temper is even more volatile than Lord Rudra's legendary anger" (OV173).

Another notable woman character in *Shiva Trilogy* is doctor Ayurvati. She is the best doctor of the land of Meluha who has expertise in medicines using juice of neem leaves, medicine from sanjeevani tree, applying antidote for poison and other life saving medicines, thus acting as a grand physician. Simultaneously, she is acting as a remarkable surgeon operating Sati, Paravateshwar, Ganesh and even bandit Parshurama on various occasions. She is also well-versed in plastic surgery and operates upon Sati to subside battle scars on her face. She is quite humble, caring and sincere. She does not hesitate to treat even enemy soldiers without any grudge. Her stature of a very prominent doctor is reflected when caravan of Shiva reaches Srinagar and they are kept in immigration camp for quarantine. Nandi is genuinely startled at seeing doctor Ayurvati. With a reverential Namaste, he says, "Lady Ayurvati! I did not expect a doctor of your stature here. He further adds, who does not know you, the greatest doctor in the land" (IM15).

Kanakhala is another prominent woman character in *Shiva Trilogy*, who is the Meluhan Prime Minister and takes care of administrative and revenue matters. She depicts her intelligence, patience, presence of mind, unquestioning loyalty to the king and country and trustworthiness several times. After attack on Mount Mandar, when war council sits to take decision for war with Swadweep, she puts her Brahmin voice of reason to the battle cry of *kshatriyas* by suggesting an alternative of sending emissary to emperor Dilipa, to surrender the terrorists who perpetrated the attack on Mount Mandar, simply to avoid death of innocent civilians. During a situation where her duties stood in direct conflict with her *dharm*a, she

chose *dharma* as she believes in "*Dharma matihudgritah*, means *dharma* is that which is well judged by your mind; think deeply about *dharma* and your mind will tell you what is right" (OV 435). She shows faith in "*Dharmarakshatirakshitaha* means *dharma* protects those who protect it" (OV 435). She breaks her vow realizing that it is in consonance with *dharma* and even chooses to die for *dharma*.

Veerini in *Shiva Trilogy*, constantly struggles performing the role of the queen of Meluha, wife of Daksha and mother of Sati. She lives with Daksha in his all decisions from the beginning of her married life till end but at one crucial point she resolves to leave Daksha alone, realizing her mistake for having supported her husband in all wrong deeds. She expresses her deep regret to Kali as, "It is not a wife's duty to support her husband in his misdeeds. In fact, a good wife corrects her husband when he is wrong even if she has to ram it down its throat" (OV 514). Thus, the character of Veerini leaves a well-digested inference for healthy relation of husband and wife. Reaction of Veerini here can be seen in consonance with Jasbir Jain's conviction is that "feminism is more than a voice of protest or questioning. It is moral self-reflection, a conquering of inner fears and a realisation of self worth... It does not abandon values or relationships, but goes on to create newness" (qtd. in Shrivastava). Anandmayi, the Ayodhya princess, daughter of emperor Dilipa has initially been depicted as enticing, appealing, seductive, ready-wit, frank, straight-forward and best example of Chandravanshi way of life.

Later, she falls in love with Meluhan general Parvateshwar and emerges as a sincere, honest, devoted wife. Her deep love for her husband is reflected in her saying, "I do not care the entire world turns against him. I do not even care if the Neelkanth turns against him. I will stand by my husband. He is a good man.... a good man!" (OV199). Her character is a noteworthy message for younger generations, about love and adjustment in relations. Tara, the talented pupil of Maharishi Bhrigu is depicted handling projects at Mount Mandar and later at Pariha. She also helps Shiva to seek cooperation of Vayuputras in getting *Pashupatiastra* for destroying the greatest Evil of that time i.e., Somras. She argues with Maharishi Brahaspati on Shiva's use of *Pashupatiastra* by saying, "You expect him to fight in accordance with the laws when his enemies have not. They have taken everything from him, his life, his soul, his entire reason for existence. He deserves his vengeance" (OV505). Kritika, a close friend and attendant to Sati, wife of Veerbhadra, a close friend of Shiva has been portrayed as a symbol of true love and compassion. She takes care of Kartik as his mother Sati does and is so close to Sati that the latter thinks, "Kritika is almost like a second

mother to Kartik. My son is so lucky" (IM153). Here, it is an example of extreme trust and intimate relation.

The character of Sita is an inquiry into the feminine principle of statesmanship. Tripathi has portrayed Sita as a woman of wisdom rather than a woman of beauty, who fields armies single handedly, is a champion archer, an efficient princess, and an able administrator. He has depicted her as a warrior and a strong woman. Tripathi's Sita is completely different from that of Valmiki's Ramayana; she is fearless, independent, extraordinary warrior, philosopher and smart leader. She is mentally as well as physically strong. Once, Sita visits Mithila at the age of eight, violating the advice of her mother and comes across a gang of naughty boys demanding her golden ring; Sita gives it to them but still they tease her. She tackles them very boldly by shattering them courageously; thus proving her maverick identity right from her childhood. She depicts her character as breaking the age-old shackles of gender stereotype in male-dominated society.

