

Cultural Imperialism in *The Shiva Trilogy* by Amish Tripathi: A Post-Colonial Perspective

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Abstract

This article theoretically explores the phenomenon of cultural and political domination of Meluha over smaller regions of the Sapt Sindhu in Amish's well-known Shiva Trilogy. The postcolonial aspects, ideas, and the anti-colonial struggle against the oppressor are sprinkled throughout the text. The theme of cultural imperialism has been dealt with subtly and meaningfully by authors of mythological retellings like the Shiva Trilogy. Amish focuses on this phenomenon in Meluhan society, which has an edge over the other parts of the Sapt Sindhu, where King Daksha's colonial aspirations make him sacrifice his own Naga child and grandchild to keep his hold on power. Shiva's transformation from a tribal leader into a divine savior is misused to influence and subjugate lesser provinces like Branga and Swadeep. King Daksha's ambitions led him to violate natural resources to enjoy longevity and youth through the consumption of Somras. The severe damage to the people and the environment caused by his greed for power brings the annihilation of his kingdom itself. The article critically contextualises the current trend of domination of the powerful countries over the poor ones by imperial designs of King Daksha and the destructive consequences through the lens of postcolonial theory.

Keywords: Imperialism, Culture, Hegemony, Cultural Domination

Submitted: 28.10.2025

Accepted: 24.12.2025

Published 30.12.2025

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Introduction

The current study deals with the concept of culture that includes tradition, knowledge, art, morals, beliefs, law, custom, and habits acquired by people of a particular society. Imperialism may refer to the making of unequal relationships between civilizations where more powerful civilizations get an edge over the other civilizations. The superiority of culture is generally imposed by powerful nations over weaker nations. This age-old phenomenon can be traced in many domains and at any level, including the political system, economic changes, or cultural patterns. Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary describes the word 'Imperialism' as "the policy, practice, or advocacy of extending the power and domination of a nation, especially by direct territorial acquisitions or by gaining indirect control over the political or economic life of other areas". For instance, American imperialism is visible everywhere across the globe in language, culture, business, and media. Its dominant culture permeates various aspects of the personal, social, economic, and political spheres. This interpretation can be applied to the cultural conflict in the Sapt Sindhu, where Meluha dominates all other cultures by proving its worth through military and civil accomplishments. The colonial mindset is reflected in the workings of powerful nations that overpower less developed nations. Promoting one's culture over an inferior community leads to the colonization of that particular community. Sometimes, it can be voluntary on the part of the inferior community, like Western influence on the third-world developing countries.

However, in *The Shiva Trilogy*, this kind of promotion is planned for smaller regions. Postcolonial theory is relevant and an easy way to understand the situation in Meluha, where the Meluhans look down upon the Swadeepans, Brangas, and Nagas of Panchavati. The yoke of imperialism as a disruptive force has been a compelling archetype for understanding cultural oppression throughout human history and even in the contemporary world. Greek, Roman, British, and, more recently, American culture has invaded our world with its coercive nature, assuming subtler forms. This form of dominance or oppression by the more powerful culture over a less powerful one is pervasive even in seemingly fictional works of literature. In the *Shiva Trilogy*, King Daksha's arrogance for the Suryavanshi way of life leads to his disdain for Chandravanshi principles. Mandal (2016) shares similar ideas: "Daksha becomes a power-hungry ruler whose sole satisfaction lies in enlarging the reign and maintaining the image before his subjects even at the expense of his family" (51). With the help of Shiva's leadership, he plans to win over Swadeep and sends General Parwateshwar to teach them the Suryavanshi way of life. The paper details the negative impact of cultural imperialism by citing an example of the Meluhan kingdom and critiquing the Suryavanshi Kingdom's domination over the surrounding smaller regions whose cultures and principles differ from theirs. It indirectly mirrors contemporary society by trying to show how powerful nations overpower the weaker nations through their culture, media and policies. The Suryavanshi Kingdom is considered a near-perfect empire by the Meluhan Capt. Nandi, who invites the tribe of Shiva to shift to Meluha for a better and safer life. He says: "Come to our land. It lies beyond the great mountains. Others call it Meluha. I call it heaven. Our government has an offer for immigrants. You will be given fertile land and resources for farming" (*The Immortals of Meluha* 2).

