



Email: [editorijless@gmail.com](mailto:editorijless@gmail.com)

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## EXISTENTIAL QUESTS IN *THE IMMORTALS OF MELUHA*

RITIKA PAUL

Research Scholar, Department of English, Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla, Himachal Pradesh, India



RITIKA PAUL

### ABSTRACT

*The Immortals of Meluha* recasts myth to raise some basic existential issues that have eternally troubled human beings. The question of choice and responsibility, of choice and one's own sense of being, repeatedly surface in the narrative. Doubt about whether one made the right choice or not can often lead to existential anguish and Shiva too experiences this angst. The eternal question troubling mankind – what is good and what is evil – is prominently addressed in the novel. A related question of one's identity – as one is or sees one self and as others see her or him – and the resultant crisis also figures in the novel. Through Shiva's progress from moments of anguish to moments of self-realization Amish Tripathi depicts a whole range of existential issues crucial for mankind; and this also partly explains the immense popularity of the novel.

**Keywords:** Good, Evil, Shiva

### Introduction

Amish Tripathi is a finance professional educated from Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta. He is passionate about history, mythology and philosophy. He is an avid reader of history and his inspirations for the story ranged from writers like Graham Hancock and Gregory Possehl to the Amar Chitra Katha series of Indian comics. *The Immortals of Meluha*, the first novel in *Shiva Trilogy* by Amish Tripathi, is also heavily embedded in Indian mythology. The *Shiva Trilogy* comprises three parts: *The Immortals of Meluha*, *The Secrets of the Nagas* and *The Oath of Vayuputras*. *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku* and *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* are of the Ram Chandra Series comprises of five books.

According to Sartre, a man is born into a kind of void or mud and he remains in the mud until he tries to come out of his situation. Shiva's character in the novel is one such example of Sartre's vision. He acknowledges his situation and then by the power of his choice and will chooses his existence. The real existential crisis comes in Shiva's life when Brahaspati is killed though he had been making conscious choices earlier also. Shiva finds himself in an irresolvable situation in the novel. When he loses his friend Brahaspati he actively joins the Meluhan army in destroying the Swadweepan land. However, the truth revealed by Anandmayi that their empire too believes in the legend of Neelkanth makes him regret his action. He is in a dilemma and dissatisfied with his act. He goes to Ramjanmabhoomi temple to find solace.

Sartre's existential formula that 'man chooses himself' is well illustrated in Shiva's character. Shiva feels disappointed after realizing that the war which he waged against the Swadweepans was futile. He is full of remorse for his action for killing thousands of men. He did not even try to know the truth and waged the war to avenge Brahaspati's death and death of several other innocents who were killed in the terrorist attacks in Meluha. He was misled by the Meluhans who made Shiva believe that the Chandravanshis are evil. However, he comes to know the truth after the war when

half of the Swadweep is destroyed in the battle. Shiva is present when after the war Daksha, Emperor of Meluha proposes to Dilipa, Emperor of Swadweep to govern them and Dilipa rejects his proposal. He tells him that the Neelkanth is with Meluha and he will destroy the Chandravanshis. Daksha says, "The Neelkanth has sworn to destroy the evil Chandravanshi way of life. You HAVE to listen" (358). Dilipa looks at Shiva, the Neelkanth, and goes on agreeing with Daksha. Shiva is lost in his thought after hearing this conversation.

Shiva wasn't paying attention. His troubled heart desperately searched for answers. How could a struggle that appeared so righteous, just a few hours back, now suddenly appear so wrong? (359)

Anandmayi, the Swadweep Princess, visits Shiva and his platoon after the war. She talks to Shiva and finds that he is inquisitive to know about her land and her people. She tells him, "Whoever you are, you will all be finished when our Lord comes. When he descends to Swadweep and destroys the evil of your kind"(367). Shiva was stunned after hearing these words. "An unfathomable foreboding sunk deep into Shiva's heart. He was profoundly afraid of his next question. But he knew that he had to ask it. 'How will you know that he is your Lord?'" (367). He gets the same answer which the Meluhans too believe in; the legend of the Neelkanth. She replies, "He will not be from the Sapt-Sindhu. Neither a Suryavanshi nor a Chandravanshi. But when he comes, he will come on our side. And his throat will turn blue when he drinks the Somras" (367-68).

Daksha too had told Shiva, that the Neelkanth is supposed to complete Lord Ram's unfinished task and destroy the Chandravanshis.