On one occasion, Guru Vishwamitra visits Shevetaketu's *gurukul*, he finds Sita practising on a spear; he gets highly impressed. Revered sage Vishwamitra, chooses Sita as the next Vishnu by observing her intellect, bravery and excellence in warfare tactics. Vishwamitra is a Malayputra. Malayputras are a tribe left behind by the previous Mahadev; their duty being to guide the next Mahadev. Selection of Sita as Vishnu hints of the patterns of feminine characterization in a patriarchal society, showing complete faith in mother-*shakti*. After being chosen as Vishnu, Sita gets rigorous training needed for a potent ruler. She also visits across Sapt-Sindhu to gain insight as future ruler. Her vision is broadened through knowledge on various subjects of science, astronomy, medicine and administration. Here, Tripathi's central feminine character Sita is very well in consonance with present day women who keep pace with their counterparts in every walk of life.

Rama Chandra Series also represents male characters in distinct modes regarding their views on women. Once, Rama and Bharat were busy in informal talk; Bharat enquires from Rama about his choice for his life partner. Rama replies, "I want a woman, not a girl. I do not want an immature girl. Love is secondary. It is not important. I want someone whom I can respect. A relationship is not just for fun, it is also about trust and the knowledge that you can depend on your partner. Relationships based on passion and excitement do not last" (SI 78). This statement of Rama reflects his reverential thinking about female characters. After *Swayamvar*,

when annoyed Raavan attacks Mithila; on the instructions of guru Vishwamitra, Rama uses *Asurastra*. Since the use of *Asurastra* was banned, Rama is shattered. At this crucial junction Sita consoles Rama, "Sita continued to hold Rama in a tight embrace. I am with you, Rama. We will handle this together" (SWM 252). This portrayal depicts the mental maturity of Sita. Rama's deep concern for women empowerment is reflected in his conversation with Sita at Mithila before *Swayamvar*. According to Rama, "Marriage has higher purpose; it can be more than just a political alliance" (SI244). He further adds, "There is nothing worse than being married to the wrong person. You should only get married if you find someone you admire, who will help you understand and fulfil your life's purpose. And you, in turn, can help her fulfil her life's purpose" (SI 245). Rama's concern for women's esteem is portrayed in his answer regarding polygamy, "I won't. You insult your wife by taking another" (SI 245). The conversation between Sita and Rama breaks the male inflated ego, "The Malayaputras believe I am the Vishnu'. 'I have known you for years. Heard so many of your ideas. You will make a great Vishnu. I will be proud to follow you'" (SWM331).

Tripathi also focuses on Sunaina; wife of King Janak and mother of Sita who shoulders the burden of both administration and foreign policy. She is shown having pragmatism and fighting spirit, as essential qualities required in a ruler. When Sita was in Shvetketu's Gurukul, Sunaina comes to meet her; Sunaina is seriously ill and Sita notices that her mother's life is slowly slipping away. Meanwhile in jungle, a female elephant-the matriarch of a large elephant herd dies. Elephants follow matriarchy. Two calves stay near the dead body; one is a tiny male calf and another is his older sister. The baby elephant-male calf displays his incessant grief with a gut wrenching cry and impatience but his sister-female calf is calm and quiet like other members of the herd. Soon, an adult female elephant-the new matriarch appears from the herd, pays due respect by touching her trunk to the forehead of the dead body and the whole herd follows her. Male calf acts in the same way and keeps looking back again and again but his sister does not even for once. Here, Tripathi's depiction of femininity through matriarchy representing equanimity of mind at extended level is marvellous.

Vedvati in *Ram Chandra Series* is another notable character. She is actually a Kanyakumari, who are worshipped as goddess before they attain puberty. For the first time in his life, Raavan turns out to be completely hon-

**** The book "Sita- Warrior of Mithila" is abbreviated as "SWM"

***** The book "Scion of Ikshvaku" is abbreviated as "SI"

est. Raavan feels guilty that he has a monster inside him but Vedvati encourages him to adhere to *Swadharma* by proving a philosophy that every great man has a monster inside him and the need is to control the monster rather than to be controlled by it, in order to become a great man. She advises Raavan to rise to the level of a Hero. She makes him realize his capability of improving the lives of millions of people. Vedvati's lecture fills Raavan with positive energy. She inspires him to become a true devotee of Mahadev by sacrificing his ego. Kumbhakarna finds Raavan into an entirely a transformed person- full of hope and enthusiasm. Motivated Raavan also plans to use his immense wealth to help Sapt-Sindhu. He also wants to build a large hospital near Vaidyanath temple for free of cost treatment of poor people across the Sapt Sindhu. Raavan kneels in front of Vedvati in reverence; for the first time in his life he seeks blessings of another living human being. This clearly reflects the strong character of a woman; transforming a monster into an angel.

Thus, in Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy and Ram Chandra Series*, re-visiting and re-telling of myths have been done from a feminist perspective, giving due importance to women characters. He depicts Meluha as almost a perfect society. His depiction of women brings out varied feminine patterns based on matrilineal system in a patriarchal society. He has tried to sketch a picture of woman who has been integral in performing her duties to the best for contributing towards the society a lot. Thus, Tripathi has broken the concept of "weaker Vassal" usually affixed to women by making them stronger. They stand for their rights and are vocal about them taking up challenges successfully which are traditionally attributed to be resolved by men. These portrayals do justice both to the image of a *Sanatan*-women and the evolving image of women in India. They not only address the expectations of the audience but also serve desirable social (towards gender equality) ends. Tripathi's bewitching depiction of feminine patterns bids goodbye to the stereotyped submissive image of women denying their patriarchal subjugation.

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