The colonial mindset of King Daksha triggers his fear that his kingdom is under threat from the enemy Chandravanshis, who have changed the course of the river Saraswati. The water of this sacred river is used to prepare the nectarine drink Somras, which ensures longevity and youth. In the concerned text, many instances of negativity born out of forced cultural imposition are seen in the fights between Anandmayi, the Chandravanshi princess, and Meluhan general Parvateshwar. They keep arguing about the superiority of their own cultures. Anandmayi, the princess of Swadeep, tells Shiva: "The legend is not false, and we are obviously not evil. It is just that you are naïve. You have been misled by evil Suryavanshis" (*The Immortals of Meluha* 380).

The pride in the rule of law prevailing in Meluha is deeply ingrained in the psyche of its citizens, who abhor Chandravanshi's way of life. Nandi's pride in the greatness of the Suryavanshis is expressed in the following lines: "We deal honourably even with those who are dishonourable, like the Sun, we never take from anyone but always give to others" (*The Immortals of Meluha* 40).

Literature Review

The post-colonial struggle for self-identity and freedom of choice does not find favor with the colonizers. While analysing post-colonialism, Pramod K Nayar (2010) argues that, "Postcolonial theory is a method of interpreting, reading and critiquing the cultural practices of colonialism, where it proposes that the exercise of colonial power is also the exercise of racially determined powers of representation" (213). For him, "Hegemony is the domination of particular sections of society by the powerful classes not necessarily through threats of violence or the law but by winning their consent to be governed and dominated. Hegemony, like ideology, works less through coercion than through consent" (182). The cultural differences and the spread of globalization have encouraged hybridity, which keeps things balanced. Hybridity in postcolonial studies has been influenced by the work of political theorists such as Will Kymlicka (1995) posits multicultural citizenship in a globalized world that is one step ahead of hybridity. The term 'Imperialism' generally refers to the relations of victory, dominance, and hegemony between civilizations/societies, and communities and also relates primarily to the cultural manifestations of such relations. Influenced by the theories and writings of Karl Marx, Italian philosopher and critic Antonio Gramsci suggested the idea of cultural hegemony to describe the power of one group over another. This idea is similar to Marx's idea of class struggle, where the proletariat is dominated by the capitalists. Cultural imperialism has potential negative effects as well, which can be dangerous in the long term. Cultural hegemony generally makes the power of the dominant culture influence and even overtake local cultures, so cultural imperialism may take various forms. In the current era, the role of the US as a cultural superpower over the globe is influencing the economic and cultural aspects. The local cultures of colonized countries have willingly adopted the American culture and economic models to keep a balanced setup for business and other ventures. John Tomlinson (1991), in his book *Cultural*

Imperialism, argues that exported American culture is not necessarily imperialist because it does not push a cultural agenda and seeks to make money from whatever cultural elements it can, throughout the world. India's Bollywood film industry can be cited as an example of this. Local cultures respond to the influence of foreign cultures for their own purpose and benefits. Along these lines influence of Chandravanshi culture on Suryavanshis can be seen in the parents who decide to migrate to Kashi for the pleasure of having their biological children around them. They sacrifice the orderliness of Meluha and tolerate the chaos of Chandravanshi life for the sake of watching their children grow. Religious imperialism of certain religions is prevalent in the contemporary world, but the willingness for conversion is bought with money or incentives of some other kind. Meluhans also offer a safe and peaceful life to the other provinces to win them over. Boruah Uttam (2018), in his paper 'Shiva, the Colonial Agent', declares that, "*The Secret of the Nagas* presents a picture of constant occupation of land/ provinces by the Meluhans with the help of Shiva" (149). Edward Said (1993) interprets that, "Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale, but its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively white, black, Western, or Oriental" (408).

In the *Shiva Trilogy*, the best-selling international Indian author Amish has contemporized mythology to discuss burning issues of our time. Kumar (2017) feels that "The basic reason for this eternal and unquenchable interest of the writers in culture is to figure out the meaning of their present in relation to their ancient past. This common practice of reinterpreting cultural traits involves the reconstruction of mythical stories and characters in accordance with the context" (397). The insecurity of one party propels the other one to the line of erasure, and the basic human ambition is to win over others. This basic instinct is reflected in the *Shiva Trilogy* through the cultural clash between Meluha and other states of the Sapt Sindhu region, which causes disputes among them. Mukherjee (2018) observes that "Meluhan ideology has the strategic insight to keep them as their other. If they begin to resist the dominant discourse, it might lead to instability".

Despite being subjugated and ostracised, Vikarmas are given few rights for self-defence, like Agnipariksha fight and the right to challenge a rival to a duel. But Shiva finds Meluhan orthodoxy dangerous for its existence: "Many such discontented people can become a threat to society as a whole . . . If you make a person believe that his misfortune in this birth is due to his sins in his previous birth, he will resign himself to his fate and not vent out fury on society at large" (*The Immortals of Meluha* 211).