When the problems become insurmountable for ordinary men, the Neelkanth will appear. And that he will destroy the evil Chandravanshis and restore the forces of good... You must rally the Swadweepans to the side of good. (115)

Brahaspati too had told Shiva that "The legend says two things. First, the Neelkanth will *not* be from the Sapt-Sindhu. And second, the Neelkanth will be the "destroyer of evil"" (138).

Shiva is an outsider and slowly learns about the ways and traditions of Meluha and Swadweep. He believes people easily and does not question anything. His pious soul sees every one alike. His faith in people was absolute which misled him. He, in terms of Sartre, was in mud and led a passive existence when he was in Tibet. He comes to Meluha still in mud; and tries to understand the ways of Meluha. Shiva acts recklessly and lacks purpose in life. He decides to wage war against the Chandravanshis and defeats them. After the war, when Shiva meets Anandmayi, the Swadweep Princess, he recognizes the absurdity of his acts and lack of purpose. This paves way for his anguish in the novel.

Then, he understands his situation and exercises his power of choice and judgement to lead his life. He learns how to distinguish and make choices in life. He goes to Ramjanmabhoomi temple where the Pandit tells Shiva, "The Neelkanth is not the kind of person on whom responsibility can be thrust against his will. You *chose* this. You were *born* for it" (391). Shiva was perplexed as he could not understand what the Pandit was saying. His soul was tormented as he thought he has blood of thousands of innocents on his hands. The Pandit further says that there is a divine plan in his act. Everything happens for a reason. "The destruction of evil? Wouldn't you consider that a very important reason?" (391) "But I did not destroy evil!" yelled Shiva. "These people [Chandravanshis] aren't evil. They're just different. Being different isn't evil" (391). The Pandit was happy as Shiva realized the truth very quickly as compared to the previous Mahadev who nearly had destroyed everything before he realized the truth. Shiva said, "But he [Lord Rudra] did destroy evil. He destroyed the Asuras" (391).

"And, who said the Asuras were evil?" (391) asked the Pandit.

"I read it..." Shiva stopped mid-sentence. He finally understood. The Pandit tells Shiva that the Suryavanshis and the Chandravanshis see each other like the Devas and the Asuras see each other. "So if you are going to read a book written by the Devas, what do you think the Asuras are

going to be portrayed as?" (392) The Devas and the Asuras like the Chandravanshis and the Suryavanshis represent two balancing life forces—the masculine and the feminine. Both these dualities are important to sustain the universe. The one principle may differ from the other just like the Suryavanshis believe in Satya, Dharam, Maan (Truth, Duty, Honour) and the Chandravanshis believe in Shringar, Saundarya, Swatantrata (Passion, Beauty, Freedom). The Pandit says,

The difference between two dissimilar ways of life gets portrayed as a fight between good and evil...Why do you think the Neelkanth had to be an outsider? (392)

Shiva immediately understands what the Pandit is saying. The Neelkanth will not be biased towards anyone—the Suryavanshis, the Chandravanshis or the Nagas. But Shiva asserts that he was not free of biases. He was convinced that the Chandravanshis were evil. "Maybe what Anandmayi says is right. Maybe I am naïve, easily misled" (393). However, the Pandit consoles him and says that he cannot know everything. He has to enter the equation from one side or the other. "And whichever side you entered from, you would obviously be coloured by their ways, while viewing the other side as evil" (393). The Pandit further tells Shiva that Lord Rudra did not recognize it till it was too late. He nearly has destroyed the Asuras before he realized the simple fact that they were just *different, not evil*. Shiva is not the first Mahadev who is misled nor he will be the last but this guilt of Lord Rudra did not reduce the shame Shiva was feeling. The Pandit advises Shiva to do his duty, to stay to his karma in spite of the pain and guilt.

But what kind of a Mahadev am I? Why am I required? How am I to destroy evil if I don't know what evil is? said Shiva.

Who has said that your job is to destroy evil? said the Pandit. (393-94)

Shiva was perplexed after hearing this. The Pandit tells that his job is not to destroy evil but to answer the most crucial question, "What is evil?" (394) The Pandit tells that many wars have been fought but only the Mahadev can recognize evil and then lead men against it. "But how do I recognize evil?" (394) asks Shiva. The Pandit explains that the evil has a relationship with Shiva. It will come to him. It will appear before him. "It will come to you. All you have to do is to recognize it when it appears. Don't be hasty in trying to recognize evil" (394-95).