After the arrival of Neelkanth, Daksha tries to get hold of the weaker provinces of the Sapt Sindhu. Paul Sandip (2020) relates this by commenting that 'The rise of ethnonationalism in Meluha is a cultural and social impact of Somras. Shiva's struggle against the Somras is, therefore, multidimensional as it involves opposition to the social, cultural, and political forces generated by Somras (3). For Swadeepans, the Meluhans and their ways are evil, and vice versa. Capt. Nandi explains to Shiva

that: “The Chandravanshis are corrupt and disgusting people. No morals, no ethics. They are the source of all our problems” (*The Immortals of Meluha* 102).

Unlike the postmodern world, where common religious and ethical laws don't exist, in Meluha, there are universal ethical laws. Absolute values and truths exist, and changes are not acceptable. Daksha wants to impose these on the other states of the Sapt Sindhu by overpowering them, but his weakness is recognized by Lord Bhrigu, who tells him to destroy Shiva as well. The political interventions of Meluha in other regions of the Sapt Sindhu are resisted by the people of Swadeep, Brangas, and Kashi. Meluhans hate not only Swadeepans but also anyone who goes against their belief system and social norms. Mandal (2016) argues that, “Daksha was well aware of his power position and knew how to exploit it. The same attitude reflects as he wishes to attack Swadeep and make it a part of Meluha. Swadeepans were not in dire necessity of being governed by the Meluhan system. The Meluhan emperor shows the attitude of the colonizer that makes him feel the urge to unite the free nations under one flag and rule over the entire dynasty” (56).

Both Meluhans and Swadeepans believe that their prophesied Neelkanth would defeat evil. Daksha accepts Shiva as Neelkanth, the saviour, because: “The Neelkanth has chosen my reign to make his appearance. He will transform all of India in line with the ideals of Meluha- a land of truth, duty, and honour. His leadership can help us end the Chandravanshi crises once and for all...from the terrorist attacks to the shortage of Somras to the killing of Saraswati” (*The Immortals of Meluha* 73).

But when Shiva discovers Somras as evil and puts a proclamation in different cities of Sapt Sindhu ordering them to stop the use of Somras, Daksha is furious. His ungratefulness and disrespect for Shiva are astounding: “Never tried to become emperor? What nonsense! I am the emperor. Not just of Meluha, but of India. You think some barbarian with a blue throat can defeat me?” (*The Oath of the Vayuputras* 82). He further claims: “I made him, and I will finish him” (*The Oath of the Vayuputras* 83).

Methodology

The present study has employed an eclectic methodology, which consists of a close reading of the text. It falls under the umbrella of cultural studies, and since it is a qualitative study, data were not collected to analyze. The text is simultaneously placed within the socio-cultural and socio-historical contexts to understand the author's perspective. Along with a textual analysis of the main theme, parallels are drawn from the postcolonial theory.

The *Shiva Trilogy*

The postcolonial ideological motif behind the loyalty of the Suryavanshi people to the Meluha is laudable. They follow the path shown by Lord Rama without questioning its relevance in their time. King Daksha's fervent search for the Neelkanth leads him to deceit, as the Guna tribe, led by Shiva, is administered the

Somras without any previous information. They all fall sick except Shiva, whose neck turns blue after the consumption of the Somras. Shiva complains:

... You should have told us the complete truth at Mt. Kailash. Then you should have let us make an informed choice rather than you making a choice for us. We probably would still have come to Meluha anyway, but then it would have been our choice ... “Please forgive us the deception, my Lord,” said Daksha, with guilty regret. (*The Immortals of Meluha* 121)

King Daksha never gives a second thought to the privacy and rights of the tribes who join Meluha. All decisions for their welfare are taken by him, as his superiority complex considers them uncouth immigrants who should be grateful to the Meluhan kingdom for inviting them to get settled there. Meluhans’ youthful longevity comes at the price of diseases and deaths of Branga people, as the toxic wastes produced in the preparation of Somras are thrown into the river. Overuse of Somras causes deformities in children of Meluhan parents also, but Daksha and his advisor, sage Bhrigu, are not ready to accept this as evil. The deformed children called Nagas are sent to Panchawati, which is located in the South of the Narmada. Brangas and Nagas face the harmful effects of Somras but are not aware of the reality and nature of the evil. As Swadeepans have a limited supply of Saraswati water, only members of the royal family can afford to consume Somras. They change the course of the river, which causes enmity with Meluha, who face scarcity of Saraswati water for preparing the Somras. ‘Who are the Chandravanshis?’ asked Shiva. “Think of them as the very antithesis of us, my Lord. They are crooked, untrustworthy, and lazy people with no rules, morals, or honor. They are cowards who never attack like principled Kshatriyas. Even their kings are corrupt and selfish. The Chandravanshis are a blot on humanity” (*The Immortals of Meluha* 59).