The existentialist thought to question the existence of God by not believing in the tradition of worshipping the idol is seen in the novel. Shiva enters the Temple of Brahma,

As he entered the main temple he found himself staring at the designs and sculptures, mesmerized by the sheer magnificence of the architecture. (45)

When the Pandit questions Shiva, "you don't believe in these gods, do you?" Shiva is perplexed as to how the Pandit knows about this. The Pandit answers,

Everyone who enters this place of worship has eyes only for the idol of Lord Brahma. Almost nobody notices the brilliance of the architects who built this lovely temple. You, however, have eyes only for the work of the architects. You have not yet cast even a glance upon the idol. (45)

Shiva feels embarrassed and answers, "I don't believe in symbolic gods. I believe that god exists all around us" (46). Beauty of nature captures Shiva's heart. He appreciates the flowing river, the music of water, trees, flowers, landscapes, etc. and believes God speaks to us through nature all the time.

Good and evil are two sides of a same coin. Each one of us has the responsibility to understand these two aspects in human life. Shiva is one such being who is so obsessed with the idea of good and evil that even in dreams he is having good and evil on his mind. Shiva meets the Pandit in a dream. The Pandit engages Shiva in a riddle. He asks him to tell the colour of the leaf he sees from the temple. Shiva answers that it is green.

Is it? the Pandit asked.

Isn't it? answered Shiva. (295)

Shiva is confused but the Pandit asks him to explain what the scientists at the Mount Mandar had told him. Then Shiva explains that light falls on an object and when it reflects back from the object to

our eyes, we see the object. The Pandit further asks him about the normal white sunlight. Shiva explains that white light is made up of seven different colours. The rainbow is seven colours because it is formed when raindrops disperse sunlight. Then, the Pandit asks to put these two theories of light together to answer his question, "Why does that leaf appear green to you?" (295) Shiva starts working on the problem and says that white sunlight falls on the leaf and the leaf's physical properties absorb the colours violet, indigo, blue, yellow, orange and red. It does not absorb the colour green which is reflected. Therefore, the leaf is green. The Pandit asks Shiva to tell the colour of that leaf from the perspective of the leaf itself. "What colour it absorbs and what it rejects. Is its colour green? Or is it every single colour in the world, *except* green?" (295) Shiva is surprised by the simplicity of the Pandit's argument. Then, the Pandit explains that there are different realities. "There are many realities. There are many versions of what may appear obvious," continued the Pandit. "Whatever appears as the unshakeable truth, its exact opposite may also be true in another context. After all, one's reality is but perception, viewed through various prisms of context" (295-96).

Shiva sees the leaf again and tries to see another reality. He finds that the colour of the leaf slowly dissolves and he could see the outline of two colours – black and white. "It almost seemed as if the leaf was nothing but a carrier, which the black and white curved lines used as a temporary stop on their eternal journey" (296). Shiva finds that all the surrounding leaves, trees, squirrels and the temple have been transformed into the black and white outlines. The black and white curved lines stream in and out of all. He sees that even the Pandit has been transformed into an outline. Shiva finds himself too transformed into an outline completely transparent from inside. He examines the lines and could see that these lines are tiny waves of jet black colour. "There wasn't even a hint of the white waves close to Shiva's outlined body" (297). The Pandit explains that the white waves are positive energy and the black waves are negative energy. "They are both important. Their balance crucial. It will be cataclysmic if they fall out of sync" (297). Shiva is puzzled and asks the Pandit as to why there is no positive energy around him and no negative energy around the Pandit. The Pandit explains that they both balance each other:

The Vishnu's role is to transmit positive energy...And the Mahadev's role is to absorb the negative. Search for it. Search for negative energy and you will fulfil your destiny as a Mahadev. (297) To this Shiva replies that he is not a Mahadev because his deeds till now do not deserve the Mahadev title. The Pandit explains that Shiva's perception needs to be altered. One should believe in oneself. "The title isn't at all the result of one's deeds. Deeds, however, noble will follow the rightful belief in you that you are the Mahadev. It matters little what others think. Believe you are the Mahadev, and you will become one" (298). Shiva frowns. The Pandit repeats 'believe'.

### **Conclusion**

By humanizing the character of divinity in the novel, by making Shiva go through various worldly ordeals, relationships and action Amish Tripathi explores several existential dilemmas which confront mankind in all ages, and which have been extensively discussed by philosophers particularly in the twentieth century. As Shiva's experiences reveal it is 'choice' that defines the 'self', and belief in one's own self is important for one's own sense of being. Deception may be common in human world but one should make a careful, informed choice and then must take responsibility for one's choice.

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