Individual freedom is limited in Meluha as healthy children are kept in Maika, the deformed (Nagas) are sent out of Sapt Sindhu, and the handicapped, misfortune-affected, and diseased (Vikarmas) are not allowed to take part in mainstream society. The practice of Vikarma law is meant for all sections of society and is based on the theory of past-life karmas. According to this law, anyone who has some misfortune in the form of widowhood, the birth of a stillborn child, physical deformity due to an accident, etc., has to perform penance and follow certain rituals to purify his/her sins. These Vikarma men and women are not allowed to marry or touch people who are not close to them. Shiva brings positive changes in the orthodox system of Meluha and removes the Vikarma tradition for all the people concerned, and rather encourages them to join occupations of their choice, which were forbidden to them before. Panda, P. & Mehta, A. (2024) argue that, “Therefore, serving as a reflection of broader postcolonial struggles, highlighting the enduring effects of colonialism on Indian identity and cultural heritage. Naga’s quest for acceptance and recognition prompts readers to critically examine colonial legacies and interrogate dominant historical discourses” (51). The freedom of the citizens is curbed as the parent-child bond is completely eroded by the Maika system of the Meluhan Kingdom. According to the Maika system, birth parents are not allowed to

keep their children with them, as they are adopted by the empire with equal opportunities for study, health, education, and welfare. When they turn sixteen, they are allocated to the applicant's parents, but for the royals, the laws were diluted. Daksha's daughter Sati was brought up in Meluha, away from the hospital city, Maika. "Sati had to take Shiva's word for it. Being a Meluhan who did not live in Maika, she had never seen a child younger than sixteen years of age" (*The Secret of the Nagas* 153).

Mutual hatred between the two states leads to a war in which Swadeep is defeated under the leadership of Shiva, the Neelkanth. In the war against Swadeep, the Meluhan king exhorts: "We need to destroy the Chandravanshi ideology". And the only way to do that is if we can give the benefits of our lifestyle to the people of Swadeep" (*The Immortals of Meluha* 153).

He introduces some social reforms to assimilate the deprived and oppressed sections of the Meluhan society. Daksha wants to ensure the expansion of his empire, so at the personal level, he also does not hesitate to cast off his own twin Naga daughter Kali to save his reputation and political power. He gets Chandradhwaj, his first son-in-law, killed for fear of having more Naga children in the future, which would be detrimental to his ambition of acquiring more power. Ganesh, his Naga grandchild, is thrown away without the knowledge of his mother, Sati. On the other hand, rigidity in following rules goes to the extreme in the case of ordinary citizens of Meluha. In chapter 15, 'Trial by Fire' of *The Immortals of Meluha*, objection to Sati's presence at a religious ceremony is raised by Tarak: "The law says no Vikarma should be allowed on the Yagna platform... (and) princess Sati defiles the Yagna with her presence" (*The Immortals of Meluha* 226). He further argues: 'I am a Meluhan' shrieked Tarak. 'It is my right to challenge anyone breaking the law.' (*The Immortals of Meluha* 228).

Although the Vikarma law was abolished, and Vikarma Sati got married to Neelkanth himself, the rigid adherence to the laws remained the same. This reaction of an immigrant is a reflection of the strict and disciplined Meluhan lifestyle and excessive pride in the culture.

Shiva could see the aftermath of environmental pollution caused by the Somras. He had seen the plight of Branga's parents, who used peacock blood to save the lives of their children. Outgrowths on the bodies of Nagas and other side effects of Somras caused havoc. He shares this with the Mrityikavati people who listened to Neelkanth attentively: "Thousands of children are born in Maika with painful cancers that eat up their bodies. Millions of Swadeepans are dying of plague brought on by the waste of the Somras" (*The Oath of the Vayuputras* 292).

Shiva convinces people regarding the politics over the consumption of Somras, which has led to the depletion of Saraswati, diseases in Swadeep, and physical deformities in Nagas. Barring a few, most of the provinces go with their saviour in the fight against evil. The ultimate result was the destruction of the perfect empire that wanted to rule the whole of India. Karthic V R (2024) opines that:

In a world where societal divisions are often based on superficial differences, Tripathi's work serves as a reminder of the power of empathy and the need to look beyond the surface. The *Shiva Trilogy* thus transforms the concept of the hero from a figure of strength and valor to one of compassion and inclusivity, redefining what it means to be a savior in a complex and interconnected world. (28)

Negative Impact of Cultural Imperialism

The power struggle of Daksha is aggravated by the social and cultural influence of the Somras, so after discovering the Somras as evil, Shiva puts a proclamation in different cities of Sapt Sindhu ordering them to stop the use of Somras: "To all those who refuse to stop using the Somras: Know this. You will become my enemy. And I will not stop till the use of the Somras is stopped. This is the word of your Neelkanth" (*The Oath of the Vayuputras* 120). A proud culture that wanted to impose its culture and ideology on Swadeep and other states of the Sapt Sindhu gets razed by the wrath of its so-called saviour. Neelkanth's anger after the cruel assassination of Sati by Egyptian mercenaries cannot be abated. Despite his promise to Vayuputras to never use the Pashupatastra in any way, Shiva's rage leads to the killing of the culprits and also innocent citizens of Meluha who wanted to remain faithful to their swadharma and die with their city. General Parvateshwar, Anandmayi, and many others decide to perish with others despite the choice given to them to come out of the city before the annihilation. Maharishi Bhrigu and three hundred men are saved as they possess the knowledge of making the Somras. The elixir, which turned evil, could become necessary in the future, so the people who were a repository of knowledge are saved for posterity. 'My father is distraught at this point in time,' said Kartik. 'You know of his devotion to my mother. The grief of her death has clouded his mind. He is furious, and rightly so. But you also know that his heart is pure. He would not want to do anything that is against Dharma. I only intend to keep the technology of the Somras alive till my father's rage subsides' (*The Oath of the Vayuputras* 510).

Shiva stands for justice, and his efforts for the social reformation of Meluhan society gradually eliminated outdated laws that were no longer relevant. Despite Shiva's efforts to save innocent people, the devastating effects of the weapon could not be subdued. The grandeur of Meluha's culture is wiped out because of the imperial ambitions of its king and the conspiracy to kill the saviour, Neelkanth. As a punishment, Daksha loses his beloved daughter Sati and the kingdom which he had always wanted to expand. The fight between Good and Evil comes to an end with the annihilation of the centre of Meluhan culture, the city of Devgiri. No one is a winner in this fight, as Shiva loses Sati and many of his supporters. Daksha loses everything dear to him, and he becomes a victim of his own ill will. The pride expressed by the Suryavanshis through the imposition and glorification of their own socio-political principles subverts the identity and people of the Chandravanshi Kingdom, Branga, and Kashi. Similarly, the Meluhans' xenophobic hostility directed

towards the Nagas is ego-driven but is baseless, as they are the product of the excessive use of the Somras by the Suryavanshis themselves. By birth, even though they are Meluhans but their physical deformities cause their expulsion from their native land. Similar to Daksha's case, in popular culture, the stories of Ravana and Dhritrashtra are lessons in perennial wisdom wherein we learn that all power and pelf are lost due to pride and greed. Even Duryodhan's imperialistic desires led him to his destruction. Besides the ancient legends, contemporarily, American cultural imperialism is oppressing the local cultures, with subtle and insidious coercion being used to establish a dominant influence. Likewise, the Chinese are focused on establishing cultural supremacy through their explicitly coercive geopolitics and geo-economics directed towards the developing or the least developed world.

Conclusion

Amish's *Shiva Trilogy* critiques the cultural imperialism in the Sapt Sindhu region through King Daksha's portrayal as a hegemon who dominates over the marginalized regions. The ego of Daksha also manifests in the form of unfair and excessively strict laws that ostracize Nagas and Vikarmas, resulting in chaos. Shiva eventually abolishes these laws to assimilate Nagas and Vikarmas into the mainstream. The author's take on different issues prevalent in modern society has found solutions in Indian mythology. The pride-driven overconsumption of Somras by Suryavanshis for longevity and its resulting ill consequences exemplifies the Dharmik principle 'Ati Sarvatra Varjyet' (Excess/Extreme of everything is bad). A principle-driven, inclusive approach of Shiva, as seen in the *Shiva Trilogy*, would help bring solutions to the problems posed by cultural imperialism in the contemporary world. It is time for introspection in today's world, where we inclusively draw from our local cultures to reach solutions for most of the problems, similar to the scenario in the *Shiva Trilogy*. Amish provides several lessons through Shiva's character, who counters the cultural imperialism founded on pride and ego, proving the worth of an inclusive and tolerant society and alluding to its contemporary relevance for the wholesome progress of the world. The Trilogy inspires cultural diversity and warns against the dangers of cultural hegemony.

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